CHAPTER 6

Rewritten Pasts and Scripts for the Future
Heart of Light

The much-acclaimed film Heart of Light emphasises the disastrous social outcomes in Greenland of pro-Danish politics from the 1950s and 1960s. These years, commencing with the inclusion of Greenland within Rigsfællesskabet (Danish Commonwealth) in 1953, are some of the most intense, challenging, and disillusioning years of Greenlandic colonial history. There were many discussions and much disagreement in Greenland leading up to the change in political status. The highly influential politician Frederik Lynge (grandfather of Greenlandic novelist Hans Anton Lynge, who co-authored the script for Heart of Light) was, along with his cousin Augo Lynge, among those politicians who were in favour of modernising Greenland and having it join the Danish Commonwealth.¹

However, the questions concerning to what extent Greenland was to undergo industrialisation and modernisation, how rapidly, and at what costs, seem to have been the cause for some disagreement, with Frederik Lynge taking the more hesitant approach (DIIS 2007, 431). One of the main reasons behind the desire of elite Greenlanders to enter the Danish Commonwealth was to improve the quality of life and obtain equality between Danes and Greenlanders—especially in wages, where the difference was 25%. Since early colonial times, there had been two wage-systems in operation, one for Greenlanders and one for Danes. In 1958, educated Greenlanders who had lived in Denmark for more than 10 years could be paid the same wage in Greenland as Danes. However, a new law based on place of birth, the so-called fødestedskriterium, was introduced in 1964 with the support of the Greenlandic Council. The new measure cemented wage inequality and made it impossible

¹ A recent book dealing with the years before and after the Second World War, and entry into the Commonwealth, is Eske Brun og det moderne Grønlands tilblivelse (Eske Brun and the Genesis of Modern Greenland) by Jens Heinrich (2012), published under the auspices of the Greenlandic government. The book is a published version of Heinrich’s PhD dissertation in history from Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland). In it, Heinrich argues that the push for industrialisation in the early twentieth century came from Greenlanders themselves in a desire to develop their country. While I don’t disagree, I would want to add the word “elite” to “Greenlanders.” Indeed, one of the primary actors Heinrich emphasises is Augo Lynge, whom I also discuss in this chapter.
for anyone born in Greenland to be paid Danish wages in Greenland. This law was repealed only in 1990 (Olsen 2005, 72). Wage equality between Danes and Greenlanders, let alone general equality, never occurred within the Commonwealth, and this became one of the primary reasons for the Greenlandic demand for home-rule and, later, self-government. In 1953, however, when Greenland entered Rigsfællesskabet, there was an expectation of equality. It is worthwhile to consider who had these expectations. As Greenlandic journalist Jørgen Fleischer notes:

[W]hen the country—after the constitutional change—was incorporated into the Danish kingdom as a province with equal rights, and all Greenlanders became Danish citizens, one had envisioned that the differential treatment finally was over. But that did not happen. 1999, 209

Note that the phrase “one had envisioned” retains the impersonal expression of the Danish text (havde man forestillet sig). Who does this one represent? Does it speak on behalf of men, women, and children, families in the towns and the impoverished settlements? Does it include those whose lungs were decomposing from tuberculosis in turf- and stone-houses, and their families? Those who had to beg for bread at the doorstep of the Danish Inspector to stave off starvation for another day, or the fishermen forced to sell their catch at just five per cent of the retail price? Or does it mainly speak on behalf of the ‘upper social stratum,’ the Greenlanders with Danish ancestors who for decades had been living, eating, and acting like Danes and working in the colonial administration?

Regardless of who had these expectations, the ongoing practices of inequality between Danes and Greenlanders in Greenland soon put them to rest, as this quotation from Knud Hertling, former Minister of Greenland in the Danish Parliament, illustrates:

Augo Lynge’s speech in the country council [the prelude to the Greenlandic Parliament] in 1952 and Frederik Lynge’s speech at the [Danish] Parliament’s opening in 1953, coupled with declarations in the UN on the equality of all humans etc., made us, who at this time were part of Greenland’s hopeful youth, believe that complete equality was possible—also as far as equal pay for the same labour went. Now we had become Danish citizens, real Danes. We cried ‘hooray’ over these big and powerful words. They gave us an expectation of something good, something big and true. Only ten or eleven years later would we