




AN INTRODUCTION TO  
“**Q**LD HAVLANDIC”  
CULTURE

*Its provenance, features, and  
relation to reality*

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“Havske Auldkulturs” Introduktion (Engelsk)  
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## Introduction

Ignoring the title of this article, we must not be too hasty in supposing the existence of any genuine “Old Havland”, as our national flag-bearers are so eager to suppose. Nor should we be so eager to embrace the views of the integration supporters, who deny the island any semblance of individuality free from a fetid half-imitation of one or two cultures. It is our imperative as scholars and researchers to critically examine that which we overlook, and especially that which we adore or despise. What, then, is Old Havland, or “Old Havlandic Culture”?

## Origins of the Term

The origins of Old Havland can be traced back to Mikæl Ravn’s classic 1955 essay *Mirkenlof* (lit. “Shadow/Wood Praise” or “Praise of the Shadow/Wood”). The use of the archaic term *lof* (“praise, glory, hymn”), a predecessor to modern English “love” and German “lob”, presages the message of the essay. In it, Ravn proposes that two Havlands have been created in the decades after the revolution: one, symbolised by the twin harbour-cities, of modernity, light and increasing global- and Danmarkisation; the other being a “*Mirke Havland*” or “Wood/Dark Havland”, which survives in the woods, villages, and in the older generations of Havlanders. Notably, the term “Old Havland” (*Auld Havland*) or “Old Havlandic Culture” (*Havske Auldkultur*) do not appear in the essay at all, except once near the end in the phrase “let us not, in the pursuit of our future, forget the old Havland that we

leave behind”.

Yet it was clearly this sentence that struck a chord with the public consciousness, because while works that directly engaged with *Mirkenlof* used the phrase “*Mirke Havland*”, “*Auld Havland*” rapidly eclipsed it in popularity. Both the People’s Party and the new Socialist Party found cause to cite it in their speeches in parliament, and *Fremgangeren* (“The Progressive”), the literary magazine that carried the essay, saw its circulation double in the months following its October issue.

It’s perhaps telling that *Fremgangeren* was the venue Ravn chose to issue his essay. As a native of Auldhavn and the son of a merchant family he was clearly a part of the cosmopolitan, forward thinking, progressive social class that populated his “*Borgenhavland*” (“City-Havland”, the opposite of “Wood/Dark Havland”). Yet he became a historian and a scholar of Havland’s historical tongues, and made frequent use of archaic words and phrases such as *lof* in his writings. The essay itself works to romanticise aspects such as the lack of lighting and modern conveniences in Havland’s inland villages; the use of what he calls “*mirksprog*” (dark-speech, the modern remnants of historical Havlandic before the language reforms of the Absolutist era), which he claims preserves the rich history of the island in its idiosyncracies and syncretic elements; as well as the preservation of traditional dress, food, and culture. Given that Ravn, for all his antique proclivities, spent his whole life in Orienshavn’s fashionable bohemian districts, it is not difficult to see a hint of exoticism in this effusive “praise”, or a

city-dweller's idealisation of rural life backed with precious little personal experience.

I would also be amiss if I did not mention Ravn's support for the single-party regime, which many associate with his fetishisation of an ideal past, perhaps one that included a king. Because of this his essay, written just after the opening of Havland to democracy, can be easily construed as a reactionary's outcry against perceived liberalisation, but I do not share this view. While City-Havland is indeed associated with such ideas as "progress" and "cosmopolitanism", Ravn was also intensely aware of the monarchy's role in burying the Old Havland he so admired, and was not afraid to publicly decry any attempts to paint him as a monarchist or a revanchist. His support for the single-party state can be attributed to his (very public) opposition to both Communism and the Danish Party, which led him to desire a sort of "government by stasis". His life's dream, according to a letter published after his death, was "a world without politics or war... without confusing developments... where the contemplation of the beautiful may proceed without delay." Given his loss of both his parents in 1922, perhaps we cannot blame him too much.

## Modern Usage

In its contemporary form, then, "Auld Havland" can be said to mean "anything associated with the history or unique culture of Havland, in particular rural Havand". The most clear example of this is the usage of a distinct pattern of speech, which we

know was descended from the intermingling of English captives with Vikings in the earliest centuries of Havland's settlement. Other popular examples include "flodrodfisk" (river-caught *rod*fisk), distinct from the "havrodfisk" (sea-caught *rod*fisk) of the harbour cities; as well as local garments.

More important however than these surface trappings may be the emphasis on a particular "Old Havlandic Mindset" (*Havske Auldmod*), featuring a revival of the deprecated word *mod* for a historic affect. Some commentators have gone as far as to call this "The Havlandic Mind", which for a variety of reasons (not least of which its parochial inaccuracy) must not be considered in proper scholastic discourse. Nevertheless, descriptions of such a mindset inevitably mention the following aspects:

- A stoic resilience against adversity, an ability to withstand the "hard life"
- A high focus on communal and familial relations
- A high degree of independence, usually tied to surviving "the wild"
- Strong personal values involving honour and loyalty
- A propensity for self-sacrifice and abnegation of the self "for the good of the community", involving restricting emotions and personal desires.
- Strong religious or spiritual beliefs (animist or Old Norse in particular)
- Lower-class economic status

That these values are at times self-contradictory (community-centric and individualist attitudes do not often conjoin harmoniously, nor rugged practicality and heavy superstition) goes without saying. However, it must also be said that those who primarily make use of such tropes are also a great distance from the subjects they purport to be described. The phrase is a consistent theme in political campaign materials, advertising for various "traditional" items, popular media, and literature. All these cultural products, ironically, are strongly associated with the "City-Havland" Ravn laments has taken over all of Havlandic culture. Almost always, the advertising or message intended is some sort of link between a given person or product and this mythic past, whether in terms of attributes, personality, or provenance.

Of course, this has very little to do with actual rural populations and those who might be considered a part of Old Havland would describe their culture. When these groups refer to themselves they consistently use the historic term "*lagrmann*", meaning low-man or person of low status, a sociopolitically charged word dating back to the Viking period. Related to this is are the adjectives "*lagrst*" and "*lagrstan*", the second being the emphasised form of the first, which are used to signify their low social standing and exclusion from urban society.

Having thus established its modern applications, largely irrelevant to those who it is used to describe, it then falls on us to examine the final question: what, if any, real utility does "Old Havland" serve in our understanding of

these social groups?

## Connection to Reality

As with most common stereotypes, there are (if judiciously examined) slight grains of truth to the myth of Old Havland. Of course, rural lower-class Havlanders would likely be more physically fit than perhaps your average city-dweller, and their lack of modern conveniences might, to the untrained eye, resemble a sort of "self-reliant ethos". Rural religiosity is a common belief that more research is required to affirm or deny, but spirit-worship or worship of old Norse gods is almost certainly a myth. Nevertheless, the myth of Old Havland, and the cultural associations that have sprung up with it, are largely fictitious. In researching this article, I found cause to visit several villages in rural Havland and spoke with members of their communities, all of whom resembled nothing like the wood-and-dirt depictions of "Old Havland" seen in shows or books. Of their inhabitants, while some certainly fit the stoic, resilient mould, all varieties could be seen, as in any other human society not marked by extreme social or environmental problems.

If this section is notably shorter than the others, it is because almost nothing of what we think of Old Havland is rooted in reality. By we, I mean Ravn's city-dwellers, of which Ravn himself was one. Nevertheless, I move now to conclude.

## Conclusion

The short length of this article, ultimately, is a cause for regret.

However, given my work into the field has only begun, it would be presumptive to propose anything other than a preliminary sketch, or an introduction.

Nevertheless the evidence is clear. It is a great tragedy that, despite living on a tiny island, we have nevertheless allowed ourselves to be so deluded as to the lives and attitudes of our fellow island-dwellers. If I do not begrudge an orphan who grew up amidst civil unrest for yearning for the solace of an imaginary pastoral paradise, I certainly begrudge those who cynically exploit that vision for commerical and political gain.

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