



# Information

## The 17th of May

### *A historical date and a day of national celebrations*

The United States has the 4th of July as its National Day commemorating the American Declaration of Independence. The French celebrate the 14th of July in memory of the storming of the Bastille and the downfall of l'ancien regime. The 17th of May is Norway's National Day. In the history of Norway, 17 May 1814 marks both the country's declaration of independence and the triumph of constitutional government. In order to understand the dominant place occupied by the celebration of the 17th of May in the national consciousness it is necessary to view it against its historical background.

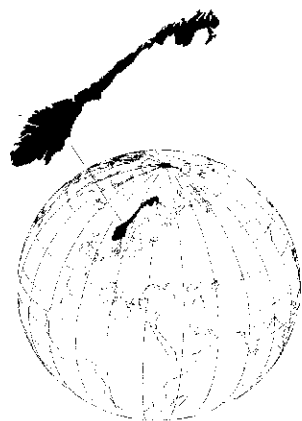
By professor **KNUT MYKLAND**

In 1319 Norway was linked with Sweden in a union after over 400 years as a self-governing and independent realm. In 1380 Norway and Denmark were united under the same king, a union which eventually led to Norway's being integrated in a Danish-Norwegian single unified state with Denmark as the realm's dominant partner and Copenhagen as the unchallenged capital of the kingdom. It was not until 14 January 1814, the date of the Treaty of Kiel, that the Danish-Norwegian dual monarchy was dissolved and King Fredrik IV of Denmark was forced to cede Norway to the King of Sweden.

It is true that from the middle of the 18th century there had been a certain amount of discontent in Norway over the fact that the country's interests were disregarded to Denmark's advantage and, above all, to the advantage of the dual monarchy's capital, Copenhagen. There were repeated Norwegian requests that the country should have its own university and its own national bank, but it was not until 1811 that the demand for a university was finally met. The demand for a bank continued to be rejected out of

fear that the dual monarchy could break up if Norway were to acquire a separate and independent monetary system.

When Denmark-Norway was drawn into the whirlpool of the Napoleonic wars in 1807, Fredrik VI opted for alliance with France and war with England. His choice was determined exclusively out of consideration to the Realm's continental portion, Denmark and the two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. As far as Norway was concerned the war with England meant blockade, crisis and hunger. In this situation there were clear signs of a growing separatist movement in Norway and increasing disenchantment with the existing regime and the union with Denmark. Some Norwegians, among them Count Wedel Jarlsberg, went so far as to advocate Norway's separation from Denmark and the establishment of a union with Sweden. However, this discontent never reached such proportions as to threaten the existence of the dual monarchy. When Norway was separated from Denmark by the Treaty of Kiel on 14 January 1814, this came not as a result of dissatisfaction in Norway, but rather as a consequence of the policies Napoleon's former marshal, Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, had pursued after he was elected Crown Prince of



*Produced for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Nytt fra Norge. The author is responsible for the contents of the article.*

*Reproduction permitted.  
Printed in March 1996.*

*The Norwegian Government's WWW-server, ODIN, contains official documents and information about Norway: <http://odin.dep.no/>*

**UDA503ENG**



*The battle of the market place, Christiania, 17th of May 1829. Carl Johan had forbidden celebrations, but not everyone observed the ban. When groups of singing, dancing people gathered in the market place, the cavalry and infantry were summoned. The feelings aroused in the people by this event led to the 17th of May becoming firmly established as a day of national celebrations. Lithography from a satirical drawing by Hans E. Reimers.*

Sweden in 1810 and as heir-presumptive to the Swedish throne adopted the name Carl Johan. Norway was the reward of the victorious commander in the field, in return for his and Sweden's support to the allies in the final reckoning with Napoleon.

From the spring of 1813 the young heir-presumptive to the Danish-Norwegian crown, Prince Christian Fredrik, resided in Norway as "Statholder". At the end of January, when he received news of the Peace signed at Kiel and the cession of Norway to Sweden, he decided to prevent the realization of the cession of the Kingdom by placing himself at the head of a Norwegian independence movement, with reunion with Denmark as his unexpressed secret hope. King Fredrik VI of Denmark was well aware of the Prince's plan, was in sympathy with it, and himself supported the independence movement in Norway by supplying large quantities of grain.

When Christian Fredrik incited the Norwegians to fight for their independence, he was in no doubt that he enjoyed the support of large sectors of the population. The Norwegian independence movement received encouragement from many different traditional sources: the attachment to the old royal house, hopes for reunion with Denmark, anti-Danish feeling, recollections of bygone days and fear of a union with Sweden. From these vague and confused dreams, there developed in Norway, during the winter and spring of 1814, a powerful and heady desire for independence: Norway was once again to join the

ranks of independent states as a free, self-governing realm, as she had been many centuries earlier.

There was one point on which Christian Fredrik's political plans after the Treaty of Kiel were frustrated by the desires and hopes of the upper stratum of society. After the news of the Treaty of Kiel and the cession of the Kingdom reached Norway, Christian Fredrik had the intention of ascending the Norwegian throne by virtue of his alleged right of inheritance and of governing the Kingdom as the only rightful absolute monarch. However, many prominent officeholders and other citizens nourished a strong desire for a free constitution, a desire to which the Prince would have to give way if he were to bring his policy of independence to a successful conclusion. On 10 April 1814 the popularly elected National Assembly met at Eidsvold Iron Works outside Christiania (Oslo) for the purpose of giving the country a constitution. As one of the representatives described this Assembly: "Here was to be seen a selection of men from all parts of the realm, of all ranks and dialects, men from court circles as well as landowners come together in no set order for the sacred purpose of laying the foundations for the rebirth of the nation." Six weeks later, on 17 May 1814, the National Assembly had completed its work on the Constitution, and on the same day closed its proceedings by electing Prince Christian Fredrik King of Norway. The solemn proceedings ended with a short and powerful speech by the President,

Georg Sverdrup, linking the old free Norway to the Norway which was now emerging: "Thus within Norway's boundaries is resurrected Norway's ancient seat of Kings, which was graced by Athelstans and Sverres and from which, with wisdom and might, they ruled over Norway of old."

The fact that Christian Fredrik was able to unite the Norwegians in the struggle for independence and, in cooperation with the National Assembly, to organize the government of the new state in the course of a few hectic weeks prior to the 17th of May was due to Carl Johan's continued involvement on the Continent with the main Swedish army. But after Napoleon was forced to abdicate at the beginning of April, the Crown Prince of Sweden had fulfilled his obligations to his allies and, towards the end of May 1814, he was able to return to Sweden with the Swedish army. Despite bombastic statements from Norway, and despite the declaration "Death before slavery", after a short war Norway was forced into a union with Sweden, the union became effective when the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament) elected Carl XIII of Sweden as King of Norway on 4 November 1814. But the constitutional form of the Kingdom was in all main respects such as was laid down in the Constitution of 17 May, and the union with Sweden was so loose that it could be dissolved in 1905 without either kingdom being seriously affected as a result.

There are therefore good grounds for regarding 17 May 1814 as the pre-eminent date in Norway's history. After centuries as a dependency Norway once again joined the ranks of free states as an independent realm, and the new union with Sweden proved only to be an intermezzo, with no influence on the inner development of the country. From being subjected — at least in theory — to a most extreme form of despotism, the country emerged with a more liberal Constitution than any other contemporary state. While other free constitutions in Europe, drawn up during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, were rescinded and substituted by more authoritarian regimes, the Norwegian Constitution remained standing.

As early as the 1820s people started to celebrate the 17th of May, and since then this day has been established as Norway's National Day, Norway's Liberation Day, even though the celebrations have in the course of time changed their character and form. The history of the 17th of May celebrations in Norway reflects in many ways the main features of the country's history from 1814 until today.

When Carl Johan, as the victor of

1814, accepted the 17th of May Constitution as the basis for government in Norway, within the framework of a union with Sweden, there were many reasons for this policy: hope of once again being able to play a role in French politics, fear of a Gustavian restoration in Sweden, fear of a winter war in Norway, the desire to win the Norwegians over to the idea of a union with Sweden through concessions and a policy of appeasement. Among these motives, there was one which had the future in mind: the hope of later winning back what he had been obliged to give up in 1814. It was this last motive which formed the basis for Carl Johan's policy *vis a vis* Norway after becoming King in 1818. Deliberately and systematically he pursued a policy aimed at restricting the powers of the Storting such as they were prescribed in the Constitution, extending the powers of the Crown and creating a closer union between Norway and Sweden. Norwegian policy in the 1820s was characterized by a struggle to defend that which had been gained in 1814, the defence of the Constitution which formed a bulwark for national independence. These events also formed the background for the 17th of May celebrations in the 1820s. They took the form of an outer manifestation in support of the national liberation efforts of 1814 and for the will to defend the Constitution and national independence. It is significant that the slogan "Guard the Constitution" was the running theme of the banners used in the first 17th of May processions.

Around 1830 Carl Johan changed his policy on Norway. In reality he gave up the idea of a thoroughgoing revision of the Constitution, and his successors to the throne were to follow the same line of policy. Thus the 17th of May celebrations took more and more the form of a national day of celebration. The defensive watch-dog attitude which characterized the first 17th of May celebrations was superseded by a form of celebration characterized by a feeling of springlike optimism, by the joy of having a free constitutional government, by a people seeking to stress their own identity. It is a characteristic feature of the change that, in addition to the solemn procession of the citizenry, the children's procession was introduced, which, in time would come to be the most striking and colourful feature of the Norwegian 17th of May celebrations.

It was above all the holders of "embete", or higher office, who were responsible for creating the Constitution of Eidsvoll. It was this group which stood guard over it against Carl Johan's encroachments in the 1820s. It was also this group which in fact ruled

the country during the first two generations after 1814. From the 1830s the farmers began to awaken and became conscious of the power given them under the Constitution, and the 1870s and '80s were characterized by the fierce political struggle between the old ruling class — the senior office holders and bourgeoisie — on the one side, and the farmers and the liberal urban citizenry on the other. The conflict erupted into a bitter and uncompromising struggle in the Storting, which led to impeachment, the victory of parliamentary government and the establishment of the two political parties, the Conservatives (Høyre) and the Liberals (Venstre). In this situation the 17th of May celebrations again changed character. The day was no longer regarded as a day of national unity, but a day of strife, when conservatives and liberals voiced their political standpoints in town after town, each with their own 17th of May speakers and their own 17th of May processions.

On 7 June 1905 the union with Sweden was dissolved by a decision passed in the Storting. The dissolution was supported by a united population, more united perhaps than at any time before or since. This attitude was also to be reflected in the 17th of May celebrations. The differences between the parties were to give way to the feeling of unity. The 17th of May processions were now characterized by a feeling of fellowship and of rejoicing that the country had at last gained full independence.

But time brought changes. In the 1880s and the 1890s, the Norwegian political scene had been marked by the struggle between the Conservatives and the Liberals, between the old regime of officialdom on the one hand and on the other the alliance of farmers and urban liberals. In the 1920s and '30s the clash of interests between the middle class and the working class formed the main area of conflict in Norwegian political life and this state of affairs was intensified by unemployment, strikes and labour unrest. The bourgeois parties put full emphasis on the national element in politics. As far as the working class was concerned, politics centred on international fellowship in tune with the slogan: "Workers of the world, unite". This conflict-ridden situation was also to set its stamp on the 17th of May celebrations. While the middle class celebrated the day with massed processions in the towns, processions often featuring slogans directed against the workers' internationalism, the working classes largely avoided the 17th of May celebrations altogether. "It is not in cooperation between the classes, but in the class struggle to the bitter end that the

answer is to be found — on 17 May as on the other days of the year", wrote Martin Tranmæl, editor of the Labour Party's main organ. The Labour party and the unions in Oslo supported the party line in a declaration in which they urged the workers not to take part in "the bourgeois celebrations of 17 May. Boycott the arrangements of the bourgeoisie."

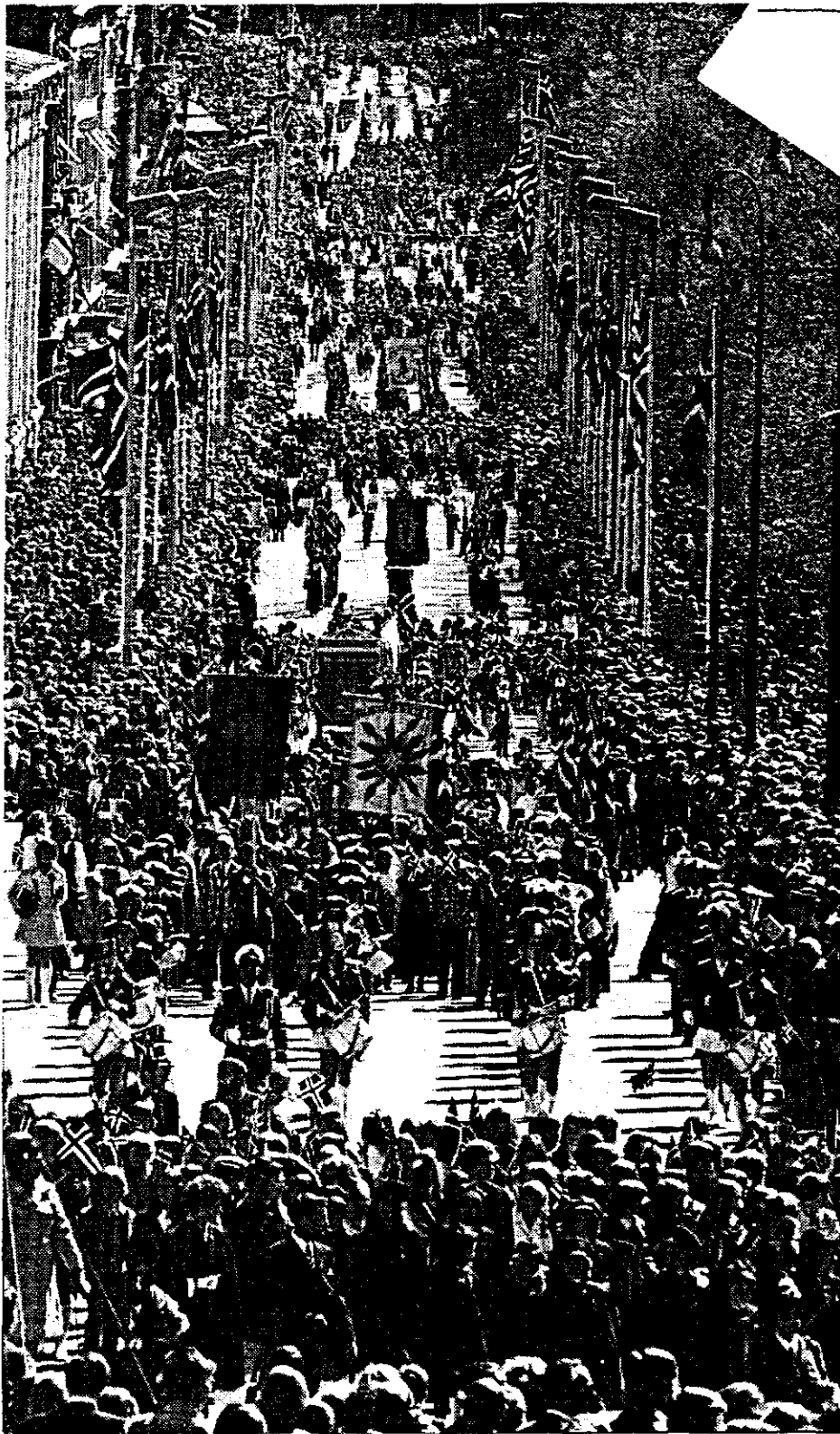
During the German occupation of Norway from 9 April 1940 until 7 May 1945, the feeling of national fellowship predominated. The Nazi regime, with all its terror, imprisonment and torture, united the population. During the German occupation, the 17 of May celebrations were strictly forbidden, but there can scarcely have been any time when the day occupied a more important place in the national consciousness than just then in the occupation period, as the writer Nordahl Grieg phrased it in a poem which was soon the common property of all Norwegians:

*"Now stands the flagpole bare  
Behind Eidsvoll's budding trees,  
But in such an hour as this,  
We know what freedom is"*

The bitter conflicts which had marked the 17th of May celebrations in the 1920s and '30s were replaced after the war by a feeling of fellowship resembling that of the years around 1905. But there was a difference. Then, it was on full national independence that the 17th of May celebrations and the public rejoicing were centred. In the post-1945 period, the main stress was laid more on democratic rights, constitutional government, freedom of the press, and law and order, in contrast to what had been experienced in the war years — violence, terror, concentration camps and dictatorship.

The discussion of Norwegian membership in the EC in 1971 and 1972 again led to a major split in public opinion. The Norwegian population found itself divided into two main factions: the supporters of membership and its opponents. The hostile feelings were just as intense as in the 1880s and the 1930s. This dissension was at the same time a struggle over the national symbols, a struggle where traces were visible in the 17th of May celebrations in 1972. But after the question of membership had been decided by a public referendum on 25 September 1972, antagonism gradually faded, and in the years that followed the feeling of fellowship was again to come to the fore.

If the 17th of May celebrations in Norway are viewed in the long-term perspective, one is struck by the manner in which the annual celebrations have changed in character and content over



One reason is to be found in the physical features of the country.

The 17th of May has remained the great spring festival in Norway, in a country with a winter that is both long and cold. For this reason the 17th of May has more and more taken on the character of a children's festival. The children's procession has become the colourful focal point in the celebrations, from the most remote coastal settlements to the capital city where literally thousands of schoolchildren, marching along behind their school bands and banners, file past the Royal Palace in salute to the King.

Another reason for the central position the 17th of May celebrations have occupied and continue to occupy in Norway is to be found in the country's relationship with other countries. From 1814 to 1905 Norway was joined in a union with Sweden, and although the country held an independent position in this union, nevertheless in the Norwegian consciousness the union always represented a potential danger, able to arouse feelings of nationalism and lead to closing of ranks around the national symbols, as in the 1820s and the period around 1905.

Jumping from the time of the Union to our own globally-minded era, a similar tendency may be seen. The German occupation during World War II provided evidence of the fate which could befall a small country in a world ruled by the great powers. Experiences from that time were kept alive in people's minds in the post-1945 cold war, in which the small states were often treated as no more than pawns in the great powers' ruthless game. There are still many countries which have not yet attained national independence. There are still many peoples who continue to live under dictatorship and despotic forms of government. Viewed against such a background, the ideals from Eidsvoll still retain their relevance and significance, representing values which are able to give the 17th of May celebrations a deeper meaning.

*The children's procession with flags aloft and brass bands playing. Photo: ScanFoto*

the years. The 17th of May has been a day of strife, as well as a day when the people rallied around the Constitution, national independence and democratic rights. Viewed against this background,

the question inevitably arises: despite all this, how is it that the National Day has managed to retain its central position in the public consciousness and remain Norway's great ceremonial day?

---

**The author of the article, Knut Mykland, is a professor at the Institute of History in the University of Bergen.**

# „Ja, vi elsker dette landet“

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

Rikard Nordraak.

SANG. *mf*



Ja, vi el-sker det-te lan-det, som det sti-ger frem fu-ret, vær-bit  
Nor-ske mann i hus og hyt-te, takk din sto-re Gud! Lan-det vil-de  
Ja, vi el-sker det-te lan-det, som det sti-ger frem fu-ret, vær-bit

PIANO. *mf*

*p*



o-ver van-net, med de tu-sen hjem, el-skar, el-sker det, og ten-ker  
han be-skyt-te, skjønt det mørkt så ut. Alt hvad fed-re-ne har kjem-pet,  
o-ver van-net, med de tu-sen hjem! Og som fed-res kamp har he-vet

*mf*



på vår far og mor og den sa-ga-natt som sen-ker drøm-me på vår  
mød-re-ne har grett, har den Her-re stil-le lem-pet, så vi vant vår  
det av nød til seir, og-så vi, når det blir kre-vet, for dets fred slår

*mf*



jord, og den sa-ga-natt som sen-ker, sen-ker drøm-me på vår jord.  
rett, har den Her-re stil-le lem-pet, så vi vant, vi vant vår rett.  
leir, og-så vi, når det blir kre-vet, for dets fred, dets fred slår leir.

*Yes, we love with fond devotion*  
(The Norwegian national anthem)

Norsk Musikforlag A/S, Oslo.  
Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

*Yes, we love with fond devotion*  
Norway's mountain domes,  
rising stormlashed o'er the ocean  
with their thousand homes;  
Love our country while w're bending  
thoughts to fathers grand,  
and to saga night that's sending  
dreams upon our land.