

Kent, Neil. 2008. *A Concise History of Sweden*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xii+300 pages. ISBN: 978-0-521-01227-0.

In the introduction to *A Concise History of Sweden*, Neil Kent correctly asserts that “a comprehensive history of Sweden is much needed” (i). His book is an ambitious attempt to fill a void. To write a general textbook which encompasses the entire history of one of the oldest states in Europe is challenging, as it forces difficult choices regarding what to include and what to omit. *A Concise History of Sweden* is written for an Anglo-American audience, something apparent in the choice of focus and references. While it is amusing to see the “match king” Ivar Kreuger introduced as the role model for a character in an early play by Ayn Rand, the Anglo-Saxon mould does not always fit. For instance, Kent over-emphasizes Sweden’s admittedly fascinating, but marginal colonial legacy. There are no less than 12 pages with references to Sweden’s miniscule Caribbean colony Saint Barthélemy, a tiny island of 21 km² with a population of a few thousand people and only six Swedish speakers by 1860. Kent’s over-emphasis of this detail comes at the price of overlooking some important events of far greater importance. For instance, there is no mention of the 1676 Battle of Lund, one of the bloodiest battles on Swedish soil in which almost 10,000 men lost their lives, and Swedish control over *Skåneland*—Scania, Blekinge, and Halland—was reconfirmed. It is difficult to understand why this event, which came to have a profound impact on Swedish history, is omitted from a standard textbook. In general, the inadequate attention to the history of Scania results in anachronistic misunderstandings. For instance, writing about the 1520s, Kent refers to the population of Malmö as “Swedes ... still under Danish sovereignty” even though the Swedish conquest still remained a century and a half in the future, and *Skåneland* at this point constituted the well-integrated, eastern part of Denmark (52).

Kent’s book would have benefited from some more detailed maps of the historical provinces and areas of Sweden. It contains only two maps of Sweden, neither of which marks the provinces, and from which many of the major cities are missing. The absence of good maps exacerbates Kent’s problematic treatment of the historical geography of Sweden. Without any disambiguation, Kent uses the term “province” to refer to *landskap*, or *län*, such as Värmland or Dalecarlia, but also to describe Norrland, the northern two-thirds of Sweden, north of the river Dalälven. Yet, Norrland is not a *landskap*, but a *landsdel*, which constitutes, along with Svealand and Götaland, one the three historical lands of modern

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Sweden. The imprecise terminology, combined with the absence of good maps, risks confusing readers who are new to Swedish history and geography.

Irritating also is the frequent misspellings of personal names, several of which belong to key figures in Swedish history. Prime ministers Hjalmar Branting (220), Per Albin Hansson, and Olof Palme, (285), foreign minister Östen Undén (299) along with the kings Olof Skötkonung, Gustav II Adolf, Karl XII, even the current monarch, Carl XVI Gustaf (293) get their names mangled. So do composers Wilhelm Stenhammar, Hugo Alfvén (214), Johan Olof Wallin (190), the poets Erik Axel Karlfeldt (206, 210), the explorer Sven Hedin (176), and others. Place names, such as Jokkmokk (98), Härnösand (116), Svartsjö (115), Fredriksten (94), Altränsstad (92) are subject to odd misspellings. The inflectional errors that occur in the titles of journals, for example, *Familjens Vänen* [sic] (204) and *Allers Familjen-Journal* [sic] (207) are such that one must question the author's mastery of the Swedish language.

Kent's book is not without its positive sides. The focus on the history of art, medicine and architecture, Kent's areas of expertise, is unusual in a general textbook and it yields refreshing insights, as well as many surprising and curious details. The book contains several sections on health and hygiene, orphanages, criminality, and social welfare, and care of the elderly throughout Swedish history. The sections on the art history of Sweden contains many curious facts. The inclusion of such material, which Kent introduces skilfully, results—unusually—in a textbook that contains information rewarding to readers already familiar with Swedish history.

Generally, the section on the earlier Swedish history is stronger than the section on modern Sweden. That said, *A Concise History of Sweden* is marked throughout by significant factual errors, some of which are serious enough to lead to real misunderstandings of Swedish history. For instance, Karl XII was exiled to Moldavia, then under Ottoman overlordship, not Mordova (75), St. Marten was never a Swedish colony (134, 165), bears “have not long since disappeared” from Sweden (xi), Gustaf III was not the grandson of the childless queen Ulrika Eleonora (102), the Swedish population in America, while substantial, never superseded that of Sweden (186), Selma Lagerlöf's classic novel *Gösta Berling's Saga* (as any Swedish high school student will tell you) was not written by Harry Martinsson (230). Operation *Weserübung*, the German assault on Norway and Denmark, started on April 9, not March of 1940 (233); the right-hand traffic diversion took place in 1967, not 1973 (248). The tax burden was *not*, as Kent asserts, 55 per cent of BNP in 1997 (252), the first female minister in the Church of Sweden was ordained in 1960, not 1954 (254). The 2004 formation of the centre-right current governing Alliance for Sweden is mis-dated by a decade (245). Kent misunderstands the Swedish constitution—the changes to the Act of Succession were legislated by the *Riksdag*. It was not, as Kent asserts, “the decision

of the current Swedish king, Carl XVI Gustaf, and his consort, Queen Silvia ... in 1980 to make their eldest child, Princess Victoria (born 1977), heir to the throne” (xii). In fact, king Carl XVI Gustaf personally opposed the change to equal primogeniture, but was—since the 1975 constitution had removed virtually all his powers—unable to prevent them.

Somewhat unusual for an introductory textbook, Kent makes a number of tendentious assertions. For instance, Kent writes that Ingmar Bergman “scornfully but with sadness watched the debasement of much of Sweden’s modern artistic culture” (261). His description of post-war Sweden’s relation to the rest of Europe as marked by “political aloofness” (264) and his assertion that “private initiatives” are “stifled” in Sweden (265) are contentious. Debatable is also Kent’s description of Olof Palme as “the world’s policeman,” who was “turning a blind eye to the horrors of Communist repressions in the Soviet satellite states to the east and south. That said, Swedish co-operation with the Soviet Union and North Vietnam was less real than apparent” (243–44). That Palme was a dedicated anti-communist, who denounced the 1968 Soviet invasion and the following “normalization” in Czechoslovakia in no uncertain terms, referring to the Husák regime as *diktaturens kreatur* (roughly “dictatorial creatures”), is overlooked, as is his high-profile support of *Solidarność* in Poland. Kent implies a *Gleichschaltung* in Swedish mass media, alleging suppression of a supposed serious disagreement within the scholarly community regarding global warming. “Global warming is a particularly hot issue, though media unity on the rightful solutions to invoke masks genuine scientific disagreement among meteorologists, academics and industrialists” (265). While the legacy of Olof Palme, “the Swedish model,” and the Swedish mass media should be debated, this reviewer is not convinced that a textbook, intended as an introduction to Swedish history, is the right forum.

While uneven, *A Concise History of Sweden* is a welcome addition to a sadly meagre flora of English-language textbooks on Swedish history. Despite being presented as a concise introduction of Swedish history, aimed at a general readership, it seems more appropriate reading for an intermediate class, in which the students have some prior knowledge of modern Swedish history. A second edition of the book would benefit from a thorough proofreading and a double-checking of the facts.

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