

Moberg, Vilhelm. 2005. *A History of the Swedish People. Volume One: From Prehistory to the Renaissance*. Translated by Paul Britten Austin. Foreword by Gunnar Myrdal. Vol 1: ix + 211. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2005. *A History of the Swedish People. Volume Two: From Renaissance to Revolution*. Translated by Paul Britten Austin. Foreword by Gunnar Myrdal. Vol 2: x + 268. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Vilhelm Moberg never finished his *Min svenska historia*. In 1973, aged 75, he was found drowned in a lake, not too far from his summer residence. It has never been fully established whether he drowned or committed suicide. However, what is clear is that he had been depressed for some time. Moberg felt unable to live up to the enormous expectations of him after writing literary masterpieces such as his monumental *Emigrants* tetralogy and *Your Time on Earth*, which established him as one of the greatest Swedish writers. Unfortunately, the two-volume *A History of the Swedish People* [*Min svenska historia berättad för folket* (Stockholm: Norstedts 1970)] which he was working on at the time of his death, is not among Moberg's stronger books. No one was more aware of this than Moberg himself. His ambition was noble: to write a social history of the Swedish common people in order to challenge the often suffocating heroic and nationalist narrative of the textbooks he grew up with. His death left his work unfinished, ending as it does in the 1540s, the time of Gustav Vasa's reformation.

For many years, *A History of the Swedish People* was out of print. Now, the University of Minnesota Press has re-published Paul Britten Austin's English translation of Moberg's unfinished, final work.

One problem Moberg faced in tackling this history was scarcity of primary sources. Volume One, in particular, still very much follows the traditional narrative of focusing on the kings (and queens) of the past. Reluctantly, Moberg was forced to keep his focus on the elite members of society when writing about early Scandinavia. Thus, this volume, much like more traditional history books, is replete with entire chapters on St. Birgitta and Queen Margrethe I. Only in the second volume does Moberg get closer to his ambitions of writing the history of the "common people." Here he for instance dedicated an entire chapter to the history of bark bread (Vol. II 36-48).

Moberg's struggle to compose a social history can also be attributed, in part, to his lack of training as an historian. Thus, for example, the two volumes lack footnotes.

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My Swedish history is in the first place the quintessence of my sixty years reading. So I have found the task of listing all my sources beyond me. Nor have I tried to. Footnotes only irritate the reader unnecessarily, and most people skip the long lists of titles at the foot of each chapter—an unsatisfactory solution to the problem anyway, as the reader cannot know which of the listed works any given statement has been taken from.
(vol. I 6)

This seems to indicate that Moberg never intended this book to be used in academia. Moberg's lack of a theoretical base for his claims is also a serious limitation. His presentist assumptions are far-fetched and not always compelling. Many historical parallels seem laboured and are aimed at his contemporaries. They tell us a lot about the social and political environments in which Vilhelm Moberg lived, but do not necessarily expand our knowledge of early Sweden. Thus, comparing Gustav II Adolf's raids in then-Danish Skåne during the Kalmar War of 1611-1613 with American outrages in My Lai during the Vietnam War may have been rhetorically powerful at the time of writing, but is not necessarily great scholarship (Vol. II 68). Neither is the comparison between the 1200s Swedish ruler Birger Jarl and Mussolini very convincing (Vol. I 90). Nor are Moberg's unsubstantiated and frequent references to "nationalism" and the "nationalist party," when referring to Karl Knutsson Bonde (Karl VIII) and his supporters in the 1430s and 1440s, without problems (Vol. II 42, 49, 54). His attempts to deconstruct nationalism reveal a lack of understanding of the subject matter. In search for a model of explanation, other than traditional Christian references to "evil" and materialist Marxist interpretations, Moberg attempts to find a third cause: "nationalistic feeling, inciting the peoples to hate one another" (Vol. II 71). Here he contradicts himself: a few pages earlier, he had played down the importance of nationalism as a cause of war between Sweden and Denmark:

Collective feelings of enmity, loathing, rage and resentment, involving whole peoples, cannot be strictly speaking hereditary; are not a fact of nature. Nor are they spontaneous and self-generating. The Swedish peasant had done the Danish peasant no harm, nor had the Danish peasant harmed the Swede; therefore they felt no personal enmity.
(Vol. II 62)

As for Britten Austin's translation, it is a limitation that this new edition is but a facsimile of the 1973 edition. A new edition could, and should, have eliminated spelling errors and inconsistencies, particularly when dealing with places and persons central to Swedish history. Certainly, the Latinizing/Anglicizing of Swedish royal names has a long tradition in English language literature. Thus, Karl XII is often referred to as Charles XII and Gustav II Adolf as Gustavus Adolphus.

This is problematic, since the English language literature of today does not refer to Carl XVI Gustaf, the current Swedish monarch, as Charles XVI Gustavus. Britten Austin's translation confuses the reader further by jumping liberally and inconsistently between Latin, English, Norwegian and Swedish spelling. Thus Håkan (Vol. I 118) becomes Håken (Vol. I 119), and both Gustav Vasa (Vol. II 66) and Gustav II Adolf (Vol. II 68) appear in two different spellings on the same page. As for Swedish kings by the name of Karl, they randomly appear as Karl VIII, Charles IX (Vol. II 30), Karl X Gustaf (Vol. II 69), Charles XII and Karl XV (Vol. II 33). Later Gustavs fare little better: Gustav IV Adolf, Gustaf III/Gustav III (Vol. I 119/159). The name Olof seems to have caused Britten Austin particular problems: Olof Skötkonung sometimes becomes Olaf (Vol. I 77-78), Olof von Dahlin's name appears in two alternative (mis)spellings. Not even Olof Rudbeck, the bombastic Swedish ultra-patriot of the 1600s is spared. He would roll over in his grave if he knew his name had been spelled Olaf, in Norwegian (Vol. I 30). Even such a central phenomenon of medieval Scandinavia as the Kalmar Union is misspelled (Vol. I 199). Seeing the the city of Västerås misspelled Västeräs (Vol. I 52) will certainly give many a bilingual reader a good laugh.

Other than these annoying blunders, Britten Austin's translation largely does justice to Moberg's lively, colourful and clear Swedish. Even if this book is not one of Moberg's more important works, in his mastery of the Swedish language Moberg has few equals. As reading for a history class I would be hesitant to assign this dated, controversial and highly personal account of early Swedish history. For those teaching classes in cultural and Scandinavian studies, on the other hand, the re-edition will certainly be a welcome addition to the reading list. It is still an entertaining and informative—and a noble attempt to give voice and agency to the masses, who for so long were drowned in a narrative of nationalism and glorification of war-waging monarchs.

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