

**H. Arnold Barton (2003) *Sweden and Visions of Norway: Politics and Culture, 1814-1905*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. ISBN 0-8093-2441-5, xiv + 228pp, 33 b & w illus.**

In his book *Scandinavia in the Revolutionary Era, 1760-1815*, H. Arnold Barton wrote that, 'although the Nordic lands were never invaded, occupied, or reorganized by revolutionary or Napoleonic France, they underwent by 1815 as fundamental a transformation – territorially, dynastically, constitutionally, economically, socially and culturally – as any part of the Western world' (Barton, 1986, 360). A stark illustration of this occurred in 1809 when Sweden lost Finland to Russia, thereby rupturing a 600 year association. This in turn had serious repercussions for Denmark when it was compelled by the Treaty of Kiel (1814) to cede Norway to Sweden. And it is the subsequent union between these two nations that is the subject of H. Arnold Barton's *Sweden and Visions of Norway: Politics and Culture, 1814-1905*.

As the title suggests, 'this study... explore[s] the positive results of the union from the Swedish perspective, most specifically in the intertwined areas of politics and culture' (Barton, 2003, 167). The affirmative tone of this book made it somewhat exceptional at the time of its publication in 2003. Up until then the bulk of attention had focussed on the seemingly inevitable demise of the union in 1905. Barton's attempt to rectify this anomaly has important implications for everyone involved in the business of history:

'It... illustrates how views of the past all too easily become one-sided and stereotyped by reading history backwards, starting from what in retrospect appear to have been the inevitable end results. It reminds us that if history is written by the winners ex post facto, we need to go back and examine it as contemporaries lived it at the time, when ultimate outcomes still lay hidden in the future.' (Barton, 2003, 182)

In the case of the Swedish-Norwegian union this has to a large extent been achieved thanks to the fact that the dramatic events of 1905 occurred exactly one hundred years ago. This has opened the publishing flood gates to a wave of books looking not only at the union period but also Swedish and Norwegian relations up to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to books, the anniversary of 1905 has also prompted a series of exhibitions, including a joint project between the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History in Oslo and the Nordic Museum in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> The latter institution traces its origins back to the Scandinavian Ethnographic Collection established in 1873 by Artur Hazelius, founder of the Skansen open-air museum. These, as Barton shows in his book, were important manifestations of 'Sweden's search for its own historic and cultural

uniqueness, most particularly in relation to Norway's' (Barton, 2003, 129). Yet today this is mostly forgotten, even by those running the Nordic Museum. When questioned about the union-inspired exhibition I was informed that: 'In Sweden the union was a historical parenthesis. The union did not affect people's lives much, nor did the dissolution.'<sup>3</sup> Barton's book constitutes a challenge to this orthodoxy. Indeed, his principal contention is that 'it was Sweden that was more directly influenced by Norway in politics and culture than the reverse' (Barton, 2003, 174).

His book is accordingly divided into two equally sized sections. The first provides a succinct yet comprehensive explanation of the political events that brought about the union, followed by an account of the nature of that union. (Less is written about its eventual dissolution in 1905 given that, as we have seen, this is the one aspect that has garnered so much attention.) A key finding is the impact that the Norwegian experience had on Swedish democracy. The reason for this is that in 1814, during the hiatus between Danish rule and Swedish union, Norway had in fact enjoyed a few months of independence. This saw the ratification of a constitution that 'was by far the most liberal in Europe at the time of its adoption' (Barton, 2003, 16). With only minor amendments this document remained in force throughout the union period (and up to the present day). Barton deftly charts the impact that this had on Swedish political development, stating on one occasion that: 'If Norway provided the shining ideal of the more radical proponents of representational reform, it was the counterideal of its conservative opponents.' (Barton, 2003, 42)

A similar dialectic is apparent in the cultural sphere – the subject of the second section of the book. This can be encapsulated in Erica Simon's notion of the Swedes taking 'a "Norwegian detour" to their "Swedishness [*suédité*]"' (Barton, 2003, 176). The shock of losing Finland in 1809, and the burden of placating defiant, 'stiff-necked Norwegians' (Barton, 2003, 28) from 1814 necessitated a profound national reassessment on the part of the Swedes. The union period therefore witnessed parallel 'cultural nation-building' processes (Barton, 2003, 182). Barton avers that: 'In 1814, Norway had become a political, but not yet a cultural, nation.' (Barton, 2003, 87) By 1905 it could claim to be both. Meanwhile, the changed circumstances that Sweden found itself in meant that it had to plunder its extensive cultural reserves in order to invent itself anew. The exact nature of these entwined developments is charted by Barton, leading him to conclude:

'Although the broader trends of the period were international in scope, one is still hard put to find any real parallel to the greater influence that Norway, the smaller nation initially lacking a truly national, recent history or a developed national culture, exercised over Sweden, the larger partner, with its long, unbroken national history and cultural life. Therein lies its special fascination.' (Barton, 2003, 182)

A plausible explanation for this is that '[f]ar fewer deeply embedded vestiges of the past inhibited the free development of a new society in Norway than in Sweden.' (Barton, 2003, 166)

What emerges in this study is a particularly clear instance of history being put to the service of bolstering not one but two nations. Their heritage, both ancient and modern, was inflected by politics and ideology in the pursuit of competing identities. In this light it is easy to appreciate how history is as much to do with the present as it is the past. Interestingly enough this fact is confirmed by the aforementioned gamut of projects spawned by the centenary of 1905. Echoes of the comments, criticisms and compliments that Swedes and Norwegians made about each other from 1814-1905 can be heard in this anniversary year. What has emerged from this commemorative process is a realisation that 1905 is of far greater significance to Norway than it is to Sweden. That the whole union period has been so comprehensively forgotten would seem to testify to the success of Sweden's cultural re-invention before, during and after 1905.

Does this have special significance for the readership of the *Journal of Baltic Studies*? Barton concludes with the recommendation that:

'In a world of tensions between nationalism and internationalism, regionalism and localism, the Swedish-Norwegian union in its time provides us with a prime reminder that each case is unique, yet it offers its particular insights into complex relations between governments, nationalities, and cultures.' (Barton, 2003, 182)

This must be especially apposite to a study of the Baltic nations in terms of their past histories, present circumstances and potential futures. Professor Barton himself has proffered one such potential line of enquiry in his article 'Scandinavianism, Fennomania, and the Crimean War' published in this very journal. In it he relates that, following the military successes of 1808, Tsar Alexander I 'declared that he had placed Finland "in the rank of nations."' (Barton, 2005, 132) Finland, like Norway in 1814, was therefore 'a political, but not yet a cultural, nation.' The cultural Norway that emerged in the nineteenth century was predicated on a negotiation between a Danish past and a Swedish present. An analogous development must have been taking place in Finland. Meanwhile, Sweden, in order to cope with the loss of Finland and the acquisition of Norway, needed to expunge the memory of its lost territory and strengthen its Scandinavian heritage (Barton, 2005, 134).

How will this be construed in the run-up to the bicentenary of 1808-09? Will this historical moment have different resonances for modern-day Sweden, Finland and Russia? What impact did Russian suzerainty really have over Finland's cultural and political development? How will present-

day relations interact with historical interpretations? These and other questions will cast new light on cultural and political interactions – both past and present. If H. Arnold Barton's work is anything to go by this promises to be a fascinating exchange.

## Sources

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## End notes

<sup>1</sup> These include two volumes edited by Øystein Sørensen and Torbjörn Nilsson, *1905 – Nye perspektiver* and *Norsk-svenske relasjoner i 200 år* (Aschehoug). See also O. Mestad & D. Michalsen (eds.) *Rett, nasjon, union: Den svensk-norske unionens rettslige historie 1814-1905* (Universitetsforlaget); B. Stråth, *Union og Demokrati: Norge – Sverige 1814-1905* (Pax); F. Sejersted, *Socialdemokratiets tidsalder: Norge og Sverige i det 20. århundre* (Pax); U. Grønvoold (ed.) *Hundre års nasjonsbygging* (Pax); I. Neumann & H. Leira, *Aktiv og avventende: Utenriktjenestens liv 1905-2005* (Pax); A. Norland, S. Hennem & P.G. Damsgaard (eds.) *Hvem Hva Hvor 1905* (Schibsted forlag); P.E. Hegge & L.A. Ulland, *Det var i 1905* (Andresen & Butenschøn); R. Andersen, *1905: Spillet bak kulissene* (Aschehoug).

<sup>2</sup> 'Norwegians and Swedes 1814-2005', exhibited at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History (*Norsk Folkemuseum*), 28 April – 4 September 2005 and the Nordic Museum (Nordiska museet), 28 October – 1 May 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Berit Rönnstedt, *Planeringschef, Nordiska museet*, email correspondence sent to the author, 30 June 2005.