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## Book Reviews

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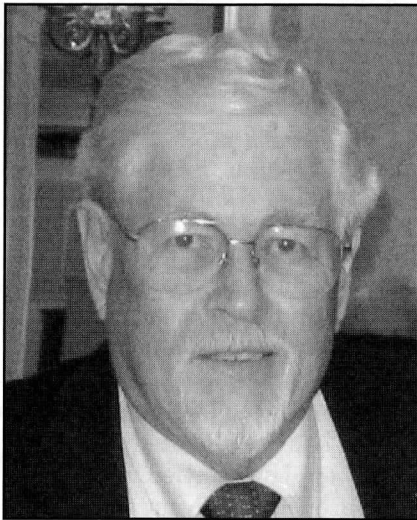
# Book Reviews



Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps.

If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the SAG Editor, at <sag@etgenealogy.se> so we know what you are working on.

## SAG Book Review editor retires



Dennis L. Johnson, 2009. (Photo by E. Thorsell).

SAG Book Review editor *Dennis L. Johnson* of Pottstown, PA, has since 2004 written 90 lengthy, detailed, and interesting book reviews of books on Swedish or Swedish-American themes.

For this big effort we are all very grateful.

Now Dennis has resigned from being the regular Book Review editor, but will still write occasional reviews when he feels like it. And I hope he will feel like it often.

I must also mention that Dennis is my 5<sup>th</sup> half-cousin, we share a *klockare*, Anders Persson (1762–1834) in Gestad (Dals.), who was married twice. *Elisabeth Thorsell*

for Stockholm where he found work as a ship painter, then sailed to France and then to England seeking work. He found a little work as a scene painter in theaters and in 1901 he earned his passage to the U.S. by decorating a Norwegian sea captain's cabin. He worked on the East Coast as an itinerant artist for two years, then signed on a ship as seaman to get to California. There he found work decorating buildings and doing other odd jobs. He began associating with other artists in Los Angeles and started exhibiting his own easel paintings by 1905.

Through his circle of artists, Borg became acquainted with Charles Lummis, founder of the Southwest Museum, and leader of a group of Southern California art patrons and enthusiasts. They took Borg under their wing and helped him sell his paintings and sponsored trips to Europe and North Africa, later South America, to sketch and to observe. By 1917 he began traveling to the desert southwest to document the vanishing life of the Southwest Indians. As he became better known, he became more in demand and was able to maintain a more steady income. By 1918, he married a much younger woman, Madeline Carriel, and built a home and studio in Santa Barbara. His paintings became celebrated nationally and he maintained contact with his friends and patrons in Los Angeles. He had become famous but had little money. His wife was unhappy in Santa Barbara and they finally moved back to Los Angeles in 1924 where he had more opportunities to earn money by selling paintings and teaching.

Borg and his wife settled in Holly-

## A famous Swedish artist

*Carl Oscar Borg and the Magic Region*, by Helen Laird, 1986, Gibbs B. Smith, Inc. Peregrine Smith Books, Layton, Utah, 248 pages, Hardcover, Illustrated, Amazon.com, \$41.33 plus shipping.

Swedish American artist Carl Oscar Borg was born into poverty in Sweden in 1879 and rose to become one of the best-known artists of the American Southwest. His life has been recorded in this biography written by Helen Laird and published in 1986. The author was asked to write this book by Borg's widow, Lily Borg Elmberg, before she died.

Lily Elmberg gave Ms. Laird the autobiography in Swedish written by Borg covering the years 1879-1908, as well as her own summary of the years 1908-1947. She was also given Borg's poems, letters, notebooks, and essays, which she used heavily as a nucleus for her own further research.

Born in a soldier's hut named Östebyn östre in the parish of Grinstad, (Dals.), Borg was the oldest of six children born to his father, Gustaf Eriksson Borg, and his mother, Kristina Olsdotter. His father had irregular work and pay, and the family had little means. Carl Oscar began sketching at an early age but as in most poor households was soon hired out to work for other neighbors. When he was fifteen he was apprenticed to a painter who did decorative painting found in traditional Swedish houses. He left home at twenty

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wood, where old friends were abundant and galleries were close at hand to show his paintings. His life took an unexpected turn when one of his students introduced him to Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., who was looking for an art director for his next film, *The Black Pirate*. This led to intensive work making sketches and blocking out scenes for this film, America's first full-length film in color and released in 1926. Borg helped this silent film make history, made in the days when most scenes were filmed in indoor studios with painted backdrops and scenery. Borg shared in the

acclaim for *The Black Pirate*, and went on to design sets for over a half dozen more films, as art director supervising the work of many others. By 1930, however, times had changed and new technologies had made the role of art director obsolete. Silent films had seen their day, and filming had moved to outdoor locations where painted backdrops and scenes were no longer needed.

In the realm of painting, times had also changed. Modern art was displacing the role of landscape painters and old masters in the galleries and in the public taste. In 1934, Borg and a dozen other Los Angeles artists formed an organization intended to "stem the tide of modernism." This was to be called the Academy for Western Art and had as members some of America's foremost western artists. The "Old Masters" were fighting a losing battle, and Borg

joined his friends to enter what he referred to as his dark years. In 1930 Borg lost most of his savings in the collapse of a savings bank, then lost his wife who met a younger man. He continued living and working in his studio and produced some of his finest etchings, monotypes, and paintings, one of which ("Summer Storm") won him admission to the American National Academy. But by 1934, he had decided to return to Sweden. He was deeply depressed and began disposing of many possessions, books, collections of Amer-

icana, and even paintings.

Despite being hailed in the Swedish press on his return as "The Great Indian Painter," Borg remained restless. He revisited old haunts, painted his father, now old and frail, sketched his home and childhood scenes, visited bookshops and museums, and wrote private poems expressing his moods of nostalgia and despair. By December 1934 he returned to Los Angeles for an exhibition of western artists, and resumed his work. He rented his old studio and house in Santa Barbara, sought a divorce from his wife Madeline, and immersed himself in his work. But by early 1936, Borg ended his western painting era with the publication of a folio of his etchings of the Southwest. He moved to New York for an exhibition of his oils which met mixed reviews and, again disillusioned, he returned to Sweden. Despite acclaim, he remained depressed until he met a woman who helped him believe in himself again, a Miss Lily Lindstrand.

This new romance was interrupted by the need for Borg to return to America again to finish winding up his affairs there. This return was extended to over a year due to several new commissions and a period working on a film with Cecil B. de Mille. He continued disposing of his collections, including gifts of paintings and other materials to the newly completed American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia. (Paintings on permanent display at the museum include "On The Island of Santa Cruz" [c. 1920] and "The Hopi Corral" [c. 1915]). He again headed east on the train for New York, spent time with old friends, and finally returned in June to Sweden to see his dying father again. He and Lily Lindstrand were married in the Swedish Church in Copenhagen, Denmark, on October 3, 1938, and settled in Göteborg where they invested in an apartment house. Borg became a Swedish paint-



*Grand Canyon, by Carl Oscar Borg.*



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er, painting old churches, Viking graves, old barns, boats, and houses in his native Dalsland, but “with a disinterest in the modern approach.”

This period of financial security, his new marriage, popularity in his native country, and a comfortable life did not calm Borg’s restless soul, however, and he began longing to return to California. World War II intervened, and he and Lily were trapped in Sweden until 1945. He was presented with the Linné medal by the Royal Swedish Academy of Science for his many generous gifts of Indian artifacts to the National Ethnological Museum in Stockholm and other gifts to museums and institutions in Sweden. Yet he still longed for California, and in September of 1945 he and Lily sailed for America. In an interview, his only plans were to return to Santa Barbara and go back to his Indian paintings. On the state of Art today, he reflected that “the time of the old masters is finished.”

The Borgs bought a house in Santa Barbara, where Carl Oscar’s studio was on the second floor. He did not need to paint, but did so for his own ease and pleasure working from old

sketches and memories. He enjoyed talking to old friends and neighbors, and occasional meetings with those of his former associates who still lived. Borg’s health had declined, his heart was weak, and he was subject to colds and pleurisy, but these were productive years for his painting. In 1947 old friends invited them to go to San Francisco but Borg declined, Lily reluctantly agreed to go without him. Borg spent the next day painting in his studio, then walked to a favorite restaurant for Spanish food. In the restaurant he was stricken with a massive heart attack, and died in the ambulance on the way to a hospital. He was 68 years of age. In accordance with his wishes, his ashes were cast to the winds in the Grand Canyon.

This account of the life of Carl Oscar Borg is a success story and yet a tragedy. The life of an artist with a gift for seeing what others cannot and who with great struggle rose from humble beginnings to achieve acclaim and fortune in both America and in Sweden; yet the sensitivity to know that having arrived at this goal, it was for him an empty achievement. He felt the art world had passed him by, and in his own eyes his life was a failure. Without the inclusion of many of his own poems in this biography, the reader would not understand the turmoil that haunted Borg’s soul. Yet the many reproductions of his works included in the illustrations in the book vividly convey the valuable contributions made by Borg in recording the history of the American southwest and its Native Americans before the modern world changed them forever, not in the way that a camera records these images, but through the special insights and sensitivities of the true artist.

This biography, which took author Helen Laird seven years in the writing, is extremely well organized and thoughtfully written in a way that

helps the reader see not only the accomplishments of this Swedish American artist, but the emotional struggles of Borg with his own life and his exceptional abilities. Eighteen chapters organize the book into the successive chapters in his life and are interwoven with examples of his watercolors, etchings, oils, poems, and sketches to help tell the story of his versatility and his evolution as an artist. Thirty-four color plates bound in after the text illustrate many of his significant oil paintings in which his interpretations of scenes from his “Magic Kingdom” made Carl Oscar Borg the “Painter of the American West.”

Dennis L. Johnson

## An outside view of Sweden

*Xenophobe’s Guide to the Swedes*, by Peter Berlin, Xenophobe’s Guides, London, UK, 2013, Soft-cover, 90 pages, Illustrated, Amazon.com \$7.16 plus shipping, Kindle \$4.99.

*Xenophobe – a morbid fear of strangers (Webster).*

This small pocket book is one of a series of guides to visiting or living in a number of countries. There are now 29 books in the series, about people from Americans to Welsh. This volume was first printed in 1994 and has been updated and republished annually up to this current 2013 version. It is compact in size and short enough to easily be read on the plane on your way to Sweden, if you wish.

This *Guide to the Swedes* was written by Peter Berlin, who was born in Sweden but left the day after he graduated from university. He says you have to go abroad to view your country in perspective, for “how can you size up a whale from within?” He has a Canadian wife and four children who, he says “help provide

### SALE!

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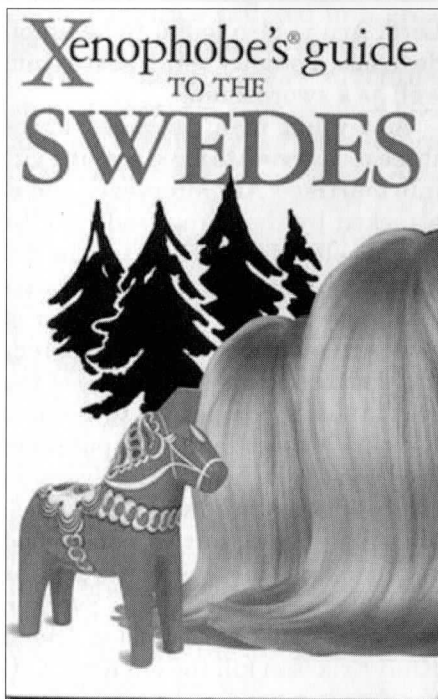




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Swedish insight and Canadian perspective." Berlin spent 25 years in the satellite and rocket business and then retired to become a full-time writer. He also gives seminars in cross-cultural awareness. He is possessed of a marvelous sense of humor, a trait that he probably did not acquire in Sweden.

This is not so much a travel guide as it is an insider's view of the Swedes intended to help a visitor know them better and understand better how they think and behave. He touches on their qualities in a series of a dozen and a half short chapters on such attributes as their character, their behavior, manners, dining, leisure, traditions, beliefs, and values, and, yes, their sense of humor. A few chapters deal with their habits in business, in government, and in the Swedish language. All is presented in a humorous, tongue-in-cheek vein



which makes the book especially enjoyable to read.

I do not think many Swedes would find themselves offended by the way in which their attributes are described, possibly excepting those Swedes with no sense of humor at all. The author's comments generally fit with my own experience visiting Sweden six times over about a 25-year period. As a third-generation Swedish American, I find many of these Swedish habits lingering in my own personality despite the powerful influence of a lifetime of dwelling in the mosaic of blended cultures found

in the United States.

Special attention in this guide is the section on eating and drinking, devoted to the manners and customs of the dinner party. This is seldom spontaneous or casual, the hosts spend the entire day preparing, cleaning, cooking, and otherwise fussing until the appointed hour. The doorbell rings at exactly that time, the host answering the bell to find five or six guests lined up on the doorstep, each with flowers in one hand and a pair of slippers in the other. Several have driven around the block several times in order not to be early,

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and others have arrived by taxi in order to be able to have a drink or two. The rituals of greeting are described, as are the protocols for seating of guests, the obligatory making of speeches by the host and the *hedersgäst* (guest of honor), and the proper manners for *att skåla* (propose a toast). The tongue-in-cheek rendition of this section alone is worth the price of the book.

Other aspects of Swedish life and culture are dealt with in an equally informative but humorous fashion, including conversation and gestures, habits of leisure and pleasure, customs and traditions, business, their government, systems, and crime. The

author puts special emphasis on the Swedish penchant for literalness in almost everything, in which you are taken at your word as much as they expect you to take them at theirs. My own example is in my elderly Volvo. The fuel gauge is as literal as a clock, showing exactly how much fuel is present. As soon as the tank is filled, the gauge begins to drop and does so in linear fashion until empty. Most American cars and those from other countries have adopted the American system, in which the gauge remains on full for at least 100 miles, then falls like a stone for the last half of the tank, presumably to persuade you that you are getting exceptionally high mileage. (Possibly this has changed in recent models, since Volvo is no longer owned by Swedes.)

A few examples of the author's comments, taken from this guide:

"Anyone wondering what really makes Swedes tick need look no

further: It's the coffee."

"Established novelists cater to a peculiarly Swedish taste for flawed characters engaged in bizarre activities and relationships."

"Neutrality has to be defended with guns, blood, and, as a last resort, fermented herring."

All in all, this little book is highly informative while providing a great deal of enjoyment, perhaps for all readers except the Swedes themselves, who may not see it as nearly as humorous as the foreign reader will.

It will not replace a good guidebook on what to do and what to see while in Sweden, but will certainly give you many chuckles and a good belly laugh or two as you read it.

Dennis L. Johnson

**This is Book Review  
#90!**

## A film review

Arn – *The Knight Templar* (Arn – Tempelriddaren), 2007, Swedish with English subtitles, Amazon.com, \$19.60 plus shipping.

This film, as yet little known in the U.S., is an epic film that takes place in the middle of the twelfth century in what is now Västergötland, Sweden. The period is only a little more than a century (4-5 generations) after the area has become Christian after some three centuries of Viking, and its preceding pagan, culture. Sweden is not yet unified as a country, and this area is one in which competing clans vie for ruling power. Arn Magnusson is a son of a powerful leader of the Folkung dynasty that is in competition with the clan of the Sverkers.

The film may be purchased at

Amazon.com and other outlets and is available on Netflix and possibly some other subscription film outlets which provide movies by streaming through your home computer. It may also appear from time to time on one or another cable channel.

Arn at the age of about eight is badly injured in a fall, and his devout but ill mother prays he will be given into God's service if he survives. Arn does recover, and before his mother succumbs to her illness, she turns him over to a nearby Cistercian monastery to be raised by them as a monk. As Arn grows up in the monastery, he is trained in archery, horsemanship, and swordsmanship by brother Guilbert, a former Knight Templar. The Knights Templar are warrior monks of the Cistercian order who fight in the service of the

Lord. Arn is also found to be ambidextrous, a quality which serves him well as a swordsman.

As a young man, he comes across three men trying to force a young girl into marriage. Arn intervenes and is attacked by the three, and he kills two in self-defense. He is told he did no wrong, but that his skills cause him to be destined to be a soldier of God. Arn soon leaves the monastery and returns to his family, one of the two families competing to become King of Västergötland. A dispute over land causes the head of the Sverkers to challenge Arn's father to a duel. He must agree, but is not a good swordsman. Arn steps forward as his champion, and defeats King Sverker. He later helps his boyhood friend Knut Eriksson kill the old King Karl Sverkersson, leading to war between

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the two factions.

Meanwhile, Arn becomes romantically involved with a girl, Cecilia Algotsson of a family in support of the Sverkers. They are found guilty of premarital relations, excommunicated, and each forced to serve twenty years of penance. Cecilia goes to a convent and Arn is sent to the Holy Land as a Knight Templar to fight against the Saracens in the third Crusade. Cecilia, with child, scrubs floors in silence in the convent, and Arn serves heroically in the third Crusade and is instrumental in the defeat of Saladin, leader of the Saracens. After many years Arn is released from his service and the couple and their now teen-age son are finally reconciled when he returns to his homeland. Their reunion is destined to be short-lived, however, when Arn again joins the struggles with the Sverkers, and succumbs to serious injuries suffered in a great battle between the two clans.

This film is a great adventure story, a story of long unrequited love, and an extremely well-made production overall. It is based on a trilogy of the same name, written by Jan Guillou. For those interested in Swedish history, it provides a very plausible and convincing portrayal of this time in the history of Sweden. Numerous films about Vikings have been made, but few focus on this period in early medieval history after the time of the Vikings. This period was centuries before the Reformation, and the role of the Catholic church of the time in medieval society in all of its various elements is well presented. Competition for rule was under way and the future Scandinavian nations were in the process of

determining their boundaries and governments. The scourge of the "black death" (bubonic plague) was still a century in the future for Scandinavia, in which many areas lost over a third of their population. For Swedes and Swedish-Americans, this production provides a glimpse into the life and time of some of our possible ancestors of some 30 to 35 generations ago.

The title role in the film was played by Joakim Nätterqvist as the adult Arn, several child actors played him at earlier ages. Several other familiar actors are to be seen, including Michael Nyqvist as Arn's father, Stellan Skarsgård as Arn's uncle, the lovely Sofia Helin as Arn's Cecilia, Gustaf Skarsgård as King Knut Eriksson of Sweden, and Bibi Andersson as Rikissa, the unkind Mother Superior of the Convent. Many others made up an excellent supporting cast. Dialogue is mostly Swedish, but in the Holy Land English and Arabic is used. English subtitles are used wherever needed. The photography is magnificent with the Swedish scenes all made in Västergötland. The Crusade scenes were made in Morocco. All the music for the film

was composed by Tuomas Kantelinen. The film has considerable violence and some moderate nudity as part of the story, but should be suitable for all from teenagers on up.

This film was produced by five nations, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Germany with production headed by Svensk Filmindustri. The total budget to make the film was US \$30,000,000, the most expensive production in Swedish film history. It was originally to be two films in a series, but was later edited down to serve as a single film, and then for a six-part series for television. Viewers will be most satisfied with the single film version, 133 minutes, I believe. In the genre of historical fiction, this film is a fine production in the tradition of great Swedish films.

*Dennis L. Johnson*

## SAG needs Your help!

As you have seen by now, our very competent Book Review editor is retiring from his position after having written 90 book reviews and one film review.

We regard the reviews as a very important part of SAG, as the readers are spread all over the U.S., Canada, and Sweden, and a lone subscriber even in Australia. For all of them it is very difficult to keep track of the many interesting books (and movies) that are published with a *Swedish* or *Swedish-American* theme.

We need you to keep your eyes open. And we are extremely pleased if you write a review and send it to the SAG editor. Family histories, church histories, local group histories, lodge histories are among the things we would like to present in SAG. And all in English.

*Elisabeth Thorsell*  
SAG editor

