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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 Book Review Editor, Dennis L. Johnson, at <1\_viking@verizon.net> or Dennis Johnson, 174 Stauffer Road, Bucktown Crossing, Pottstown, PA 19465, so he knows what you are working on.

## Swedes in Bishop Hill

*De lydiga kreaturen i Bishop Hill. En religiös fanatikens uppgång och fall*, by Björn Fontander, 2011, Carlssons Bokförlag, Stockholm. ISBN 978 91 7331 426 8, in Swedish. 34 illustrations. 318 p., hardcover. Person index.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, confronting the powerful State Church of Sweden was a feat of moral and physical courage. Enduring a 4,000-mile journey and facing the hardscrabble American frontier was not for the faint-hearted. From the outset, the separatist Swedish movement led by lay preacher Erik Jansson was a social experiment filled with controversy, befuddling the Swedish mainstream.

In this volume of popular history, Swedish journalist Björn Fontander “aims to give part of the history of Erik Jansson and his fight against the Swedish church, and the rise and fall of a religious movement.” Fontander takes his title from disgruntled 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish sheriff Johan Ekblom from his ancestral parish who referred to the Janssonists as “the obedient cattle.”

A longtime producer for Swedish Radio and Television, Björn Fontander is the author of seven books, most focusing on WWII as it relates to Scandinavia. He has roots in Torstuna, the home parish of Erik Jansson’s parents, and when he visited Bishop Hill on assignment for Swedish Television, he became fascinated.

Although Swedish scholars have published analyses of this unique Swedish-American social experiment (for example, Cecilia Wejryd’s impressive dissertation), nonfiction books for the general reader are rare: the sympathetic portrayal by professor Olov Isaksson of the National Museum of Antiquities, *Utopia on the Prairie*; the well-researched pastiche by local historian George Swank, *Bishop Hill: Showcase of Swedish History*; and the lively if not totally accurate biography of Jansson written by theology professor Paul Elmén in 1976, *Wheat Flour Messiah*.

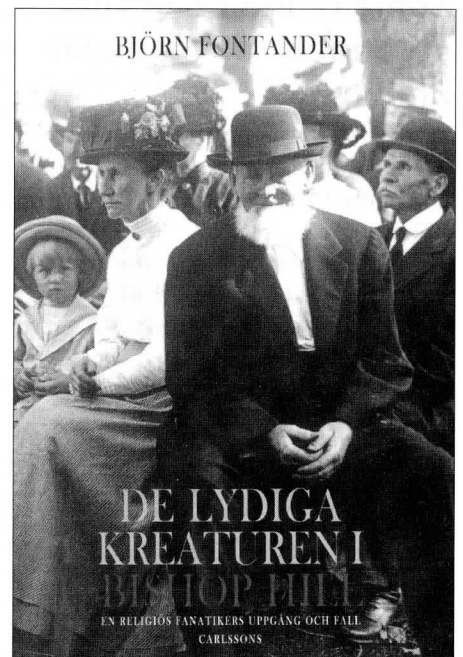
*De lydiga kreaturen* is an ambitious book, divided into five sections spanning 150 years. The history is told through vivid scenes, flashbacks, and lengthy asides. The point of view shifts between the author’s visit to Bishop Hill in the 1980s, and a third-person focus on Jansson. Two framing devices are used: a painting by Olof Krans and the notion of Jansson sitting at a desk writing his memoir.

Following a brief introduction, part one is an imaginative retelling of the sect’s early years in Sweden, apparently primarily based on Jansson’s memoir and the 1900 Herlenius dissertation. Part two is a brief account of Jansson’s flight to America. Part three relates the Janssonist emigration and first years of the Colony, culminating in Jansson’s murder in 1850. Part four brings us to the 1861 dissolution of the Colony, but also touches on the 1896 Colony reunion, a 1993 auction of Colony items, and the 1989 funeral of a Colony descendant. Part five describes a sect which

formed the basis for Selma Lagerlöf’s 1901 novel, *Jerusalem*.

Fontander maintains a good pace, sprinkling the tale with quotations from Jansson, hostile clergy in Sweden, and loyal Janssonists. He brings to light passages from Jansson’s own diary and the letters of his former servant, Anna-Maria Stråle — sources sometimes overlooked in treatments of the Colony. He is skilled at providing a summary and analysis of complex issues including Jansson’s moral code (p. 29) and farewell letter (p. 112).

Not surprising for an award-winning television producer, Fontander does visuals best. His scene-setting and character sketches are vivid. He is an engaging narrator with a flair for clever phrases. He characterizes Jansson as going from *jordbrukare* (p.35, literally “earth-





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user,” i.e. “farmer”) to *ordbrukare* (“word-user”) or ‘*Satan hit och djävlar dit*’ (p. 81, “Satan here and devils there”). One parish was “*profetfritt*.” (“prophet-free” p. 60). We encounter provocative chapter titles, such as “*Flykten från Djävlandet*” (“The Flight from the Land of Satan”) and “*Bos Karin och horkarlen*” (“Bos Karin and the Whoremaster”).

There are a number of unfortunate errors in the book. Some are understandable, given a lack of background in American culture. Fontander characterizes a burial he happened to witness in the Bishop Hill cemetery as “short, efficient, American” (p.149), perhaps not aware that Bishop Hill burials are preceded by lengthier funeral services in the nearby church. Misunderstanding the nature of district court hearings in the 1800s, he wonders how the courtroom accommodated everyone. According to him, Jansonists took horse-drawn boats from New York City to Albany (p.141), although the Hudson River had no tow-paths.

Unfortunately, the book was published without sufficient fact-checking or editing. Here, Erik Jansson looked at the Steeple Building built three years after his death (p.208), thousands of Swedes arrived in New York before 1845, newlywed Colonists after the mass marriage in 1848 stayed in the Big Brick, built 1850 (p.157) – none of which is correct. While the layout of the book is attractive, I found the inconsistency in citations, punctuation, chapter datelines, and captions distracting.

Creative nonfiction is a difficult genre. The lack of subject index, endnotes, or bibliography make it

impossible for most readers to know when the facts are being stretched. It is sometimes difficult to tell which thoughts are excerpts from Jansson’s memoir and which are fabricated. In creating incidents, thoughts, and dialogue, Fontander has tiptoed over the line.

The bias against the Jansonists is glaring. Without irony, Fontander several times likens the pious and peaceful sect members (full disclosure: my ancestors) to acquiescent Germans under Hitler. Jansson he dismisses as a “religious fanatic” and a “slick fish” who mesmerized over a thousand gullible countrymen with his passion and preaching.

Some of the unsubstantiated claims are startling, for example, that Erik Jansson spoke Latin (p.163), that happy times in Bishop Hill lasted only until 1851 (p.171), that Jansson planned to build a palace in Bishop Hill (p. 145). The charming cover photo of unidentified travelers has nothing to do with Janssonists, and was taken fifty years after the Colony dissolved.

The author’s imagination runs well beyond the historical record. Although Jansson’s mother and two brothers emigrated with the sect, Fontander speculates that he was the black sheep of the family (p. 35). With no evidence of anything beyond a childhood accident, he wonders whether Jansson’s brother chopped off two of his fingers intentionally.

The treatment of women is especially troubling. Although they comprised the bulk of the colony and made crucial contributions to the sect’s survival and economic success, Jansonist women show up here chiefly in salacious and/or romantic episodes going well beyond the evidence – Bos Karin, Anna Maria Stråle, Maja Stina Larsdotter, and Sofia Schön.

Not one to let the facts get in the way of a good story, journalist Fon-

tander spins a tale to support his somewhat smug premise – Who in their right mind would want to leave our *Fjällhöga North*? Thus, activists must be crazy, emigrants must be bewitched.

A fan of creative nonfiction, I wanted to like this book, but Fontander’s foray into frontier history was a disappointment. Neither fact nor fiction, *De lydiga kreaturen* is a Nordic yarn for a long winter night that doesn’t stand up to the sober light of day. The real story of the Jansonists is powerful and immensely moving. In straining for the sensational, this otherwise talented author disrespects us all.

Brita Butler-Wall,  
Ph.D., is a descendant of the  
Jansonists who writes about the  
Bishop Hill Colony.

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## Modern Swedes in Oregon

*Ten New Lives, Swedes in the Pacific Northwest*, by Lars Nordström, Swedish Roots in Oregon Press, Portland, 2010, Soft Cover, 256 pages, Swedish Roots in Oregon Press, \$15.00.

Lars Nordström was born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden, but has lived in the U.S. since 1978. He has authored many books in both Swedish and English about Swedish immigrants in the U.S. Northwest, where he now resides with his family. Once a technical translator, he now divides his time between growing grapes in his vineyard near Beaver Creek, Oregon, and writing, translating, and giving talks on various Swedish-American subjects.

In this new book, Lars Nordström has recorded the results of ten interviews with recent Swedish immigrants, five men and five women, most of whom came to the U.S. around the year 1980. These interviews stand in vivid contrast to those usually read about Swedes coming to the U.S. during the "Great Migration" years of 1840 to 1930. These stories illustrate the differences in circumstances between today and the earlier years, and vary greatly among the ten themselves. Lars was interested in the reasons why Swedes would migrate today to the U.S., in a time when living conditions in Sweden were much more stable and secure in many ways than they were in

earlier days.

The method used was to search for people born in Sweden who had lived here at least ten years. The people were found largely by word of mouth in the Portland area, among friends and acquaintances. Of those interviewed and recorded, only one had become a U.S. citizen, the others were resident aliens, and one had returned to Sweden. Nordström provided a four page questionnaire ahead of time to serve as a starting point, before the three to four hour interview, usually held in their own homes. From these interviews Nordström condensed and edited their stories, then gave them an opportunity to review the final draft and work out any changes before publication.

Today, all but one of the persons interviewed still live and work in the Portland area but eight are now U.S. citizens (probably due to a 2001 change in Swedish law allowing dual citizenship). All but one remains married to the same spouse, all continue to work and none have retired. A big change which has occurred in the last ten years is the growth of the internet, allowing these Swedish-born residents to stay in

closer and easier touch with relatives in Sweden and with Swedish news. Most felt that their opinions as recorded in their original interviews in 1988–91 have not changed much since that time.

The ten individual stories related in the book are as fascinating as they are unique and different. Of the ten, a few examples are:

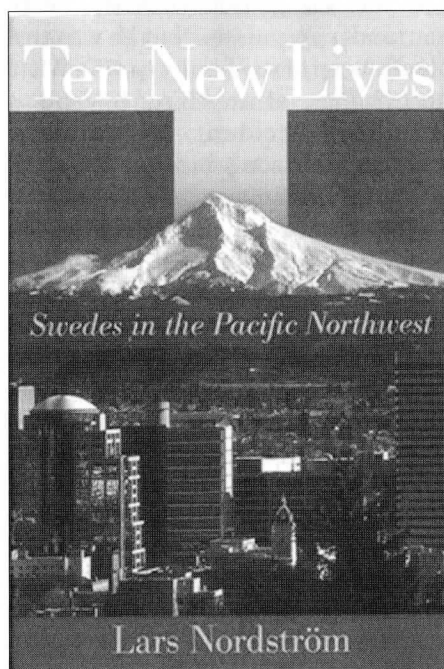
– Roger, b. 1955, an electrical engineer from Eskilstuna, had an urge to travel and worked in several countries before coming to Texas with his Swedish wife and small child. He later moved to the Pacific Northwest, where he remained.

– Cecilia, b. 1950, from Sundsvall, had been to the U.S. as an exchange student. She met her husband, an American, in 1974 and they moved to Oregon in 1977, living in Eugene and later Portland.

– Jan, (b. 1958, male) first came to the U.S. as an au pair desiring to see more of the world, went home, then returned later to work in California. He later moved to Oregon where he met and married a Norwegian-American girl in 1990.

– Britt-Mari, (b. 1948 in Nässjö), met an American at a folk high school in Sweden, stayed in touch, and then married him in 1971. They later moved to Seattle where he continued his law studies, returned to Stockholm, then settled in Portland, Oregon.

Each interview as recorded by the author began with a brief biography



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of the person being interviewed, then summarized the experiences and opinions that they had formed about their experience, quoting them directly wherever possible. Most liked moving to the U.S. but had strong feelings and attachments to their families in Sweden. A common feeling was that this is only a temporary change; at some point they would return to Sweden to live. Settling in, owning a home, and raising children in the U.S. made a return difficult however, and only one of the interviewees at this point had actually done so.

Of great interest to readers are the reaction of these Swedes to living in the U.S., and their view of the many differences they found. In one case, Maria was divorced and returned to Sweden with her children, mainly to continue family ties. Some adapted quite quickly and nicely to living in the U.S., others told of more difficulty. Taken as a whole, the interviews give a valuable picture of how a recent immigrant sees their new country, both the positive and the negative. The variety of experiences and reactions that they had is very revealing of the cultural differences between the two countries. There is also the enormous contrast between 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish immigrants seeking opportunity when there was none at home, and those of 100 years later where opportunities were plentiful in both countries and choices became much less clear-cut.

The glimpses into these ten lives provided by Lars Nordström makes for great reading by Swedish-Americans and others interested in a better understanding of Swedish attitudes and how they differ from our

own. A common element in both cultures appears to be that our lives seldom work out in the ways we had envisioned when young. In today's world,

"Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans."

*Dennis L. Johnson*

## Old Swedes

*Swedes of the Delaware Valley*, by Margaret Murray Thorell, 2011, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC, 128 pages, softcover, Illustrated, Amazon.com, \$17.15 plus shipping.

This compact volume is another in the "Images of America" series of books about the history of numerous cities and places in the U.S. published by Arcadia Publishing Co. The book provides an excellent summary of the role of the Swedes in the settlement of the Delaware Valley, and identifies most of the remaining structures and sites related to the Swedish settlement. The Delaware Valley includes the lands around the upper Delaware Bay, including parts of present-day Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. The author is a resident of Philadelphia and, in fact, the daughter of a well-known merchant couple and community leader in Chestnut Hill, near where this reviewer lived for some years. A foreword for the book was provided by Tracey Rae Beck, popular current director of the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia.

The colonial settlement of New Sweden began in 1638 with the arrival of a ship bearing a group of some 24 settlers, mostly of Swedish, Dutch, and Finnish descent. Three more voyages by the same vessel, the *Kalmar Nyckel*, and another ship, the *Fogel Grip*, brought other settlers to increase the small colony to some 600 in all. In 1655, the colony came un-

der Dutch rule, and later English when William Penn arrived with a charter from the British king. In a time before roads and bridges, the first settlers stayed close to the waterways, but in time they and their descendants settled and claimed farms throughout the Delaware Valley.

The story of the Delaware Valley Swedes from colonial days to the present day is told mainly through the use of many historic and contemporary photographs of places, artifacts, and people associated with the settlement over the years. Extended captions to these photographs and, in some cases, portraits, fill out the story and provide many interesting details. A first chapter illustrates the history and life of the Swedish Museum, built in the Great Depression on land settled by Swedes, and dedicated in 1938 as a center to celebrate the history, culture, and life of Swedes and Swedish Americans in the area. This it continues to do today with permanent and special exhibitions, social events, and the observance of Swedish cultural and ethnic celebrations.

A second chapter focuses on the history of the Swedish log cabin, brought to the U.S. by Swedes and Finns as a form of dwelling readily constructed in the forests of North America and used by many for several centuries in the later settlement and development to the West. A few examples remain or have been restored, although many others have been lost to time.

Where Swedish immigrants settled in the neighborhoods of Philadelphia over time is also the subject of the second chapter, including Wicaco, Southwark, Kingsessing, Port Richmond, and elsewhere. Swedish Farmers spread out to New Jersey to the East, and on the upper Schuylkill to the West.

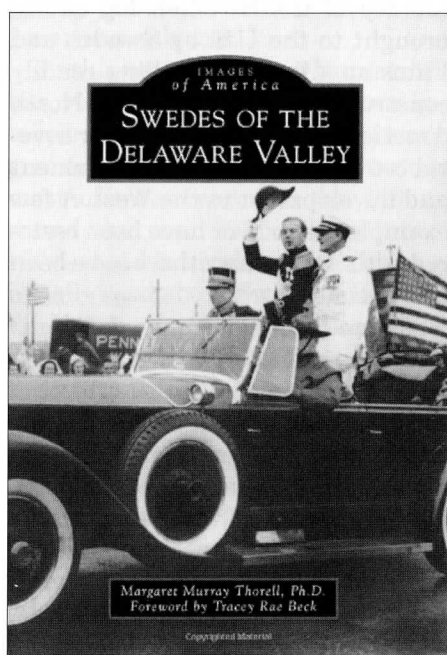
Churches were an essential accompaniment to the Swedish settlement, beginning with Gloria Dei in

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Philadelphia (1700) and Old Swedes' in Wilmington (1699), both replacing log or wood churches built earlier. As the Swedish population and their descendants spread, six additional churches were added at various times such as St. James of Kingsessing (1760), Douglasville, and elsewhere. A fourth chapter focuses on information and photographs related to these historic churches.

In the fifth chapter, the earliest history and its subsequent commemorations are illustrated along with other locations and buildings related to this history. The sixth chapter is devoted to the various monuments, art work, sculpture, and important historic personalities associated with the Swedish history of the Delaware Valley, including visits by Swedish royalty, art work by Anders Zorn, Claes Oldenburg, Christian von Schneidau, and various



Swedish and Swedish American celebrities.

The seventh and final chapter addresses the impact of Swedish culture on Philadelphia and in the U.S., including such persons as Jenny Lind, Fredrika Bremer, John Ericsson, Charles Lindbergh, Gloria Swanson, and Birgit Nilsson. Even the modern IKEA stores are mentioned as contributing to Swedish culture. The Philadelphia flag continues to bear the blue and yellow of Sweden, and statues of a Swedish pioneer woman and of a man in pioneer dress, designed by Alexander Calder in 1894 are poised near the top of our city hall tower to recognize the historic contribution of Swedes to the building of Philadelphia.

This book serves as a useful and excellent compendium of the history of the Swedes in the Philadelphia region, both for the prospective visitor and for those generally interested in Swedish contributions to the life and growth of the Delaware Valley. It is thoughtfully put together and incorporates many historic photographs not available elsewhere. The captions and descriptions are thoroughly researched and reinforce the photographs in telling this interesting story. It will serve as a useful reference in any personal or public library, or for persons finding ancestors with roots in the Delaware Valley.

Dennis L. Johnson

**Ed:s note:** The cover picture shows H.R.H. Prince Bertil during the 1938 Pioneer Jubilee.

## A new book by Lilly Setterdahl

Well-known Swedish-born author Lilly Setterdahl has recently published a new book, this time about the Swedes on the *Titanic*.

Lilly Setterdahl's *Not My Time to Die: Titanic and the Swedes on Board* presents a brief, but thorough history of the *Titanic*, and gives an array of information about the tragedy as reported by the press of the day – the American, the Swedish, and most importantly the Swedish-American press. In a generously large paperback format, the book describes the conditions in Sweden in 1912, the reasons for the emigration, and profiles each of the 123 Swedes on board. The stories of the 34 survivors cover some 100 pages. The author has researched the intriguing lives of the survivors to a greater extent than anyone else. She has translated eyewitness accounts, letters, newspaper reports, and interviews that give new insight into what happened on that tragic night one hundred years ago when the biggest steamer built-to-date foundered on its maiden voyage. Families are separated, or decide to die together. The personal stories were vivid and heartbreaking, but not without some happy endings. This well-referenced and illustrated book about the third-largest ethnic group on the *Titanic* is the first of its kind published outside of Sweden.

Available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)  
Price \$19.95 + s & h.

