

6-1-2005

## Book Reviews

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

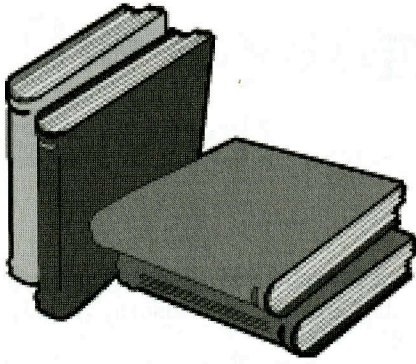
---

### Recommended Citation

(2005) "Book Reviews," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 25 : No. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol25/iss2/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Swedish American Genealogist* by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).



# 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 <djohnson@2vikings.com> or 2407 Hunsberger Drive, Limerick, PA 19468, so he knows what you are working on.

## Scandinavian Lefties

***On the Left in America***, *Memoirs of the Scandinavian-American Labor Movement*, by Henry Bengston, translated by Kermit B. Westerberg, Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 237 pages, illustrated, softcover, \$27.00 (Amazon.com, hardcover \$40.00, paperback \$27.00)

***On the Left in America*** is the biography and memoirs of one immigrant from Sweden who was heavily involved in the labor movement in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily through his association with socialist organizations. *Henry Bengston* was born 26 March 1887 in By, Värmland, the son of a farmer. In 1907, at the age of twenty, he left Sweden for Port Arthur, Ontario, a Canadian lumbering town on the north shore of Lake Superior. Traveling with an uncle, an earlier migrant returning to his home in Port Arthur, Bengston found work as a lumberjack and then as a bricklayer for two seasons. By 1909 he had decided to move to Chicago in the U.S., which he considered would offer him more and better employment opportunities.

Bengston's education in Sweden was conventional, roughly a high school education. His father was a politically active liberal in a region of mostly conservatives, but no labor organizations yet existed in Värmland. With a strong interest in social issues, Bengston became drawn early to social democratic ideas despite

warnings from his father and from a teacher and mentor who became interested in him and recognized his intelligence. He had read of the American intellectual, Henry George, and his single tax system. Bengston also became involved in the temperance movement, and attended lectures at the Good Templar Lodge in nearby Säffle. He read many pamphlets and attended rallies of the social democratic movement, then gaining momentum in Sweden.

Immigration to Port Arthur brought Bengston to a wholly new environment of the backwoods, lumbering, and many fellow immigrants from Europe. He was attracted to the other young Swedes in his logging camp, about ten in number, several of whom were also students of socialism. Despite warnings against doing so from his uncle, he became involved in forming a Swedish Socialist Club in Port Arthur. Dispersal of the members caused the club to dissolve, however, bringing this effort to an end. Bengston then decided to move to Chicago. There, he found work as a department store clerk and soon resumed his interests in socialist organizations.

By the spring of 1911, Henry Bengston was heavily involved in the Chicago Swedish and Scandinavian socialist clubs. He was elected chairman at an organizational meeting that year and, with fellow Swedes and Danes, undertook to publish a newspaper begun in Rockford, IL. The paper was moved to Chicago, and the first Chicago edition was published on June 7, 1911, with Charles Sand as editor. The paper

was published weekly in Swedish with a four page, five column format and became the means of communication with the club's members, many scattered throughout the Midwest. It was one of several dozen papers published by socialist clubs around the U.S. and Canada, in New York, and in other cities with many Swedish immigrants.

After Charles Sand resigned, another editor served for a few months. Bengston became editor in 1912. He served in that capacity for six years, then became business manager and writer in 1918. Henry Bengston had changed the paper from contract printing to in-house printing, thereby reducing chronic budget deficits and teaching himself the printing business. Circulation varied during that period, but was never greater than 5,000 copies per edition. Costs were supported mainly by subscriptions and revenue from advertising. Bengston supported himself with his department store job and volunteered or received minimal wages at the newspaper.

During the decade 1910–1920, socialist organizations in the U.S. were turbulent and beset by many schisms, weakening their unity and creating splinter groups and divisions. In general, the socialist groups agreed on opposing capitalism, were pro-socialist and pro-communist, opposed organized religion, admired Karl Marx's (1818-1883) writings on social and economic issues, supported Lenin and the overthrow of the monarchy in Russia, and viewed as socialist heroes Eugene Debs and the martyred Joe Hill (Joel Hägglund). However, they disagreed on

# Book Reviews

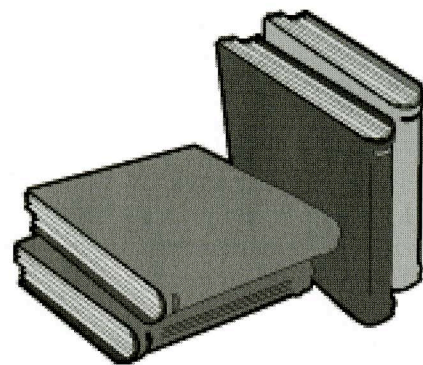
many points, leading to major divisions among various factions. In the days leading up to U.S. involvement in World War I, the socialist groups were pacifists and opposed American entry into a “capitalist war that had no meaning for the working man.” This resistance to the war led to sanctions against many socialist newspapers and even imprisonment of some of the more outspoken members. By 1920, the socialist groups split over events in Russia, many becoming communists. Bengston strongly opposed this change and he resigned from the socialist party.

From 1911 to 1920, Henry Bengston as editor of *Svenska socialisten* was at the heart of events in Chicago and knew most of the people involved in the socialist movement. In the 1950's, he was persuaded by a friend in Sweden to write his memoirs of that period. Over a period of five years, he completed the work and it was published in Stockholm in 1955, in Swedish under the title *Skandinaver på vänsterflygeln i USA*. It received little notice in the U.S. until it was translated into English by Kermit Westerberg and published in 1999 by The Southern Illinois University Press in cooperation with the Swedish-American Historical So-

ciety. An excellent introduction by Michael Brook adds information about Bengston's personal life and helps put his memoirs in context of the times.

In his memoirs, Henry Bengston describes in detail the events and people involved in the socialist movement during his most active decade. He describes many of his Swedish-American socialist associates and their positions on the leading issues of the day. By 1920, Bengston became estranged from the socialist movement and the newspaper, *Svenska socialisten*, closed its doors. Through his knowledge of the printing business, Bengston began, with a Swedish partner, a printing business in Chicago known as The System Press, and devoted his time to building up that business and providing for his family. He married at some point in the 1920's and he and his wife Hildur had a daughter, Margit. He spoke little in the book about his personal life, but it is known that later in the 1940's he joined the Irving Park Lutheran Church in Chicago. He professed sympathy for the labor movement and socialism throughout his life, but did not again become active. He died 8 October 1974 in Northfield, Minnesota. In later correspondence with an early comrade, he confessed that he was much disillusioned after 1920 and felt that most of his ten year involvement had been time wasted.

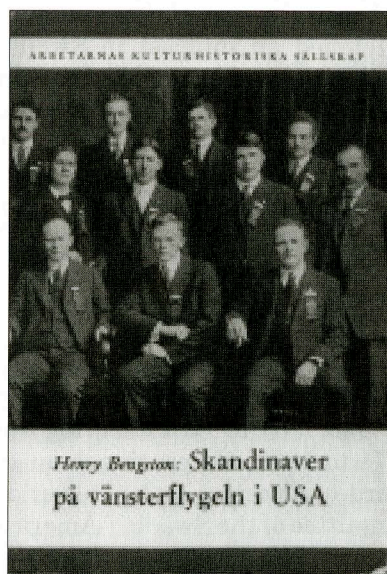
A thread running through Bengston's memoirs is the slow but steady attrition of socialist radicals from their group, many tiring of controversy and abandoning their idealistic crusade in favor of joining the American capitalistic system. In so doing, many of these bright young men became successful in business and some even became quite wealthy. Bengston recalls in his memoirs revisiting Port Arthur, Canada, in 1927, 16 years after he left for Chicago. He mentioned that two of his

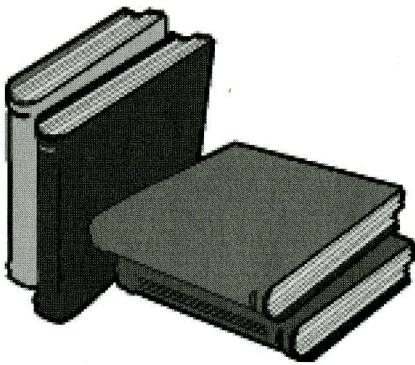


Swedish lumberjack friends in the camp were now wealthy, one in the lumber business and the other had become a millionaire. It seems that while these idealistic young Swedish socialists were trying to change the world, the world around them had changed, and offered boundless opportunities for success in America.

Most of the active Swedish socialists, like their counterparts in many other European countries, had been brought up in 1890–1910, in an environment of radical socialist ideas generated as a result of the industrial revolution. They brought these ideas with them to America, but here these seeds fell mostly on barren soil. Some of the causes they championed later became a part of government policy in the 1930's under Franklin Roosevelt. Other immigrants who came earlier, from famine-threatened farms, knew little of these ideas and came without preconceptions to seek their fortunes in a land of unprecedented class mobility, cheap land, freedom, and opportunity. The “class struggle” did not exist in their new land, and labor was slowly developing independent collective bargaining power to avoid the worst abuses of laissez-faire capitalism.

*On the Left in America* offers a new, rare insight into the history of a small group of Swedish immigrants who marched to a different drummer than the great mass of immigrants described by the many usual chroniclers of the great migration. Henry Bengston's memoirs offers a perspective into the people, events, and ideas of one such group centered in Chicago, and their relationships with national groups, during probably the





# Book Reviews

most active period of the radical socialist parties and the labor movement in our nation's history.

Dennis L. Johnson

## A New Nordic History

*The Soul of the North, A Social, Architectural, and Cultural History of the Nordic Countries, 1700-1940*, Neil Kent, Reaktion Books Ltd., London, 2000, Hardcover, 416 pages, illustrated. Also at Amazon.com, hardcover \$45.00, paperback, \$29.95

Neil Kent, teacher and historian at the University of Cambridge, UK, has written this innovative history of the Nordic countries. Unlike the more common chronological histories of nations, this history is organized into eight major topic areas such as *Christianity, Spirituality and the Church, Health, Hygiene, and Disease*, or *Nordic Life in the Town and Country*. All Nordic countries are covered, with similarities and differences among them usually distinguished. Sweden, being the most populous, is not shortchanged in this history, and those primarily interested in Swedish history will find the country abundantly represented. The author's approach helps the reader understand Sweden in the context of the other Nordic countries, as well as Sweden's relationships with Germany dating back to the times of the Hanseatic League (*Hansan*).

Richly illustrated, the book has chapters with reproductions of drawings, paintings, sculptures, and architecture; almost no photographs

are included. All illustrations are well chosen to represent the character of the times under discussion. The scope of the book extends to the arctic settlements and to the colonies in the New World, in the Caribbean, and in Africa. The author also includes at the end a detailed chronology of political events and a separate chronology of cultural and scientific events, both handy, quick reference tools for readers.

Woven into the various topical chapters, the book examines such issues as the role of women, attitudes toward children, pietism, criminality, attitudes toward slavery, political expression and dissent, the influence of climate, nationalism and radicalism, treatment of the sick, the mentally ill, and lepers, illegitimacy, treatment of the elderly, and many other topics.

An entire chapter, *Regal and Imperial Visions*, is devoted to the attitudes and aspirations of the royalty of the Scandinavians, their palaces, and their influence on the arts, design, and architecture. In Sweden, the end of the reign of the Vasas and the establishment of the Bernadotte dynasty are discussed and the influences of this change are illustrated.

Neil Kent offers at the end of the book some of his conclusions about the Nordic region and the sweeping trends which have taken place in these countries during the time period of the book. Not all Scandinavians may agree with all of these conclusions, but they are of special interest due to the perspective of a Cambridge scholar in England, an outside observer who is relatively free of Scandinavian national bias.

Those interested in broadening and deepening their understanding of Sweden and its history in particular, and the Nordic countries in general, will find this book both enlightening and highly readable. This book belongs on the shelf of all

students of Sweden, not only for its text but also for the many outstanding illustrations reproduced within its covers.

Dennis L. Johnson

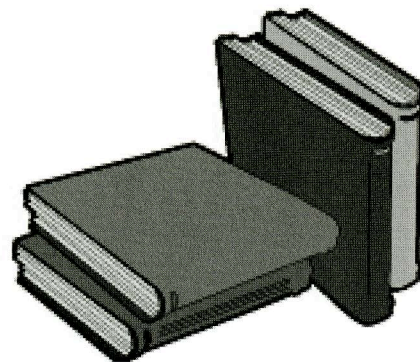
## In Honor of Arnold

*SCANDINAVIANS In Old and New Lands, Essays in honor of H. Arnold Barton*, The Swedish-American Historical Society, Chicago, 2004. Edited by Philip J. Anderson, Dag Blanck, and Byron J. Nordstrom. 302 Pages, hardcover, order for \$24.95 (\$21.95 for members) plus shipping from [info@swedishamericanhist.org](mailto:info@swedishamericanhist.org)

H. Arnold Barton, one the most prolific authors writing about the history of Scandinavia and the Scandinavian-American experience, has been honored on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday by the publication of this collection of essays prepared by fourteen of his peers in Scandinavia and in America. Educated in the U.S., Barton developed an interest in his studies of Scandinavia at an early age. Two of his paternal grandparents had immigrated from Sweden, he spent a year in Europe after high school, and two months living with relatives in Hälsingland. He developed an interest in Swedish history, culture, and language and pursued this interest as a graduate student at Princeton. He later taught history at the University of Alberta, Canada, at the University of California in Santa Barbara, and from 1970 at Southern Illinois University.

Besides his teaching duties, Barton became editor of the *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (renamed the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* in 1982), serving from 1974 to 1990. He continues on the board of directors and publications committee of the Swedish-American Historical Society, furthering Swed-

# Book Reviews



ish-American scholarship among established and young scholars. He has published at least eighteen books, scores of articles in professional journals, dozens of book reviews, and many other writings in a lifetime of scholarship. Among his more well-known books are *Letters from the Promised Land*, 1975, *Scandinavia in the Revolutionary Era, 1760-1815*, 1986, and *A Folk Divided: Homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans*, 1994.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I: SCANDINAVIA has seven essays dealing with various aspects of Swedish history. Part II: SCANDINAVIAN AMERICA, adds seven more essays relating to the Immigrant experience and life in the United States.

Although the title refers to Scandinavians, all but four of the essays focus on Sweden and Swedes. The articles are arranged roughly in chronological order according to the periods of history they focus on.

## Part I

The first two essays deal with events of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Sweden. First, *Stig Ramel* (Director of the Nobel Foundation 1972-1992) and a career Swedish foreign service officer, leads with "From Horn to Bernadotte: Sweden's transformation from a European Great Power to a Nordic Small Power, 1721-1812." The second is an essay about Michael Anckarsvärd, commander of the Finnish Squadron of the Coastal Fleet under Gustav III, by *Hans Norman*, Professor Emeritus at Uppsala University in Sweden.

*Lee Sather*, Professor of History at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, follows with an analysis of the Swedish-Norwegian border war of 1808 and the Swedish revolution of 1809. This is followed by "King Carl or President Konow: Norway's Form of Government after 1905," by *Terje I. Leiren*, Professor of Scandinavian

Studies and History at the University of Washington. *Byron J. Nordstrom*, Professor of History and Scandinavian Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, then sheds light on the role of organized labor in shaping foreign policy in Sweden in the 1930's, particularly with regard to relations with Hitler's Third Reich. "Religious Revival and Norwegian Influence in Early Danish Emigration," by *John R. Christianson*, helps the reader understand the origins and role of religious reform movements beginning in the 1790's and continuing through the great migration period. John Christianson is Research Professor of History at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

Concluding the first part of the book is an article by *Lennart Limberg*, who was General Secretary of *Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt* from 1987-2003, and a specialist in African history. The essay deals with a century of work in preserving Swedishness outside of Sweden and the history of an organization formed in Göteborg in 1908 for that purpose.

## Part II

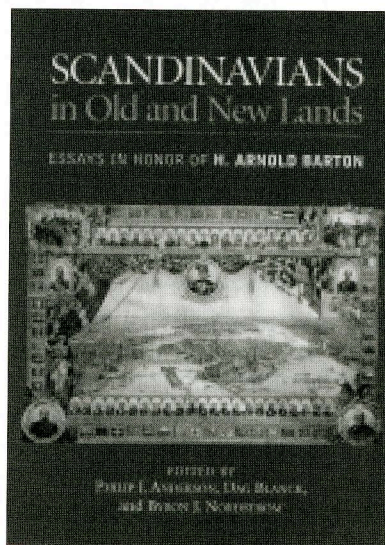
After this heavy dose of highly academic, professionally thorough, and somewhat ponderous essays in

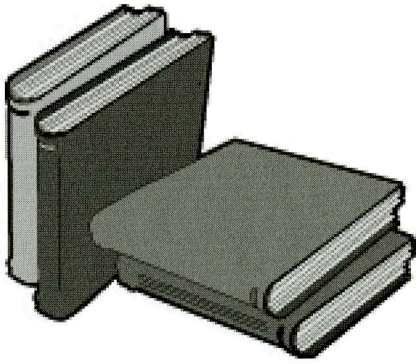
history, the reader is ready for something lighter and more easily digestible. This desire is more than met in the second part of the book, in a series of essays about Swedes in the New World. The first, by *Ulf Beijbom*, Professor of History and first director of the Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden (1965-2002), discusses the great Swedish poet, Esaias Tegnér, (1782-1846), and his American contemporary, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. These poets were personally close and Longfellow's style of writing was heavily influenced by Tegnér.

The Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind, is the subject of the next essay, by *Anita Olson Gustafson*, Associate Professor of History at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. Focusing on Miss Lind's visit to Charleston, S.C., in December, 1850, the reader learns more of her charming ways, her vast talent, and her relationship with her U.S. promoter, the famed P.T. Barnum.

*Ulf Jonas Björk*, Associate Professor of Journalism at Indiana University in Indianapolis, writes about "What the Immigrants Read," after settling in America. This was mainly the reading of serialized novels, by mostly Swedish but a few American authors, in the many Swedish language newspapers published in the U.S. Then *Philip J. Anderson* relates in his essay a true story of the difficult but all too frequent bad experience of one Swedish immigrant on Ellis Island in 1901, an elderly clergyman, Rev. Carl Johan Nyvall.

New Sweden, Maine, is the subject of an interesting essay by *Barbro Klein*, Professor of Ethnology at





# Book Reviews

Stockholm University. Ms. Klein writes about 125 years of place names, stories, and culture based on interviews with many descendants of the Swedes who settled in this small community in the upper St. John Valley of northern Maine in 1870–1890. The essay is salted with interesting and humorous anecdotes from the memories of the current residents of New Sweden. Following this essay, *Odd Lovoll*, King Olav V Professor of Scandinavian-American Studies at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, sought out the character of the Norwegian-American through a questionnaire, nearly one thousand personal interviews, correspondence, and various community and family histories. He traveled to some 30 states in his quest, and this essay is the result of Prof. Lovoll's research. (Note: Garrison Keillor is not far off the mark, but his observations were mainly limited to Norwegian bachelor farmers.)

The concluding essay in Part II was written by *Nils Hasselmo*, Professor of Scandinavian Studies and former President of the University of Minnesota, now President of the Association of American Universities in Washington, D.C. Prof. Hasselmo recalls his early perceptions of America as a lad growing up in Sweden in the 1930's. This perception was shaped mainly by his reading of boys' adventure novels by American writers such as Mark Twain, James Fenimore Cooper, Edward Ellis, and others, all of which had been translated into Swedish. Swedish and German (Karl May for instance) writers also wrote adventure novels

about America, and he read these as well.

This collection of essays offers much for both serious scholars and for those simply interested in discovering more perspectives on Scandinavian history and the Scandinavian-American experience, related by some of the most distinguished scholars and historians in both countries. It is a fitting tribute to the esteemed H. Arnold Barton and his life's work, and a valuable contribution to the literature about the history of Scandinavia and Scandinavian-Americans.

Dennis L. Johnson

## Minnesota Swedes

*Swedes in Minnesota*, by Anne Gillespie Lewis. Published by Minnesota Historical Society 2005. Paperback, 94 pages, illustrated. Notes and index. ISBN 0-87351-478-5. \$11.95 from Amazon.com

This little book is a good introduction to the history of the Swedes in Minnesota. The author has earlier published *So Far Away in the World: Stories from the Swedish Twin Cities*, which was reviewed in SAG 2/2004, and she is well qualified for the job of writing this book, having grown up in a Swedish neighborhood in Minneapolis.

The book starts with figures on how many Minnesotans that considered themselves of Swedish origins in the year 2000 (9.9%), and Kittson County was then the top county (almost 34%). In Minneapolis the figure was 7.9 % and 6.4 % for St. Paul.

The tale goes on with the stories of the early immigrants, including Jacob Fahlström, Eric Norelius, Hans Mattson, and Joris Per Andersson, the founder of the Chisago settlement.

The gradual growth of the Swedish

communities all over the state is shown by maps and stories. There is a chapter on the people that moved to the cities, both directly from Sweden and from the rural districts, and how they built their own enclaves both in Minneapolis and in St. Paul. *Swedish Hollow* in St. Paul was discussed by James E. Erickson in articles in SAG 3/2002 and 4/2002.

The churches and the civic organizations were important parts of the lives of the early Swedes, which is discussed here, as well as the current living organizations and the activities at the American Swedish Institute.

Swedes that did well, like Charles A. Lindbergh, John Lind, and governor John A. Johnson are not forgotten.

The book is well illustrated and has a number of interesting sidebars, that tell about Swedish Meatballs, Cooperative Creameries, The Moberg Mystique, and more.

There is also a list of books for further reading; it might have been longer, but it will get the interested person on the track of more information.

Elisabeth Thorsell

