Swenson Center News

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Swenson Center News

Nils William Olsson Leaves Editorship of SAG

In January of this year, Dr. Nils William Olsson stepped down as editor of Swedish American Genealogist (SAG). As the publisher of SAG, the Swenson Center expresses its deep gratitude to Dr. Olsson for his many years of stewardship of and his significant contributions to the journal.

Dr. Olsson has been active in the field of Swedish-American studies and Swedish-American relations for over five decades. He served as executive director of the Swedish Pioneer Centennial in 1948, and received his Ph.D. in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Chicago in 1949. He then entered the U.S. diplomatic service, and served in Reykjavik, Stockholm, and Oslo between 1950 and 1967. He also served as the director of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis (1967-73), was the moving force behind the establishment of Swedish Council of America, and served as its first executive director (1973-84). He is the recipient of numerous awards.

His research interests have focused on Swedish-American personal history, biography, and genealogy. Among his many books and publications are such well-known publications as Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the U.S. 1820-1850 (1995), Tracing Your Swedish Ancestry (1974), and A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858 (1950, 1959).

In 1981 Dr. Olsson founded Swedish American Genealogist, and remained its editor until the beginning of this year. During his seventeen years as editor and driving force behind SAG, it quickly became a leading publication for anyone interested in Swedish-American biography, personal history, or genealogy. SAG has been a true labor of love for Nils William Olsson; and, as readers and researchers in the field of Swedish-American studies, we are deeply thankful for his contributions, without which we would know significantly less about the history of Swedish immigration to North America.

Ett stort tack för dina stora insatser, Nils William!

Dag Blanck, Ph.D.
Director, Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center
The Migration of Ideas: A Conference at Augustana College

During the twentieth century, Sweden and the United States have experienced a close relationship. There have been lively exchanges of persons, ideas, and goods between the two countries that have influenced both Sweden and the U.S. in different ways. On October 9 and 10, 1998, the Swenson Center at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois will host a conference to explore one important dimension of the relationship between Sweden and the United States—the exchange of ideas. It seeks to examine ways in which ideas have migrated between the two countries, how they have been perceived and received, how they have been transformed, and how they have influenced the respective receiving countries.

One source for the close relationship between the two countries is the mass immigration of Swedes to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. About twenty percent of the immigrants eventually returned to Sweden. In addition, intricate networks of contacts were established between the Swedes in America and their compatriots back home. In this way, information about America, American goods and products, American ideas, and American dollars reached Sweden through returnees, letters, newspapers, and personal visits. It is also likely that the mass migration of Swedes to America and the ensuing thousands of contacts across the Atlantic made Sweden particularly receptive to American ideas. Sweden was one of the European countries that experienced a very high rate of emigration in terms of its total population. Only Ireland and Norway sent more sons and daughters to America relative to their population size, and it is interesting to note that it is also said that the American presence in and contacts with the U.S. in these two countries are very strong.

Another explanation for the close ties between Sweden and the U.S. is the general fascination in Europe with America from 1776 on. Swedes and other Europeans have a long tradition of following the developments in the U.S. and of forming opinions about America and American phenomena. The European view of America has varied greatly, from strong negative feelings, at times couched in specific anti-American terms, to very positive estimations of the U.S. and strong sentiments of appreciation. Debates about the influence of American popular culture or politics on European countries have sometimes been heated. The U.S. is thus a country about which Swedes and other Europeans always have had an opinion, be it positive or negative, and the emergence of the U.S. as a superpower during the post-World War II years further strengthened its prominence on the Swedish and general European mental maps.

Contacts between Sweden and the U.S. have also gone in the reverse direction, i.e., from Sweden to the United States. Sweden's transformation into a modern society, with extensive programs of social legislation, attracted great attention both in the U.S. and elsewhere. In his influential 1936 book about contemporary Sweden, American journalist Marquis Childs described the country as "the middle way," a term that became widely used as a characterization of what also became known as "the Swedish model." The debate about Swedish solutions to societal problems seems to have been especially prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to ideas from the political arena, another dimension of modern Sweden that has made an impact in the U.S. includes the arts. Swedish cinema in the twentieth century, for example, has left some imprints in the U.S., ranging from actresses such as Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman to the leading director of modern Swedish cinema, Ingmar Bergman.

The conference will begin on the evening of October 9, with a keynote address that will also serve as the 1998 O. Fritiof Ander Lecture in Immigration History. On the following day, there will be nine presentations, by leading scholars from both the U.S. and Sweden, exploring the ways in which American ideas have reached Sweden and the role Swedish concepts and ideas have played in the United States. The presentations will address these questions from a broad perspective and deal with such topics as politics, literature, the arts, media, and the role played by the returning immigrants.

We invite you to join us for what promises to be a very interesting conference! Please contact Vicky Oliver, Swenson Center, Augustana College, 639 38th Street, Rock Island, Illinois, 61201-2273 for a brochure and registration materials. Ms. Oliver can also be reached by fax at 309-794-7443 or via e-mail at scoliver@augustana.edu.

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