When N.W.O. Was W.N.O.: Nils William Olsson's Early Literary and Journalistic Career to 1935

Philip J. Anderson
When N.W.O. Was W.N.O.: Nils William Olsson's Early Literary and Journalistic Career to 1935

Philip J. Anderson*

For nearly six decades, anyone even remotely aware of Swedish America—its activities, organizations, and publications—has been conscious of the name Nils William Olsson, the one who H. Arnold Barton described fifteen years ago as “surely the most protean figure on the Swedish-American scene.”¹ The festschrift presented to Dr. Olsson in 1984 on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday included a comprehensive bibliography of his writings (to that time), in which only two entries appeared before 1941. The first was a set of ten biographical essays in the four-volume Swedish Element in America (1931), edited by his North Park College professor E. Gustav Johnson and Eric G. Westman. The second was an article in the 7 July 1932 number of Svenska Amerikanaren-Tribunen.²

During a long and distinguished career as a scholar-diplomat, Nils William Olsson has authored numerous books and articles, and has edited several publications, perhaps most notably the Swedish American Genealogist, which he founded in 1981. What have remained virtually hidden, however, are the origins of it all, where and how the craft was first nurtured and applied, and when N.W.O. was known formally to all as William N. Olsson and to his friends as “Bill.” This essay will recollect the years from 1929 to 1935, beginning with Bill Olsson’s matriculation as a student at North Park College in Chicago and concluding with his editorship of the old and venerable Veckobladet (Minneapolis) during its final year of existence, 1934-35.

Early Influences

When Bill Olsson moved at age twenty from his family home near Pittsburgh to Chicago to attend college, there had already been many formative influences in his life, both in Sweden and the United States. Born in Seattle on 11 June 1909, Nils Wilhelm was the oldest of four children born to Nils Albin

* Philip J. Anderson is Professor of Church History at North Park University.
When N.W.O. was W.N.O.

and Mathilda Olsson. Four months after the birth of their son Karl in 1913, Mathilda died of complications and Albin, a civil engineer with the Pacific Car and Foundry Company, was then transferred in early 1915 from Renton, Washington, to St. Petersburg, Russia. His young children—Nils (also known as Nisse), Agnes, Lillie, and Karl—remained with his parents on the farm in Killeberg, in the parish of Loshult in northern Skåne. In St. Petersburg, Albin met and married Elsa (Tora) Larsson, a young missionary to sailors, who served with Svenska Missionsförbundet (Swedish Mission Covenant Church).3

At Killeberg, the children were welcomed and loved by an extended family. Of significant influence was Cecilia, their paternal grandmother, who, though lacking in formal education and having been occupied with raising eight children, had read everything she could find, often in the wee hours of the morning by the light of a kerosene lamp. She introduced Nils and the others to the little village library in Killeberg, open only for two hours each Saturday evening. Politics, literature, and current affairs were among her keen interests, and she had a superb knowledge of family and local history.

From 1916 to 1918 the family was together in Russia. Because of deteriorating political and economic conditions, however, the Olssons returned to Sweden and settled briefly in Örebro and then once again in the familiar surroundings of Killeberg. They remained there until 1922, when the family moved to the United States where Albin had gone ahead in 1920, finding employment in Sharon, Pennsylvania. In the post-war, heavily Irish-Catholic environment where they lived, the names Nils and Wilhelm were undoubtedly problematic, and William or Bill better suited the American culture. Here Nils William, now a young teenager, and his younger siblings learned English (Albin being the only one at home who knew the language), entered the public schools (Nils William, the first grade), and discovered the neighborhood lending library. The family's collection of books, though modest, contained in Nils William's words "the very best in world literature, history, and the fine arts."4 The impact of this early exposure to Tegnér, Geijer, Lagerlöf, von Heidenstam, Runeberg, and Topelius is particularly evident in the future literary paths taken by both Nils William and Karl.

The Olsson family also became intensively involved in the Swedish Mission Covenant Church, first in Youngstown, Ohio (near Sharon), for three years and then in Pittsburgh. In addition to experiences in congregational life, their home was visited frequently by Covenant pastors, educators, and

---

4 Ibid., 14.
In 1927 the family attended the Covenant's conference grounds on New York's Lake Chautauqua for the first time, and there the network of the regional and national church broadened, including an awareness of North Park College. Through the influence of Isaac Skoog, his pastor in Pittsburgh, William N. Olsson set off for Chicago in 1929.

North Park

During the early Depression years between 1929 and 1931 when Nils William studied at North Park, the school comprised a junior college, an academy, and a seminary. Founded by the Covenant Church in 1891, and meager in resources, it had moved from Minneapolis to Chicago in 1894. The junior college had only gotten off the ground successfully in 1919, but within the decade it had become a quality institution with a quite remarkable collection of students and faculty. This is especially evident in the publications of the period; Nils William became involved in all of them.

Bill Olsson was a reporter for the *North Park College News* for two years, a weekly paper that reported fully on campus life with creativity, substance, and humor. As a staff sports reporter with special responsibilities for men's intramural athletics, among other duties, he worked alongside new friends, some of whom, such as Paul H. Elmen and Harold W. Jacobson, would be lifelong colleagues. His first contribution appeared on 11 October 1929 in a column entitled “The Inquiring Reporter,” where he urged students to become actively involved in intramurals, as athletes or loyal observers, to enjoy the “hectic spectacle, full of vim and pep.” His coverage of events was graphic, suspenseful, and humorous.

In the spring of his senior year, “W.N.O.” wrote a piece for the column “Loafin' Aroun’,” where he described a Washington’s birthday excursion with a friend by elevated train to Chicago’s unique marketplace, Maxwell Street. Entitled, “The Ghetto,” it captured the frenzy and excitement of the characters, vendors, sideshows, and aggressive dickering on sales. It also marveled at the

---

5 Ibid.
6 *North Park College News*, 11 October 1929, 3. Copies of the newspaper may be found in the North Park University Archives, Chicago, Illinois.
multicultural diversity represented by Gypsies, Jews, African Americans, Mexicans, and other ethnic groups in a city fashioned by immigrant workers.\textsuperscript{7}

The college newspaper also covered aspects of campus life that were central in Nils William's experience: life in "Dormville," where the men lived—in conscious relation to activities in the resident female Caroline Hall; news from the dining hall, where Bill Olsson worked three meals a day; and activities of the numerous societies and clubs. Among his extracurricular involvements, Nils William naturally was involved in the Scandinavian literary group, \textit{Geijerforeningen}, serving both as president and "critic." In March 1931, the society hosted Jakob Bonggren, the foremost poet among Swedish Americans and involved with the Chicago-based paper \textit{Svenska Amerikanaren} since 1883.\textsuperscript{8} He was also secretary of the men's Glee Club, and when it toured the Midwest in May 1930, extensive coverage was provided because "the group got the idea that what happens on the tour is deserving of being recorded by a historian." The chorus elected Philip Liljengren historian, and "Bill Olsson, the Smoky City lad, got the job of assistant."\textsuperscript{9} The group visited several Swedish-American historical sites along the way, and in Topeka, Kansas, "Bill Olson [sic], it is said, got real dizzy climbing the circular staircases of the state capitol building."\textsuperscript{10}

During his senior year, Nils William was president of his class and associate editor of North Park's yearbook, \textit{The Cupola}, with Paul Elmen as editor-in-chief. In the photographs, Nils William's customary bow tie is to be seen under a moustacheless face topped by a full crop of dark hair. The yearbook is also graced by the photographs of a college freshman, Dagmar Gavert, later to become Nils William's partner in life. Next to the senior picture of William N. Olsson of Bellevue, Pennsylvania, were the prophetic words: "For Bill it is always 'spring.' He's always going some place or doing something in a big hurry—he's activity itself. However, not without motive, all this 'springing'..."\textsuperscript{11}

In early 1930, a group of students that included Nils William launched a literary society for poets that lasted until 1969. Known as the Pegasus Club, it also began a publication entitled \textit{Pegasus}; the first yearly issue appeared in May 1930 with cover art created by Warner Sallman. It was not until his eighteen-year-old brother Karl arrived on campus in the fall of 1931 that Nils William, now a student at Northwestern University, published his own poetry in \textit{Pegasus}.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 11 March 1931, 4.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 25 March 1931, 1.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 16 May 1930, 1.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 3 June 1930, 5.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Cupola: The Official Publication of the Graduating Class of North Park College} (Chicago: North Park College, 1931), 42. Copies of the publication may be found in the North Park University Archives, Chicago, Illinois.
He has said laughingly that the brief and fleeting moments of inspiration to write poetry were caused (and not without a touch of envy) by the highly gifted and prolific writings of his younger brother.\textsuperscript{12} Two examples are to be found in Pegasus, the first in the May 1932 volume, written under the pen name Nils Falkynge:

\begin{quote}
REKVIEM

Ute där världstormar rytta sitt hån,
fjärran från hemlandets ro,
förglömt bakom skogiga kullarnas bryn
står gammalt nybyggarebo.

Gläntan i skogen är allt som är kvar
av fallen banbrytaregård.
Gräsbevuxt kulle nu gömmer dens stoft
som kämpade striden hård.

Granarna sucka sin kvädesång
på vakt kring mosskatafalk.
Nynnande näcken i rännilen blå
tömmer sin sorgekalk.

Ej var man som spångar det gapande djup
kämpar tills bradden är nådd;
ej var man som hugger sig obanad mark
skördar av strävandets sådd.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Karl, whose pen name was Carolavi, also had four English-language poems in the issue.

When Nils William eventually returned to North Park in 1937-38 as an admissions counselor and instructor in Swedish, he resumed his activity in Pegasus, along with Karl and Paul Elmen (both of whom were teaching English), and continued even after he began doctoral studies at the University of Chicago in 1939. By 1942, all were in military service and off the roster of the Pegasus Club. One additional poem, however, was published under the name William N. Olsson in 1939:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Pegasus 3 (1932), 10.
\end{quote}
When N.W.O. was W.N.O.

SPANNMÅLSBÖRS

Skränt och hysteriska röster
stiga från cirkelestrad,
packad med människorester
från en själslig krevad.

En nero vickar sin tumme
en annan gällar hans bud;
språket förstås av den stumme;
i våålet drunknar allt ljud.

Högt över Michigans stränder
ilar budet från morsefusiljär
Nu trycks osynliga händer
över lumpen judasaffär.

Snart ljuder gonggongen i salen
majskungen blir sen till sin golf,
men ute i Platteriverdalen
har farmklockan slagit tolv.

Vid slutet av dagens möda
går bonden trött till sitt tjäll,
han äger ej längre sin gröda—
den tillhör den rike i kväll.

This new poem appeared in a special tenth anniversary issue of Pegasus. The first half was a collection of poems published during the first decade, chosen according to a “standard of excellence” by a committee composed of Dean Samuel A. Wallgren and English instructors E. Gustav Johnson and Paul Elmen. “REKVIEF” was one of the poems selected.

Veckobladet

The years studying and teaching at North Park College were naturally reflective of a subculture shaped by the Covenant Church and the common experiences of a youthful second generation bridging the transitions, sometimes painful, within an aging immigrant community. The next phase of William N. Olsson's journalistic career would draw those dynamics in sharp relief. Nils William remembers:

14 Ibid., 10 (1939), 47.
It was in January or February 1934, when I was a student at Northwestern and Karl was associate pastor at the First Covenant Church in St. Paul, under the tutelage of A. E. Palmquist, that I received a telegram from Palmquist (then chairman of the board of Veckobladet) asking me if I would be interested in taking over the editorship of Veckobladet, now that Andrew Johnson ("Åkerbrukaren") was retiring. Salary—$25.00 per week. I was broke since I could not afford the costs for the spring semester at NU and I was bored with school. The promise of a new vista and the opportunity of rooming with Karl were incentives, which also caused me to drop out of school. It never bothered me that Veckobladet was in the hole to the tune of $17,000. I did not receive my promised salary until the paper went into bankruptcy in the spring of 1935, when by law employees were the first to be paid in a bankruptcy case. I approached the task with all the vigor of a young calf let out to pasture in the spring.15

The paper was begun in the autumn of 1884 by the entrepreneurial pastor-evangelist Erik August Skogsbergh to be an independent, unofficial publication of the regional Northwestern Missionary Association, formed a few weeks earlier on 27 October at Salem (Pennock) in Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, four months prior to the organization of the Covenant Church itself. Svenska Kristna Härolden, as it was known until October 1887, when it became Minneapolis Veckoblad, was a weekly "devoted to religion and general intelligence." Its masthead proclaimed that it was a Christian and political newspaper for the Swedes in America.16 Though regional in its base, for a half-century its presence in Covenant congregations and work extended to an influential role in the life of the denomination and a national readership. In February 1906, the name was again changed to Veckobladet. The paper was part of a publishing company, governed by a board of directors, which also operated a bookstore and published other papers such as Linnea (for young people) and Söndagsskolvänn (for children).17

16 For a discussion of the foundation of the Northwest Conference and the context for the paper's half-century existence, see Philip J. Anderson, A Precious Heritage: A Century of Mission in the Northwest 1884-1984 (Minneapolis: The Northwest Conference, 1984), 31-4; 38f.; and passim. The first issue of Svenska Kristna Härolden is usually given as 17 December 1884, because it was volume one, number one. There was, however, a full sixteen-page issue that preceded it, distributed free to advertise the paper and gather subscriptions. Described as a "Profnummer," it was dated 26 November 1884.
17 Three MS minute books of the board of directors of Minneapolis Veckoblad Publishing Company are extant in the Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Chicago, Illinois. They cover the following periods: 1895-1903; 1903-1907; and 1907-1923. Unfortunately, the minute book(s) covering the period up to the dissolution of the company in the spring of 1935 have not been located.
Skogsbergh edited the newspaper until 1899, an amazing accomplishment in light of his many involvements and a preaching schedule that kept him away from Minneapolis several months a year. He was succeeded by the aforementioned Andrew Johnson, who edited the paper in his first stint until 1901, who in turn was followed by K. Newquist, Nils Heiner, Gustaf Frykman, Hjalmar Sundquist, Erik Wallgren, and David Marcelius. David F. Swenson, professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota and pioneer Kierkegaard scholar, also served for a time. All this was before 1910, when Erik Dahlhielm grasped the reins and remained until 1930, at which time in retirement Andrew Johnson returned again until March 1934. The paper also benefited from general managers S. A. Matson, K. Waller, and attorney Olof Bruce. The hymnwriter and publisher A. L. Skoog served many years as secretary, keeping the minutes in English, and Aaron Carlson, owner of a prosperous millwork company in northeast Minneapolis, volunteered his support for almost a half-century, time and again rescuing the struggling business by his financial generosity and acumen.

The newspaper had its beginnings in the little mission house on Fourth Street and Eighth Avenue, moving in 1886 to the basement of Skogsbergh's Tabernacle where it remained until 1904. For the next thirty years, it occupied several different commercial locations in downtown Minneapolis, including the Minneapolis Daily News building where for years Veckobladet was printed. In the early days it had been printed by the Minneapolis Tribune. Wherever the offices were located, the publishing company had been a place for Covenant clergy and laity daily to gather, drink coffee, and discuss the pressing issues of the day.

When Nils William arrived in Minneapolis to take the helm, the office was in the building of the Norwegian paper Tidende, which now did the printing of Veckobladet. Nils William produced his first issue on 13 March 1934, and Andrew Johnson remained as co-editor for two weeks until after his retirement party. He was feted in grand style at the Curtis Hotel prior to sailing on the Gripsholm, at age seventy-four, with his new wife to live out their days in his native Dalsland. The 27 March issue gave an accounting of Johnson's farewell and included an introduction of the new editor by David Nyvall, brother-in-law of Skogsbergh, beloved president emeritus of North Park, and a regular contributor to Veckobladet. He wrote that William Olsson "is of Mission Friend stock," and added:

He maintains a balanced interest in Swedish-American culture and history, but is especially interested in Covenant work. He brings to his new duties experience gleaned from journalistic enterprises while at school and college as well as an appreciation of the varying needs among young and old people
of the denomination. Since 1930 he has been instrumental in the publication of daily newsheets at our young people's summer conferences.\footnote{Veckobladet, 27 March 1934, 12. Extant copies of these newsheets may be found in the Covenant Archives.}

Olof Bruce noted perceptively in his remarks at Johnson's farewell that Olsson's arrival was "a challenge to the entire personnel for a progressive and persistent attitude and for unbounded energy." It was no secret that the newspaper was on the ropes financially; and the new editor—the "young calf"—was three months shy of twenty-five.

\textit{Veckobladet} was a sixteen-page weekly, half in Swedish, half in English, and it immediately had a new look. "I changed the format of the paper going for a tabloid size and introduced modern fonts, changed the logo and went for short snappy columns. It was not appreciated."\footnote{Nils William Olsson, letter to author, 30 December 1998.} The font on the masthead had a much more modern, yet Nordic, look about it and contained these words under the bold \textit{VECKOBLADET}: "English section published in the interests of the young people of the Northwest." Contributing editors bridged the old and the new: Gustaf F. Johnson and David Nyvall, Karl A. Olsson and Paul Elmen.

Continuity was provided by Johnson's front-page weekly column, "Tidens gång." The fundamentalist pastor of the Swedish Tabernacle in Minneapolis, Johnson had often been critical of the Covenant Church, but had a selective and somewhat large base of popular support in the area. In general Nils William and Johnson got on well, but over time the veteran preacher would prove to make life somewhat difficult for the new editor and his younger fellow writers. Nyvall provided faithful encouragement and continued to write a regular column on the past and the present; and Paul Elmen's father, John (pastor in Buffalo, Minnesota), wrote regularly in the Swedish section. The paper maintained its coverage of Swedish provincial news as well as \textit{Svenska Missionsförbundet}. Reports of activities in the area churches were written in English.

The greatest innovation occurred in the English section. Nils William's brother Karl wrote a literary review column entitled "From Our Bookstall," with reference mostly to religious publications, but also timely secular literature. Karl Olsson would also be a lightning rod for the critics. In his first column, he wrote: "This column is not an advertisement. It is designed for those whose controlled passion is books, who believe that reading thoughtfully is the best discipline of the mind."\footnote{Veckobladet, 13 March 1934, 8.}

In his first feature called "Our Covenant," Paul Elmen inaugurated a series that focused specifically on the concerns of second-generation Covenanters. For
the previous decade, the Covenant had endured intense controversy over its theology, seminary, and teachers at North Park, and Veckobladet had contained its share of polemical news—such as in 1925 when David Nyvall wrote a twelve-part series during the Scopes Trial in Tennessee on the teaching of evolutionary theory, and Gustaf Johnson countered with thundering opposition. "We have a growing conviction," wrote Elmen, "that what the Covenant needs most of all are fewer battles between men who are not quite alike in their religion, and more battles with men who are not religious at all."21

In retrospect, it was quite an accomplishment under these circumstances to edit and publish a high quality newspaper, where apart from the regular columns, according to Nils William, "I had to do a lot of writing to fill 16 pages every week."22 He introduced at the outset a feature in Swedish under the heading "Jorden runt på fem minuter." In staccato paragraphs, Bill Olsson covered the world’s news each week. Week one: Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Trinidad, Rio, Mendoza, and Washington. Week two: Paris, Athens, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Dublin, and Bowsman (Manitoba). And so on. After a few weeks of this, he "received an irate letter from a subscriber, who said he got dizzy from the speed and wanted to get off. I must have irritated a few with my innovations, but took it philosophically."23

In September 1934, Nils William printed a two-part report entitled "Till Österland vill jag fära," describing his summer train journey to points east. In Chicago he visited North Park and Northwestern, and heard the Chicago Symphony perform Wagner. Before arriving home in Pittsburgh, he heard the Detroit Symphony. From there it was on to "the Swedish Mecca," Jamestown, where he heard Gustaf Johnson address the Eastern Young People's Society at Chautauqua.24

References to the secular arts were indicative of the broadening of Veckobladet under Bill Olsson’s leadership, and were reflective of something of a culture war between many in the first and second generations. Just the previous month, Johnson had stormed into the office and angrily resigned his column because the editor had printed a review of the popular secular play "Green Pastures."25 While the paper had strong general support from readers, some continued to grumble because of perceived accommodations to the world. Shortly before the paper ceased, Karl Olsson was criticized for his appreciative review of the Norwegian Herman Wildenvey’s poems under the title Owls to

21 Ibid., 9.
23 Ibid.
24 Veckobladet, 4 September 1934, 3; 11 September, 1934, 3.
Words like the following were new to narrowly pietistic readers of the paper:

Wildenvey is a Hellene, a happy notary in that rude temple of Pan, which is his native Norway. The poems are wine from this grape; they laugh, wail and sing nature. At times they cough with the plaintive voice of many young trees under the blue rim of the circle. But the tone is predominantly glad—sun-glad, and as exultant as a spirit-slave with his shackles struck.26

In the end, there were two issues that contributed to the paper's demise in the spring of 1935. The first, and more secondary, problem was that of language. Veckobladet was not alone among Swedish-American papers attempting to make the same transition. In the first issue printed under Nils William's editorship, a resolution was printed that had been passed by the Twin City Ministerial Association approving of the equal use of English. "It is apparent that if we are to retain the interest and cooperation of our young people in our churches and religious activities," the rationale stated, "we must see to it that a weekly paper be published in the English language, and we must interest our young people in subscribing to and reading such a publication."27 Nils William Olsson was admirably suited to bridge the two worlds of language in creative ways. He, along with his contemporaries Karl Olsson and Paul Elmen, was committed to maintaining the use of the Swedish language and together they lamented its loss while being realistic about the future.

The most pressing problem was the lack of money. It was the Depression, and readers—be they drawn to Swedish or English—still needed to subscribe and pay. The paper had had a long history of financial challenges; a significant one had occurred in 1905 when Linnea was folded into the larger paper and severe steps of "retrenchment, rigid economy, and centralization" occurred because of a $3,400 indebtedness.28 By the summer of 1934, Bill Olsson and his editorial board were addressing the crisis head-on. In July a full-page advertisement was developed offering "A New Deal." Since most Covenanters at that time were ardent Republicans, one wonders how the F.D.R. image was received. "Veckobladet: Your Paper About Your Work." "At Your Service." "Make Veckobladet a family paper. Swedish and English sections together sold

26 Veckobladet, 5 February 1935, 5.
27 Ibid., 13 March 1934, 6. Karl Olsson noted in his column on 18 September 1934, 8: "A notice is given me from the Book Store that Swedish books are selling at reduced prices. As everywhere among our people the Swedish language is losing its grip. One senses the pathos of it."
regularly for $2.00—Offered to new subscribers for $1.50 until October 1."
These words surrounded cartoon images of the paper.29

A campaign was announced in August to promote the introductory subscription rates and the sale of capital stock.30 The publishing company had always been a business venture to raise capital and benefit its stockholders. Some like A. L. Skoog, to whom the company had frequently owed money, simply kept taking additional shares instead. In September, two area congregations promoted the paper through women's organizations: the Ladies' Aid of the Camden church in North Minneapolis; and the Tabitha Society of the Tabernacle in Minneapolis, headed by Jean Hagstrum's mother, Mrs. Andrew Hagstrum. It was also advertised that one could now subscribe only to the English section of the paper at $1.00 per year.31

Paid advertising was also a challenge for the editorial team during the Depression. As mainstay advertisers felt the pinch, Bill Olsson was successful in the fall of 1934 in attracting non-Scandinavian commercial interests, and being an election year, numerous political ads were run until early November. These efforts were not enough. By November Veckobladet had been cut back from sixteen pages to eight pages. The only exception was the 11 December sixteen-page issue that commemorated in grand style the fiftieth anniversary of the paper.

"In the final analysis," according to Nils William, "it was finances that killed the paper" in March 1935.32 Apart from the reduced number of pages, Veckobladet hardly died with a whimper. To the very end, it was a quality newspaper, professionally produced, and even in changing times, it knew its audience. The innovations during the last year were done with great class, and on the part of its editor, William N. Olsson, demonstrated already a keen knowledge of the business and the art, helping set the stage for Nils William Olsson's unique and multifaceted contribution to the Scandinavian countries, the United States, and Swedish America.

---

29 Veckobladet, 17 July 1934, 12; and successive weeks.
30 Ibid., 14 August 1934, 7.
31 Ibid., 11 September 1934, 10; 25 September 1934, 12.