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## Post Colonial Perspectives on Swedish History

Hanna Hodacs, *Converging World Views. The European Expansion and Early Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Swedish Contacts*, Diss, Studia Historica Upsaliensia 207, Uppsala 2003. 250 p.

*Converging World Views* adopts a postcolonial and transnational perspective to investigate the encounter between British evangelicals and Swedes in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Great Britain in this period ruled a quarter of the world's population Sweden's colonial domain was confined to one small island in the West Indies. Yet, Hodacs argues, British influence played an important part in promoting a shared world view which emphasised the distinction between the civilised protestant European and the savage heathen other. British evangelicals represented Sweden and its peoples as both in need of salvation and as capable of assistance in the global struggle to civilise others – both as objects to be rescued and as potential allies. This dual thinking had a significant impact on different sectors of Swedish society. European expansion, the thesis suggests, influenced relations and processes far beyond the colonial world.

It was the arrival of two Scotch missionaries in 1805 that initiated a period of extensive contact between Britain and Sweden. Initially stranded in Copenhagen en route to India, they decided to devote themselves to work in the Baltic region. "We pity the inhabitants of Bengal and Otaheite because they worship idols", as they put it, "but what better are Europeans who worship no God?" (p.11). They moved to Stockholm as a result of the bombardment of Copenhagen and worked in the area for twenty years. Between 1808–1840 a range of organisations dealing with Bible and tract distribution, popular education, temperance and antislavery were established in Sweden, closely modelled on British prototypes. In 1835 a national missionary society was established in Sweden with its motto based on the distinction between heathen and Protestant – a mark of the influence of British evangelical thinking. By 1842, when George Scott, the most influential of the missionaries to spend time in Sweden, was forced to leave the country because of the hostility his ideas had generated, the heyday of British evangelical influence was over and Swedes were more concerned with their own definitions of their role in the world. But in the first forty years of the nineteenth century Hodacs suggests, the expanding Anglo-Swedish network, "produced a common understanding of the world", "the civilised world that was mainly Europe (which included the settled parts of North America) [...] and the essentially different non-European world" (p.12). This happened despite the major differences

between Britain and Sweden and the distance from sites of colonial activity. Indeed, "Britain and Sweden evolved", it is argued, "a similar conception both of the role of Protestant Europe and of the needs of the heathens outside Europe" (p.21).

Hodacs makes use of postcolonial forms of analysis, mainly represented through the work of Edward Said and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, to highlight the significance of the distinction between civilised and barbaric, self and other. Her particular interest is in utilising these insights to address the question as to how other Europeans, in this instance the Swedes, figured in the British evangelical view of the world. Furthermore she asks, how did Swedes respond to these constructions of themselves and what impact did this have on the ways in which they in turn mapped the world and its peoples? Clearly the relation between Britain and Sweden was not a colonial one, yet in this period it was a particular kind of power relation. Sweden may have been an independent sovereign state, with a substantial merchant fleet, and trading activities across the globe, yet it clearly could not compete in terms of imperial or trading interests with Britain. Furthermore, Britain was widely seen, both internally and externally, as the model of an industrial capitalist society, marking the route to modernity which others would follow. As the recipient of British ideas and agents Sweden was cast in a secondary position to her more powerful neighbour. Given this flow of power from Britain to Sweden the decision was made to organise the study in two parts, the first dealing with the British initiatives, the second the Swedish responses.

The two chapters on British evangelicals focus on their ideas about Sweden and the activities that they generated. The initial inquiry focuses on the location of Sweden on British evangelical maps of the world. One evangelical map of the world, Hodacs suggests, configured Britain as separate from the rest of the world, the centre of progress and civilisation, and the point from which all efforts to christianise and civilise would emanate. Another, however, mapped the upper and middle classes of Sweden as part of a pan-European Protestant world, potential allies in the struggle to save the souls of lesser folks. All the British societies which Hodacs has studied aimed to extend their activities beyond the national and most shared assumptions as to the special place of the British in God's providential plan. The evangelicals – divided in Britain by their Anglican or non-conformist predilections – were linked by their emphasis on the importance of individual conversion and the role of the Bible in this. While missionary societies were for the most part more concerned with "the heathen" at home and in the empire, the evangelical vision was a global one and "heathens" in any part of the world, defined by their need for salvation, could become the object of concern.

The Continental Society, one of those studied, devoted its efforts to mainland Europe, anxious to rescue Catholics, degraded Protestants or rationalists from

the error of their ways. In this context work in Sweden was envisaged as the effort to bring back a "highminded and noble people to that God, from whom they have deeply revolted" (p.59). Those evangelicals who took an interest in Sweden saw the rural population as particularly important, living as they were in isolated places and subject to pressures from economic and social change but they were not for the most part represented as fundamentally different from other European peasantries. The Saami people also provoked much interest, but this time with the focus on their difference from those European patterns that were taken as normative, their strange dress and ways of living.

In detailing the activities of the British societies Hodacs stresses the distinctions made between social groups. When the Swedish middle and upper classes were the focus of an approach the emphasis was on possible forms of alliance, when the Saami people were the focus of activities the emphasis was on "the poor heathen", conceptualised, she suggests, as objects to be redeemed. British influence in Sweden was necessarily limited by religious legislation and state power, but on the other hand Swedish society in some ways resembled "home". Agents could utilise methods similar to those they might employ in home missions to the poor. Different societies used different methods. Some, such as the Continental Society, employed local agents. Others, such as the Antislavery Society, placed a premium on establishing contact with state officials in the hope of wielding influence and encouraging government action on abolition. The Wesleyan Methodists were the most interventionist in the sense that they established a mission station in Stockholm and George Scott, the permanent missionary from 1830 to 1842, was able, despite opposition, to build a chapel and preach in Swedish.

Hodacs adopts the language of "object" and "ally" to distinguish between the ways in which the British approached particular groups in Sweden. I am uneasy with the term "object". Evangelicals were agreed in seeing all souls as equal before God, though not of course equal in terms of political or economic rights. The most important division in the world was that between those who were saved and those who were not. But could a person with a soul be an "object"? Perhaps "subject" might have been a better term? Hodacs rightly suggests the dual aspects of the work with "objects" and "allies" – both kinds of approaches were necessary – and she connects these distinctions primarily with questions of class and status.

Historians of the British empire interested in postcolonial forms of analysis have made use of the trope of similarity and difference as a way of exploring the complexity of the representations of colonised peoples in relation to the colonising self. Here, of course, the major distinctions being made are often associated with "race". Enslaved Africans, for example, were represented by the abolitionist movement in the 1830s as capable of becoming like "us", fundamentally similar as human beings, but wrecked by circumstances. Scientific racists, on the other hand, those who believed that "races" were fundamentally

different, insisted that black people would never be the same as "us". During the nineteenth century both these positions were held, sometimes one was more powerful, sometimes the other. Notions of similarity and difference are constantly in play when explanations are sought for the meanings of the differences between peoples. Perhaps this language with its constant stress on the sliding scale between similarity and difference might have been helpful in elucidating the shifting relations between Britons and Swedes.

The second half of the book documents Swedish responses to these British initiatives. Hodacs' focus is on the dynamic of the encounter between Britain and Sweden and she contrasts this with the more familiar arguments which have seen British influence as triggering a "natural" development, typical of the move into modernity, along similar lines to those already established in Britain. Furthermore, she suggests the use by historians of Habermas's ideas as to the development of the public sphere has for the most part resulted in a rather static form of comparison, of already established nation states. She compares this with a transnational approach which sees the criss-crossing of connections between places and peoples and emphasises the process of *making* national societies. Since the two societies were very different in some respects the absence of a powerful middle class as in the British case, must have had important effects. In Britain the activities of voluntary societies were powerfully associated with the emergence of a more confident and assertive middle class. What then was going on in Sweden? For Hodacs the answer is that it was those already established in positions of power and influence, public officials, the clergy and the military who were critical to the functioning and leadership of the societies. And their aim was a conservative one – to consolidate the existing status quo. Inevitably their activities aroused conflicts and tensions within the establishment, best illustrated by the furor over the activities of Scott and the Methodists. Scott's forced departure, however, she argues, left the ruling orders more united against British influence and determined to uphold nationalist values.

Since Sweden had no empire to speak of and no emergent middle class it was the already established elite, it is suggested, who were most open to British influence. Ideas about "heathen natives" were widely disseminated along with the assumption that missionaries were improvers and modernisers, bringing not only Christianity but also civilisation. For Sweden to have its own missionary society was, therefore, a demonstration of its European status – its capacity to civilise others. At the same time the presence of the Saami people inside Swedish territory made a mission at home vital. British influence encouraged Swedes to think of themselves, like the British, as having their own historic mission.

Meanwhile there were objections, from the liberal press particularly, to the ways in which it was thought Britain was trying to extend its influence at the expense of other nations. "England intrudes via the church and the Bible" as one

pamphleteer put it, "with God in one hand and cotton in the other, she strives to form people" (p.216). Methodist activity in particular was seen as a form of sectarianism, indeed a global conspiracy, from which the lower classes of Sweden must be protected. It was in the face of this critique that Scott was forced to flee Stockholm. By 1842, the time of Scott's departure, Swedes had come to see themselves as exporters of missionary activities, not recipients of it.

Hodacs rightly argues that a simple bifurcation European Protestant/heathen can only be the starting point for an analysis. Perhaps the most original part of her book is the attempt to propose a more complex map of difference – one which includes the British in relation to European others – and specifically the case here is in relation to white Protestant others, the Swedes. The processes of racialisation which are involved in the construction of difference might have been of relevance here, the ways in which systems of differentiation between peoples were elaborated on the basis of ideas about "races" and their characteristics. The inauguration and reproduction of "whiteness" as the dominant racial and cultural category is one of the largely unspoken aspects of the construction of the European. Postcolonial scholars have emphasised the ways in which "whiteness" itself was hierarchised, as, for example, the Irish in England in the nineteenth century. One wonders whether this work might have some relevance for Sweden? To what extent were the Saami people, for example, racialised in this period? Were they seen as fully belonging to the nation or not? And if not, how was that exclusion legitimated?

*Converging World Views* raises many questions. It would be important to know what the distinctive world views of both Britons and Swedes were in the late eighteenth century. From what points, in other words, were they converging? Would a gendered perspective have delivered material of interest? One thinks here of the wealth of material on women and philanthropy, and masculinity and citizenship in the British context. And is there more to be said about the distinctive theological positions of the different groups discussed and their relation to the Swedish church? But overall this is a book that signals a new approach to Anglo-Swedish relations and cross European relations, one that it could be most productive to develop further.

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