

Briefing Note

The Royal Circle: Swedish Monarchy and the Arctic

Robert P. Wheelersburg

I realized from travelling to the Arctic that science has an absolutely critical role to play [in the future of the Arctic]. The Nordic countries are at the forefront of Arctic research ... [and] are in an excellent position to contribute with the best of our knowledge, ideas and new solutions...Coming generations may not have a voice or a vote. At least not yet. But we owe them to make the right decisions, and to base those decisions on solid knowledge - and, above all, to act accordingly. I am quite sure that the Arctic enthusiast King Oscar would agree. And that his namesake, my 3-year-old son, Prince Oscar, expects nothing less.

- HRH Crown Princess Victoria, Arctic Circle Assembly, October 10, 2019

With those words, Swedish Crown Princess Victoria became the public face of her country's recently discovered Arctic identity that tied its past to its future. Yet, her ancestor King Oscar II (r. Sweden 1872-1907; r. Norway 1872-1905) could have given her speech because it dealt with the Arctic as a place of exploration and research, the way he understood it over a century ago.

King Oscar II was arguably modern Sweden's founder through his creation of the Oscanian Age (Frykman & Löfgren, 1987), a period of industrialization and urbanization leading to the growth of the emerging middle-class value system recognized by many people today as Swedish culture (e.g. punctuality and cleanliness). As part of his modernization program, Oscar supported expeditionary-based Arctic research. Hegemony also played a role in his patronage, as the king wanted a Swedish expedition to reach the North Pole first. During Oscar's reign, Sweden still controlled Norway, and he wanted to display a strong presence in the circumpolar north.

Robert P. Wheelersburg is a two-time Fulbright Scholar at the University of Umeå, Sweden and a former National Science Foundation – Fulbright Arctic Scholar at the University of Iceland. He was a professor (retired) in the Social Science Department at Elizabethtown College.

Along with Alfred Nobel, King Oscar funded the Swedish expedition of S.A. Andrée, who attempted to reach the North Pole by hydrogen balloon. The expedition came to within 300 miles of its goal on July 14th, 1897, only to have its three members die trying to walk across the ice to safety three months later. Oscar funded other circumpolar expeditions including Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen's expedition to Greenland in 1888. Nansen was different than other Arctic explorers because he started as a scientist, defending his Ph.D. thesis five days before departing on his Greenland expedition. In his 1897 autobiography, Nansen referred to the Arctic as "that never-ending white line on the horizon over yonder ... [where] ... a new life is beginning for us" (2008: 318).

However, Sweden lost its Arctic identity during King Oscar's reign due to sovereignty processes over the past 200 years in the Swedish Arctic including border disputes, warfare, and treaties. Sweden lost part of its access to the Arctic Ocean as a result of the Finnish War (1808-09), when the country ceded Finland to Russia, after controlling it for 700 years. Then, in 1905, the Union between Sweden and Norway dissolved, resulting in the loss of Sweden's access to the Arctic Ocean through Norwegian ports. Thus, despite King Oscar's interest and support in the region, for a hundred years following his death Sweden no longer considered itself an Arctic country because it had no circumpolar territory.

A century later, the future queen prepared for her plenary speech by visiting the royal palace's Bernadotte Library, which King Oscar founded. The library's Arctic collection was orientated toward exploration and research, setting the tone for Crown Princess Victoria's portrayal of the region as a remote place that is subject to royal control by the three modern Scandinavian kingdoms. The Crown Princess, along with the Crown Princes of Denmark and Norway (all descendants of Oscar II), spent four days in 2008 aboard the Swedish icebreaker *Odin*, visiting Svalbard to learn about climate change. The next summer, the three future monarchs boarded a Danish patrol vessel sailing to Greenland to learn how climate change was affecting the Inuit. Emphasizing her kingdom's belief that global climate change was everyone's concern, Her Royal Highness called on the Nordic countries to ensure "sustainable and peaceful development of the Arctic region". Before concluding her speech, in order to illustrate Sweden's stake in the future Arctic, the Crown Princess noted that her son Prince Oscar, Duke of Skåne would be watching our response to those challenges.

There were some aspects of Crown Princess Victoria's speech unique to Sweden as it attempts to reestablish its Arctic identity. Despite having 15% of its landmass located above the Arctic Circle, Sweden calls its Arctic region *Övre Norrland* (Upper Norrland). Upper Norrland consists of Norrbotten Province, much of which lies within the Arctic Circle, but it also includes Västerbotten Province that contains no territory within the 66.5° arc. Other Nordic countries have also recently proclaimed large portions of their nations Arctic in policy statements, such as Finland formally designating its entire country Arctic (Katainen, 2013). Arctic identity allows countries like Sweden to exploit emerging territories containing natural resources and to use newly opened corridors like the Transpolar Sea Route from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

In his essay, *The reluctant Arctic citizen: Sweden and the North*, historian Sverker Sörlin asked the question "Is Sweden an 'Arctic nation'" (Sörlin, 2014: 149). Sörlin answered that geographically Sweden is Arctic since over half of the kingdom lies above the 60th parallel, an area containing one third of Sweden's population. Sweden's northern territory also exhibits many of the characteristics

of Arctic countries, including its weather, glaciers, and a sparse population (Sörlin, 2014). Upper Norrland is also home to an Arctic Indigenous people practicing traditional activities such as reindeer herding and handicrafts.

Yet Sörlin stated that Sweden had no formal Arctic identity until 2011 when the country produced its first Arctic Strategy (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2011) as it assumed the Arctic Council Chairmanship. After entering Arctic politics in 1996 as an Arctic Council founding member, Sweden addressed international circumpolar issues such as human rights and sustainable development within the council. Conversely, Sweden's Arctic territory was treated as a domestic policy issue involving economic activities (e.g. Baltic seal hunting, reindeer herding, mining, etc.), infrastructure building (e.g. hydroelectric dams, roads, airports, universities and colleges, etc.), and security preparedness (i.e. territorial defense) (Sörlin, 2014).

As did Crown Princess Victoria, Sörlin related Sweden's Arctic identity to its long-term circumpolar research agenda starting with its early Arctic expeditions. Swedish Arctic research continued by building institutes and observatories with a circumpolar focus, including those at Abisko in 1906, Tarfala in 1945, Stockholm in 1944, and Kiruna in 1957. Since it had no formal polar secretariat, Swedish Arctic research benefitted substantially from the efforts of scientist Hans Ahlmann (1889-1974), who made the transition from expeditionary-based discovery to scientific research projects. A glaciologist who conducted field research in the high Arctic, Ahlmann's "polar warming" hypothesis became a focus for Arctic research from the 1950s until today (Sörlin, 2011). He became president of the Geographical International Union and entered politics after being appointed as ambassador to Norway from 1956 until 1960. Using informal networks and international connections, Ahlmann became "the prime manifestation of Swedish Arctic and polar policies over a critical period, spanning five decades from the 1920s through to the early 1960s" (Sörlin, 2014: 157). Like Crown Princess Victoria, Ahlmann called on the Nordic region to cooperate on Arctic science because the Scandinavian peninsula was subject to the circumpolar and North Atlantic climate and physical processes that he documented.

Sweden's Arctic research agenda became involved in the region's geopolitical divisions following World War II. Regardless of Sweden's publicly stated policy of neutrality beginning in the 1940s, the Arctic became an important part of what in reality was its West-aligned security policy throughout the Cold War. Sweden's western alignment manifested itself through U.S. military support to the Kiruna Geophysical Observatory, which in 1973 became the Swedish Institute of Space Physics. The International Meteorological Institute in Stockholm was also funded by the U.S. Air Force (up to 50%) during the late 1950s and early 1960s (until 1967 when politics ended U.S. military support). With the American funding the Russian space program became an emphasis of Swedish meteorological and atmospheric research (Sörlin, 2014).

Despite that history of Arctic research and geopolitical activities, Sweden still did not have a formal polar policy a decade into the 21st century (Sörlin, 2014: 162-163).

Swedish polar policies are still not as clearly articulated as that of the other Scandinavian countries and most other members of the Arctic Council...Swedish chairmanship of the Arctic Council acted as a catalyst to this process. Indeed, it was at the outset of that period that Sweden presented its first-ever Arctic strategy. The word 'Arctic' is nowadays also used in official Swedish foreign policy documents, which it has not been for almost a century.

Even with Sweden's officially stated Arctic identity and the country's chairmanship of the Arctic Council, most Swedes still did not consider themselves residents of an Arctic country as illustrated in a 2011 survey. Nearly 50% of Swedish respondents (n=1000) thought that "the Arctic should be an international territory like Antarctica", and only 9% had heard of the Arctic Council (Ekos, 2011: 42, 48). Thus, the year that the kingdom produced its first Arctic strategy, the Swedish public thought of the Arctic as the remote circumpolar north rather than Norrland.

A personal anecdote illustrates the Swedish peoples' lack of Arctic identity a few years later. I conducted field and archival research for nearly three decades on Saami reindeer herders in Norrland. Along the way, my wife and I became friends with a Swedish family from Umeå, with whom we corresponded and visited several times. Although not academics, the family knew of my work with the Swedish Saami, much of it in Västerbotten Province where the family lived. We were excited to tell our friends that we would be attending the International Congress of Arctic Social Scientists (ICASS) to be held in Umeå during June 2017. Yet they were puzzled. The Swedish wife asked why I would be attending a conference on the Arctic since I conducted field research in Upper Norrland?

Considering that it lacks an Arctic regional identity, that it possesses no territory bordering on the Arctic Ocean, and that it was without a formal Arctic policy for over a hundred years, it is hard to envision how Sweden can be considered Arctic. In fact, at first Her Royal Highness' speech sounded archaic in its portrayal of Sweden as an Arctic country because it tied the monarchy but not the state to the circumpolar region. Yet, upon further reflection, the future queen proclaimed that her kingdom remained firmly committed to the Arctic as a place of discovery and scientific research to address problems like climate change. By referring to Umeå as an Arctic city, despite it being located 250 miles (400 kilometers) south of the Arctic Circle, she indicated her view that Upper Norrland is part of the Arctic, although it is subject to the kingdom's domestic policy and sovereignty. Crown Princess Victoria described the royal family's continued association with the Arctic, today as supporters instead of as rulers, establishing the realm's commitment to the region that represents her subjects' future as well as their past.

References

- Bernadotte, Victoria. (2019). HRH Crown Princess Victoria's speech at Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, Iceland, Thursday 10 October 2019. Stockholm: Swedish Royal Court.
- Ekos Research Associates. (2011). Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey. Final report, January 2011. Ottawa: Ekos Research Associates.
- Frykman, Jonas and Orvar Löfgren. (1987). *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle Class Life*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Katainen, Jyrki. (2013). Finland's Strategy for the Arctic Region 2013. Government resolution on 23 August 2013. Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office Publications, 16/2013.
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs. (2011). Sweden's strategy for the Arctic Region. UD 11.011, 31 October 2011. Stockholm.
- Nansen, Fridtjof. (2008). *Farthest north: the epic adventure of a visionary explorer*. New York: Skyhorse Publications.

- Sörlin, Sverker. (2014). The Reluctant Arctic Citizen: Sweden and the North. In Kaus Dodds and Richard C. Powell (Eds.), *Polar Geopolitics: Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes*, pp. 149 – 165. Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sörlin, Sverker. (2011). The Anxieties of a Science Diplomat: Field Coproduction of Climate Knowledge and the Rise and Fall of Hans Ahlmann’s “Polar Warming”. *Osiris, Klima*, Volume 26, Number 1, pp. 66 – 88.