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“Will you accept this invitation?” Thus Isaac Hecker, in a letter of 31 July 1844, prompted Thoreau to join him in a walking tour of Europe. Although outlined as a sauntering excursion beyond the Atlantic crossing, with wide margins for spontaneous forays, the proposed itinerary was still a pilgrimage at heart with a set goal in Rome. Hecker longed for an institutional anchor to suit his own recent spiritual awakening and hoped to find it in the Eternal City. Thoreau was unimpressed. “What’s the use of your joining the Catholic Church?” he scoffed. “Can’t you get along without hanging to her skirts?” Still, Hecker’s tour proposal beckoned. Thoreau confessed to being “strongly tempted” by the “method of travelling especially—to *live* along the road—citizens of the world, without haste or petty plans.” Yet ultimately he had his mind set on something different. He declined the offer, explaining that “I cannot so decidedly postpone exploring the *Farther Indies*, which are to be reached you know by other rout[e]s and other methods of travel.”¹

While Hecker soon left for Europe on his own, Thoreau stood by his choice of travelling a good deal in Concord. Other friends, notably Waldo Emerson and Thomas Cholmondeley, would later suggest to Thoreau the idea of a European trip, but it was not to be. During the years ensuing upon Hecker’s initial query, Thoreau built his house by Walden Pond and eventually published an account of his time there in *Walden*. His responsibilities toward his immediate family grew steadily during the 1850’s, and while a skillful jack-of-all-trades beyond his literary vocation, money was seldom if ever plentiful in the family household. This paterfamilias condition, more than any inherent aversion to far-off travel or the Old World as such, probably held him back in later years.

As a citizen of Northern Europe appreciative of Thoreau, I have often wondered what he would have made of our tracts in his day. In southwestern Sweden he would have found a landscape remarkably similar to that of Concord, the discrepancy in latitude being counterweighed by the warmth of the passing Gulf Stream. Disembarking in Gothenburg, he would face a bustling harbor replete with foreign ships and merchants. Apart from the thriving export trade in iron, wood, and salted fish, all carried by sea or canal, there would however be little to see save farmland, lakes and forests by the roads of the flat or gently undulating southern interior. Industry would hardly be apparent; few factories, no railroads, and everywhere struggling small landholders and tenant farmers. Many were squirrelling away meagre savings to board ship to America in search of a better future. Over a million Swedes eventually did make the journey.

The Swedish naturalists we know Thoreau to have read—Linnæus and his disciple Pehr Kalm—would no longer be alive to greet him, nor would for that matter Emanuel Swedenborg. Apart from a ready passenger seat on an eastbound coach or riverboat headed for Stockholm or Uppsala on the opposite coast (which would take about a week), other transportation and routes would be tricky and require a good guide. The Gothenburg–Stockholm railroad track, about 300 U.S. miles long, was completed only in 1862. Thoreau would then perhaps have recalled his own journal anecdote of 21 January 1838, later grafted into “A Walk to Wachusett,” involving the reputed inscription upon the wall of a wayside Swedish inn: “You will find at Trollhate [Trollhättan] excellent bread, meat, and wine, provided you bring them with you!”

In the mid nineteenth-century, the vast regions of Sweden to the north of the two large lakes and the main coastal cities were very sparsely populated. Even today the expression is that they are essentially “tassemarker,” literally “pawland” or wilderness, despite covering a good two thirds of Sweden’s total land area. Thoreau would have had a hard time reaching these wilds on his own but might have teamed up with a legendary Scottish bear hunter and sports fisherman like Llewellyn Lloyd (1792-1876), who settled down north of Lake Vänern in 1823 to guide compatriots in search of big game or fish, or a man like C.J.L. Almqvist (1793-1866), Sweden’s foremost writer of the generation preceding Strindberg. Almqvist, an ordained minister who opted to become a philosopher in a vein similar to Emerson’s, also successfully urged school reform akin to Bronson Alcott’s, women’s rights resembling those argued by Margaret Fuller, and even (for a short time) idealistic communal farming recalling that of Fruitlands and Brook Farm. Almqvist fell from grace in 1851, however, accused of having defrauded and poisoned a creditor. He fled to America and remained there for some fourteen years, in time claiming to have witnessed major battles of the Civil War as a correspondent for various U.S. newspapers (a claim unverified to this day).

To the north, should Thoreau have chosen such a destination, he would have recognized a landscape similar to Maine’s, with dense, old-growth forests interspersed by lakes, wetlands and streams. Eventually, toward the far north, he would have come upon a truly senescent land—severely eroded hills, ancient riverbeds and systems of arctic foxholes dating back tens of thousands of years. Lacking mountain

ranges striking for their height, or indeed anything akin to Katahdin's tableland and cloud-immersed peak, what sublimity accrues in the visitor to these areas was and is one of personal transience. The mossy, shrubby surroundings of the small reflecting tarns would arguably, then as now, be suggestive of extreme age; of an ecosystem extended well-nigh intact from time immemorial.

If it were summer, Thoreau would be assailed by the silent enemies always present also in *The Maine Woods*, perhaps more formidable than the Katahdin summit itself: the hordes of persistent *no-see-ums*, ever anxious for blood. Well into the seventeenth century, this region of Sweden was known in common lore as Bjarmaland, a land of magic powers entered by strangers only at their considerable peril. Here is also where the mythic Vaner, or demi-gods, are said to have roamed in human guise—among them the thundermaker Thor, whom Thoreau playfully counted as an ancestor. Barring a gentleman hunter or fervent writer-reformer, Thoreau may have found a native Sami to guide him on his way, the Sami having longstanding knowledge of, and rightful claims to, the territory as nomadic reindeer keepers.

But we are without *A Yankee in Scandinavia*, and perhaps this is just as well. *Walden* and other later writings might then be lacking on our shelves and in our backpacks. Depending upon the season, the Swedish climate could well have been harsh on Thoreau's lungs; various contagious fevers also ravaged the Swedish countryside during the mid-nineteenth century. Even in royal circumstances there was risk. René Descartes, summoned by our queen Christina to Stockholm in 1649 to act as her tutor in philosophy, promptly contracted pneumonia in the cold and draught-prone castle and died within a few months. The Atlantic crossing could also be difficult and dangerous. Thoreau readers familiar with John Muir may recall Muir's last, lengthy botanical journey to South America, Africa and Mediterranean Europe in 1911-12. Finally chugging home on a steamer from Gibraltar headed for New York on March 18, 1912, it is chilling to consider what may have happened had he chosen to visit his native Scotland before returning to America. Just a few weeks later a ship called *Titanic* left from Southampton for New York.

If Thoreau never reached our shores, *Walden* certainly did. The book's impact upon Swedish readers is continuing and reverberant. It was translated in 1924 by a young poet and essayist, Frans G. Bengtsson, later reaching fame as a writer of Viking epics and royal biographies. The first issue of *Skogsliv vid Walden* (literally *Forest Life at Walden*) was small and made hardly a stir in the papers. Bengtsson had recently written his masters thesis on Thoreau, and this served as an informative if somewhat derivative introduction to the book.² Some twenty-three years later, however, a new issue appeared, this time with lavish illustrations by Stig Åsberg. Critics were now enthusiastic, and *Walden* sold well. The 1947 plates have since been the standard for all subsequent issues, which appear fairly regularly every three or four years.

While there is much to commend Bengtsson's Swedish translation of *Walden*, there are also a few drawbacks. Bengtsson was pressed for space, as the publisher wished to fit the book into a standard format, and so four chapters were silently excised from its middle sections. Further, though Bengtsson was awake to some of the double entendre and humor of *Walden*, his notes are few and occasionally misleading. Bengtsson was also conservative regarding his language, and *Walden* has unfortunately not been updated to modern spelling and verb forms since his effort, despite a countrywide reform during the early twentieth century. Coupled with Åsberg's often striking but also sombre illustrations, the effect upon today's readers can be one of effective distancing: Thoreau's character seems more of a remote saint than a man wishing to speak to his contemporaries and later generations. This effect is compounded by Bengtsson's translation of Thoreau's living "a mile from any neighbor" to an implicitly *metric* mile—more than six times the real distance.

Yet these various factors notwithstanding, the Swedish reception of *Walden* has been vibrant and largely appreciative. When Thoreau's book came out in translation in 1924, Sweden was predominantly an agricultural and rural nation. The bulk of the population was poor, and the state famously received foreign aid from Uruguay. Only in the coming decades did industrialization truly make a difference for the common man. The ruling Social-Democratic government came to embrace capitalism while vigorously pursuing programs involving pensions, free schooling and healthcare, all financed by taxation. People moved from country to town, headed for factories and administrations. During these decades of economic expansion, helped along by Sweden's problematic 'neutrality' policy during the two World Wars—which left our infrastructure and workforce intact—, *Walden* had little impact. Save as a quaint gentleman's guide to countryside otium along the lines of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (issued in the same Swedish publisher series as *Walden*) or Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, it did not receive much attention.

During the late 1950's and on into the 1960's, however, Thoreau's economic and political radicalism was gradually recognized, in particular as *Resistance to Civil Government* was translated in 1960 (and it has been again in 1977 and 2001). Attitudes toward the writer consequently changed: radicals came to embrace Thoreau, while conservative critics—his early champions—increasingly shunned him. Negative effects of industrialization began to be exposed in various media, while legislation was passed that gave Swedes several weeks of vacation each year (roughly, time off went from nearly none save religious holidays and Sunday sabbaths during the turn of the century to five weeks of paid leave in the 1980's). The newly affluent middle class could afford a family car and a small summer house in the countryside and often enjoyed the whole month of July in a more or less rural setting. While this obviously had many positive effects, and still has, many vacationers also came to realize and criticize what they recognized as the Swedish market economy's stranglehold on nature.

Our largest lake, Vänern, was found to be stocked with mercury from the slag water spewed out from the coastal paper mills. On my native island of Källandsö, all fishermen save one went out of business. Ospreys, rather than responding to the lessened competition, virtually disappeared. Out boating as a youngster one autumn in the late 1970's, I found an adult bird's carcass bobbing in the water below its nesting tree without visible injury. Eventually moving west to Gothenburg, I came to marvel at the clarity of the local lakes there. It turned out they were deathly pale, however, killed off by acid rain primarily from the Ruhr industries in Germany. My parents read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. There was outrage at the state of things. What we now call the Green Movement had its tentative start in Sweden during this time. *Walden* became a cult text for people gathering under its banner.

While it is difficult to assess its tangible effects in each quarter, Thoreau's book helped galvanize a counter-policy movement in Sweden that was not all hip counter-culture. During the 1980's thorough cleanup efforts were made of toxic deposits in landfills and water systems; sweeping environmental protection legislation passed; and a Green Party assembled in 1981, reaching parliament in 1988. Historian Carl Holmberg, an expert on the Green movement in Sweden, describes Thoreau as an important influence throughout this gradual awakening of the nation to environmental consciousness.³

Today *Walden* is read for myriad reasons in Sweden, ranging from pure aesthetic pleasure to searches for blueprints of a more authentic and sustainable form of life. Vegetarians, vegans, animal rights activists, university Literature majors, Greens, Anarchists, Ayn Rand followers, nudist bathers—all seem to find laudable qualities in Thoreau's book. In a fine twist of fate, *Walden* has recently also become a touchstone for the influential Swedish publicist, poet and essayist Göran Greider, in many ways akin to the American Wendell Berry.⁴ In his latest book, Greider draws richly from *Walden* to argue the merits of remaining in the northern regions of Sweden rather than joining the lemming-trains to the urbanized south. While he did not find opportunity to travel the Scandinavian interior himself, Thoreau's *Walden* at least made the trip in his stead.

Notes

¹Thoreau's remark on church affiliation as reported by Walter Harding in *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965. 164. Harding's source is given as Walter Elliot's *The Life of Father Hecker* (New York, 1891). Regarding the other quotes, see *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Walter Harding & Carl Bode. New York: New York UP, 1958. 155ff.

²This introduction has in turn been translated into English by Thorsten and Rosemary Sjölin for the *Concord Saunterer* of 1998, pp. 65-96. For more details on Frans G. Bengtsson's translation of *Walden*, see also Henrik Gustafsson, "Notes on F. G. Bengtsson and the Swedish translation of *Walden*" in *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 1999: 3, pp. 4-6.

³Carl Holmberg, a senior research fellow of the Department of History at the University of Gothenburg, is currently at work on a new study of the intellectual roots of the Swedish Green movement, including a chapter (in proof stage) on Thoreau, kindly extended to me in compiling the present survey. Notification in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* bibliography will follow upon the study's completion.

⁴Greider's book bears the blunt title *F***ing Sverige: Byn, Bruket, Skogen—en Modern Dalaresa* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2001), or, in English translation, *F***ing Sweden: The Village, Mill, and Forest—A Modern Dala Journey*. The expletive in the title is an allusion to a film by the young Swedish director Lukas Moodyson, whose *F***ing Åmål* (ca.

2000) chronicled the fate of two young girls stifled by a backward wood-mill town and seeking to escape.