

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 19
Number 2 *Double Issue*

Article 6

9-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Odelberg, Wilhelm (1999) "Nils William Olsson and His Circle in Sweden 1948-1957," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol19/iss2/6>

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Nils William Olsson and His Circle in Sweden 1948-1957⁺

Wilhelm Odelberg*

On 11 June 1984 Nils William Olsson, hereinafter referred to as NWO, turned seventy-five. His birthday was celebrated in many ways by his many friends and colleagues, as befits a man who has made himself known not only as a linguist specializing in Icelandic, but also as a diplomat, a naval officer, and, thanks to his scholarly studies, one who had attracted the attention of all who share his interests.

An issue of *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, formerly *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, appeared on his birthday emblazoned with a dedication to NWO: "An ancient folk in a new land." Amid the articles and essays mainly concerning Swedish-American personal histories, was a bibliography of NWO's authorship dating back to 1932.

The present writer contributed an article entitled "Some thoughts on Nils William Olsson," a rhapsodic attempt at a brief outline of his personal history, his interests, and his work.

In 1952 NWO was posted to the American embassy in Stockholm. The Swedish capital was in no way unfamiliar to him. As a young student during the Second World War, NWO had undergone the vigorous and somewhat bizarre training required in order to become a naval officer—a training, however, that took place on land and simulated both navigation and sea battles. This intensive course, concentrated into three months, would have taken four years under normal circumstances. Not only did NWO make the grade; his personal merits, which highly suited him for the diplomatic service, must have attracted the attention of the State Department and of the United States Naval Command, so the newly-commissioned lieutenant was sent to Stockholm as assistant naval attaché.

* This text was translated from the Swedish by Veronica Ralston.

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By now NWO was not only a naval officer, he was also a man of learning and one well acquainted with Swedish society. To outsiders indeed, the extent of his knowledge of Swedish personal history and genealogy was a constant source of amazement. It was now, during his first period of time in Stockholm, in the mid-1940s, that he made many firm friends.

NWO's naval career, however, was short-lived. He returned to the USA and resumed his studies of the Icelandic language. In 1949 he defended his thesis on the late medieval *Vidutan* saga.

In 1952, after spending two years as a secretary at the American legation in Reykjavik, he returned to Stockholm as public affairs officer and first secretary. His main duties were now to make contacts in Swedish society as a whole. The social ease with which he moved in all walks of society soon made him a familiar figure at political and cultural events, from one end of the country to the other. On the eve of his returning to the State Department, after five years of service, his Stockholm friends arranged a farewell party for him at which he received a complimentary address signed by some one hundred of those closest to him. And although cultural relations between Sweden and the U.S. have always been both lively and good, it was said that nothing was ever quite the same after NWO had left the embassy. Five years later he returned to Scandinavia as counselor for political affairs at the embassy in Oslo. This position did not have the same cultural emphasis as the one in Stockholm, but NWO, as was his wont, soon made contact with the Norwegian genealogical and personal history organizations.

After his retirement he continued to make many visits to Sweden, sometimes as frequently as once a year, and most often as the leader of conducted tours for Americans seeking their Swedish roots. NWO's magisterial work, together with Erik Wikén, was entitled *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* (1995).

I am sure there are many people who could testify to both the range and importance of his other initiatives and involvements. My main focus here, however, is on the years (1952-57) when he was cultural attaché in Stockholm. During his later visits, he would have opportunities to renew his contacts. Today, however, sad to say, only one out of his entire circle of friends from that time is still alive. And he is the writer of this article.

During those important years, NWO resided with his wife, Dagmar, in a villa in the northern suburb of Djursholm. They entertained generously and their hospitality was much appreciated, not only by those who shared NWO's interests in personal history, but by many, many more. I am now going to evoke

the guests who could have been arriving for one such dinner party, let us say, in the year 1954. At Östra Station, the terminus of the Djursholm line, we see some people gathering, all with the same destination in mind. Among them is a professor named Nils Ahnlund (1889-1957). We may consider him the grand old man of the party, a celebrity in his own right, and a member of the Swedish Academy. Ahnlund, a specialist on 17th century Sweden, is the author of an impressive array of books on the subject. He is also an often read contributor to *Svenska Dagbladet*. In December 1939 Finland had been invaded by the Soviet Union and, throughout the Second World War, Ahnlund had been deeply committed to the Finnish cause. The journey out to Djursholm may now begin.

Ahnlund and a certain Dr. Olof Jägerskiöld are engaged in vociferous conversation. Jägerskiöld, being of Finnish descent, shares Ahnlund's devotion to Finland. As head of a department at the Swedish National Archives, it has fallen to Jägerskiöld's lot to assist the microfilm company Rekolid, currently working for the Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City, by filming any material that might induce Mormons to receive forefathers retroactively into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Another passenger on the narrow-gauge train out to Djursholm is Ahnlund's friend, Professor Torvald Höjer (1906-1962), a tall thin man with a bristly moustache. Höjer has recently succeeded in out-competing other highly prominent researchers in the bid for a professorship at Stockholms Högskola, later to become Stockholm University. Höjer is primarily known for his impressive three-volume monograph on King Karl XIV Johan, who prior to being invited by a majority of the 1810 to succeed to the Swedish throne, had been Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, Duke of Ponte Corvo. Höjer, too, had become a close friend of NWO's and greatly appreciated his Swedish-American research. Indeed, it was at Höjer's recommendation, amongst others, that NWO was elected to the post of foreign corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.

This most flattering election had, more particularly, been sponsored by the ethnographer and linguist professor Dag Strömbäck (1900-1978). Though not one of our guests on this particular occasion, Strömbäck is nonetheless another of NWO's good friends, and they too have many interests in common. Strömbäck had earlier been a senior lecturer in Icelandic philology at the Lund University and, later, in Uppsala. During the latter half of the 1930s, he had been visiting professor in Chicago. Strömbäck's main achievement had been as head of the Uppsala archives for dialectal research and ethnology, and as a professor at the Institute of Ethnology at Uppsala University.

Another of NWO's friends in the same university was Gösta Berg (1903-1993), a prominent figure in Swedish humanistic research. For many years Berg had been responsible for both the Nordic Museum and for Skansen, two of the most important museums in Sweden with respect to cultural history in its widest sense. Skansen, the open-air museum so well-known to all visitors, has been much enriched by Gösta Berg's personal enterprise and wide-ranging knowledge.

In his day, professor Bertil Broomé (1913-1980) had been the leading researcher in the field of Swedish personal history. He was head of the War Record Office in Stockholm, and his books and studies, written with true archival sensitivity, were highly regarded, as was his monumental work, *Handskriftssamlarna och de svenska arkiven 1700-1950* (1977), a survey of 1,000 such collectors of manuscripts. The book contains information as to the sources they—more or less scrupulously—had obtained them from and, furthermore, indicates which institutions these manuscripts had been donated to. This magnum opus is a standard work, indispensable to anyone wishing to study Swedish history in any depth. Another field of Bertil Broomé's achievements was as editor of *Personhistorisk Tidskrift* (*Journal of Swedish Biography*), a position held by more than one of NWO's friends.

Also present at the dinner party—for now we are out in Djursholm—is an elderly editor for *Personhistorisk Tidskrift*, professor Bengt Hildebrand (1893-1964), editor-in-chief of the successive installments of *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon* (Swedish Dictionary of National Biography). By this time (and after many a crisis), the project, most ambitiously begun in 1918, had crawled as far as to the letter "F." During Hildebrand's period in office, however, the publication had noticeably accelerated, although he had found it harder to cope with its finances, and the project had had to be nationalized. At this time of writing (1998), it has gotten as far as the letter "R." Hildebrand's most excellent essays and dissertations had made him known as the foremost expert on personal history, an acknowledged reputation passed on to Broomé. Bengt Hildebrand arrives in Djursholm by taxi. "The Dictionary's paying," he jokes in his southern Swedish accent.

NWO receives his guests at the little railway stop, and offers the more elderly of the party a ride to his villa in his big American car. The others walk. Among the most elderly is a venerable gentleman, the diplomat Axel Paulin (1877-1956). In some ways, Paulin differs from the other guests. As a young man at the turn of the century, he had been one of the Swedish officers who had served in the Belgian Congo. From this he had gone on to become commercial attaché to a South American Republic and, thereafter, had held increasingly responsible positions in Argentina and Chile. Now, in his old age, Paulin is

dedicating himself to biographical research, focusing mainly on Swedes who had resided in the Latin-American countries. His large-scale publication *Svenska öden i sydamerika* (*Swedish Destinies in South America*), the result of many years' study, had appeared in 1951. It would come to be regarded as a standard reference work, almost as an encyclopaedia. At the time of this party, however, Paulin is completely absorbed in collecting material about a certain traveler, Emanuel Sundelius, self-benamed Edelhjärta ("Trueheart"), and his trips to America and Mexico in the 1820s. Paulin discovered that his true name and identity was the peculiar one of Waseurtz af Sandels. In an article in a California archive Waseurtz claims to have been the first to discover gold in the Sacramento Valley, thereby unleashing the Great Gold Rush. Unfortunately there is strong evidence of Sundelius having been an incorrigible mythomaniac, with a talent for making others believe his tall stories. As a dinner guest, Axel Paulin is a sociable enough person but incapable of talking about anything unrelated to his current passion. Many a silence in the grand halls of archives and libraries had been broken by Paulin's booming voice.

Åke Kromnow (1914-86), one day to be director of the National Archives, arrives in his own car. His passengers and fellow guests for the evening are Uno Willers (1911-1980) and Tore Tallroth (1912-1992), head of the Swedish Institute for Cultural Relations. Kromnow had quickly established himself as a capable archivist and historian. He had taken several far-sighted initiatives, in particular for the preservation and safe-keeping of commercial and industrial archives. When Uno Willers became head of the Royal Library, Kromnow succeeded him as head of division, head of the Foreign Office Archives, the Ciphers Office and the Courier Department. Kromnow and Willers had been the best of friends ever since the days when they both studied under professors Sven Tunberg (1882-1954) and Nils Ahnlund.

Willers had long been interested in NWO's research into the history of the Swedish emigration to the New World, and in 1967 had seen to it that the first edition of his *Swedish Passenger Arrivals* had been accepted into the Royal Library's *Acta Bibliothecae Regiae Stockholmiensis* series. Indeed, he supported NWO's research whenever he could. Tore Tallroth and his wife Märta, daughter of Johannes Hellner (1866-1947), one of Sweden's foreign ministers during the First World War, also came to figure among the inner circle of friends, partly on account of their involvement in American affairs, but mainly because of their charm and sincerity. Tore Tallroth had been secretary at the Swedish Institute when he had been appointed cultural attaché at the Swedish Embassy in Washington, followed by several years as consul-general in New York. Throughout these years, Tallroth and NWO had kept in touch and drawn on each other's knowledge.

The present writer, Wilhelm Odelberg (1918-) was also present on this particular occasion, and I should, therefore, add a few words about him. I am an historian and my 1954 doctoral thesis was on Swedish naval history at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. I have worked at several institutions of learning, among them the Royal Library, ending up as head librarian at Stockholm University, and at the library of the Royal Academy of Science. The first time I met NWO was in the Tallroths' home, during his second diplomatic representation of the United States in Stockholm. This first meeting would result in a long-lasting friendship between myself and the Olssons, one that has survived many decades.

During NWO's visits to Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s, Ulla and Bertil Broomé's home became a central point for him. So extensive was the hospitality offered here that one was likely to meet many friends, other than those who might ordinarily be encountered in a Djursholm villa, for instance, Allan Kastrup (1906-1991), another frequent visitor to Sweden. Kastrup had been a leader/writer on political affairs for the prominent liberal newspaper *Uppsala Nya Tidning*. After his transfer to America as director of the Swedish-American News Exchange in 1943, he had written several works on Swedish-American affairs and conditions. Worthy of special mention is his considerable opus, *Swedish Heritage in America: The Swedish Element in America and American-Swedish Relations in their Historical Perspective*, published by the Swedish Council of America in 1975. Kastrup's old links with Uppsala and its academic world meant that he and NWO had more friends in common than those we have occasion to meet here in this Djursholm villa.

One of them, perhaps somewhat on the periphery compared with some of the others, was professor Edvard Thermaenius (1896-1965), who at Uppsala had published articles on modern Swedish political history, but who also taught at Lund, Gothenburg, and Stockholm universities. He was moreover a most capable editor-in-chief and political leader/writer on one of the Gothenburg dailies. Thermaenius was also a fine public speaker and expert on popular and adult education. He had taken on many official assignments. In his post as professor of political science, conservative by inclination, Thermaenius had found himself opposed by strong liberal forces. Alongside his work as publicist and at the university, he was much appreciated, above all, for his friendly and humoristic personality as a college teacher. His considerable physical bulk caused him to be known to his pupils as "Volvo"—i.e., "I roll along"—with due reference to the famous Swedish car of the same name.

Other friends who turn up later or are outside the inner circle but who deserve mention are Sten Carlsson (1917-1989) professor of history at Uppsala, who had come to share NWO's interests during his stay as visiting professor in

the USA, and Kjell Öberg (1913-), journalist, ambassador, and director-general of the Immigration Office.

Such, to the best of my knowledge, was NWO's circle of friends, most of them from academia. Well-informed as he is on so many topics, he is ardent and knowledgeable in debate on all of them, to which he contributes his incredible range of knowledge, such as had already transpired during the time when he edited genealogical journals, but also of most social conditions. Sometimes, when discussion of some touchy issue threatened to become too heated and run too high, NWO's perfect Swedish—he hadn't the trace of an accent—would enable him to forget his position so that he would have to declare: "Never forget I'm an American, body and soul!"



Nils William Olsson and his friends celebrating the sixtieth birthday of Professor Edvard Therman in 1956. From left to right: Dag Strömbäck, Torvald Höjer, Gösta Berg, Edvard Therman, Allan Kastrup, Nils William Olsson, Tore Tallroth, and Wilhelm Odelberg.