

BACKGROUND BOOKS

SWEDEN

From Viking times to the Volvo era, Sweden's story is one of a hardworking, self-absorbed people's successful effort to make the best of modest resources, a harsh climate, and the limits fixed by geographical and cultural isolation.

The long, earnest Swedish search for a workable society and a prudent relationship with the outside world is described in Franklin D. Scott's **SWE-DEN: The Nation's History** (Univ. of Minn., 1977), a 654-page compilation of facts, figures, charts, maps, photographs, and narrative enlivened by vivid anecdotes.

One of Scott's recurring themes is Sweden's ability to alter its strategic position as changes occur in Europe's military balance. After the Napoleonic wars (in which Sweden lost Finland to Russia but emerged with a 100-year union with Norway that was peacefully dissolved in 1905), the Swedes worked toward a policy of neutrality. They maintained this policy throughout World War I and, despite Nazi occupation of Denmark and Norway, during World War II. Later, avoiding the Cold War, Sweden stayed out of NATO, stressed its neutrality (but cheered on Hanoi in the Vietnam conflict), and tended to its defenses, including an air force now said to be one of the world's strongest after those of the United States, Russia, and Britain.

Scott's single-volume treatment of the whole course of Swedish history, from icebound beginnings to the conformist, tax-burdened welfare state of the present day, is necessarily fragmented. A more unified approach to a shorter span of time is taken by Vilhelm Moberg in **A HISTORY OF THE SWEDISH PEOPLE: From Odin to En-**

gelbrecht, vols. 1 and 2 (Pantheon, 1972, 1974). Moberg's approach is imaginative and romanticized, as might be expected from Sweden's best-known writer of historical fiction. One of his novels, **THE EMIGRANTS** (Simon & Schuster, 1951, cloth; Popular Library, 1971, paper), was made into a powerful film familiar to U.S. audiences.

"Had I been born in another milieu or come from another social class, I should have written quite another history," writes Moberg, whose parents and relatives were peasants and servants. Theirs was a somber heritage. During the 19th century, despite heavy emigration (450,000 Swedes left home, mostly for America, between 1867 and 1886), Sweden's rural population doubled. In 1870, farmers who owned or rented their land numbered 1,396,000; the total number of crofters, servants, and landless laborers (who were required by law to take any job offered them) was 1,288,000.

The earlier, epic time in Scandinavian history—when the great Viking "dragon ships" set sail for the coasts of Iceland, Greenland, Britain, Ireland, and northern France and penetrated the Mediterranean—is vividly portrayed in Johannes Brondsted's illustrated **THE VIKINGS** (Penguin, rev. 1965, paper).

Brondsted discusses the main themes that have been elaborated to explain Viking expansionism (700–1200 A.D.). In his view, changing conditions in commerce were the crucial factor. Sweden's role in the Viking age was less dramatic than that of the Danes and Norwegians. The latter, the "West Vikings," roamed afar to plunder, explore, and eventually to colonize; the Swedes, or "East Vikings," were more active as

middlemen in the lucrative trade between the Baltic and the Levant.

Sweden's democratic institutions go back before the Vikings to the village *ting* (or council), the forerunner of the modern Swedish Parliament. Joseph B. Board, in his excellent introductory study **THE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS OF SWEDEN** (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1970, paper only), gives due attention to this historical background in relation to today's political system. Board acknowledges that "the state is easily the most powerful single entity" but also points out that "Sweden, like America, is a pluralist society par excellence."

The Scandinavian nations today cooperate through the Nordic Council, but comparative analysis of Scandinavian politics dispels the myth of a single "Nordic" world-view. Nils Andren analyzes contemporary elements of commonality and divergence in **GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden** (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964). Denmark, Sweden, and Norway are constitutional monarchies; Finland's parliamentary system includes a strong president whose function is to remain above the fray of party politics; all five parliamentary systems are based upon variants of proportional representation; the greatest similarity exists between Sweden and Norway.

The single best account of the evolution of Sweden's Social Democratic Party (SAP), prime architect of the welfare state, remains Herbert Tingsten's classic study, first published in 1941, **THE SWEDISH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS: Their Ideological Development** (Totowa, N.J.: Bedminster, 1973).

"The predominant trend in Swedish politics has been a convergence toward the middle, not the provocation of extremist tendencies," he writes. The SAP,

closely identified with bread-and-butter trade unionism, eventually chose the road of nonradical, non-Marxist reform. However, from the framing of the platform at the fourth Party Congress in 1897 to the first participation in a coalition government in 1917, the SAP's deliberations were characterized by intense, often vitriolic debates over both theory and tactics. In the end, the principles of democracy prevailed over the doctrines of orthodox socialism.

The "progressivism" of social reform in Sweden is rooted in a basically conservative approach to the political order, Dankwart A. Rustow argues in **THE POLITICS OF COMPROMISE: A Study of Parties and Cabinet Government in Sweden** (Greenwood, 1969, reprint). Rustow describes "that most fundamental yet elusive quality of Swedish politics—the harmonious interplay of rival forces, the tradition of government by discussion and compromise."

Some observers of the Swedish system have hailed it as near-utopian. One who has taken it as a nightmare warning to the West is Roland Huntford. In his **THE NEW TOTALITARIANS** (London: Penguin, 1971; New York: Stein & Day, 1972), the theme is Brave New World, the place Sweden, the time now. Where columnist Marquis Childs, in **SWEDEN, THE MIDDLE WAY** (Yale, 1936, 1961), saw fresh and innocent social democracy, Huntford finds a decrepit system made evil by unrestrained official megalomania. According to Huntford, the SAP, as the chief agent of social and economic security, strengthened its monolithic grip by appealing to the Swedes' fear of change: "Concerned only with economic security, the Swede is prepared to sacrifice most other things in life"; "Swedes like social control."

The country's economic growth through the second half of the 19th

century—when Sweden, long poverty-ridden, achieved her industrial breakthrough well after the United States and England—is treated in Eli F. Heck-scher's **AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF SWEDEN** (Harvard, 1954). Martin Schnitzer provides a more contemporary overview in **THE ECONOMY OF SWEDEN** (Praeger, 1970), out of print but available in most libraries. Schnitzer covers the tax system (less progressive than the British and offering strong incentives to private industry), resource allocation, the labor market, and the importance of the export trade for domestic prosperity.

Outside the realm of politics and economics, a sense of Sweden can be found in its sociology and literature. An easy place to begin is a short book by British Swedophile P. B. Austin, **ON BEING SWEDISH: Reflections Towards a Better Understanding of the Swedish Character** (Univ. of Miami, 1968). A typical Austin observation: "The last thing a Swede is prepared to dispense with is his *själsliv* (literally, soul-life). The very impossibility, indeed, of translating . . . *själ* (soul/mind/spirit/psyche) into any non-Scandinavian tongue suggests . . . what chasms there are between being Swedish and being anything else." Another instructive—and entertaining—book by Austin is **THE LIFE AND SONGS OF CARL MICHAEL BELL-MAN: Genius of the Swedish Rococo** (Malmo: Allhems, 1967). Two hundred years ago, the roistering poet Bellman (1740–95) wrote: *Am I born, then I'll be living / Well and truly on this wise / To my Eve like Adam cleaving / Here in paradise. / . . . By my bottle let me slumber; / By my girl will I awake: / When sad thoughts my brain encumber / Time an end will make.*

Also illuminating are the popular short stories that comprise the *Gösta Berling Saga*, part of the work for which Selma Lagerlöf won a Nobel Prize (1909), and the books of Pär Lagerkvist, another Nobel Prize-winner (1951) and the grand old man of Swedish letters. A translation of Lagerlöf entitled **THE STORY OF GÖSTA BERLING** (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1951; Westport, Conn.: Hyperion, 1977, reprint, cloth & paper), is available, as are Lagerkvist's **BARABBAS** (Random, 1955, cloth; Bantam, 1968, paper) and **THE DWARF** (Hill & Wang, 1945, cloth; 1958, paper).

Finally, there are the copious works of Johan August Strindberg (1849–1912), Sweden's greatest dramatist, who touches upon most, if not all, of the major Swedish preoccupations, including the war between the sexes and the tensions of social class. Several good paperback selections of his plays are available.

The gloomy dramatist's themes and characters are reflected in the world-famous films of Ingmar Bergman, who in his youth directed many productions of Strindberg. The first film written by Bergman to appear in the United States was *Torment* (1947). *Scenes from a Marriage*, a typical Bergman study of psychic conflicts and personal morality, captured a large U.S. television audience earlier this year.

Swedish films are everywhere. But not very much of the sizable recent Swedish literary output is available in English. Happily, this gap is being filled by the University of Minnesota Press, which plans to release anthologies of contemporary Swedish prose (edited by Gunnar Harding and Anselm Hallo) and poetry (edited by Karl-Erik Lagerlos) late in 1978.