

Scandinavian Studies in 1977: A Retrospective

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Forty years ago this year, a report was published by the Inter-University Committee on Scandinavian Studies, entitled 'Scandinavian Studies in Britain'. 'Published' is perhaps rather a grand word in this context; it is a home-made 46-page brochure produced on an early word processor and stapled together. The committee which is referred to was set up at the conference of University Teachers of Scandinavian Studies in 1975 in Aberdeen, the preamble informs us, and 'charged with enquiring into the present state of Scandinavian Studies in the United Kingdom and with making proposals for future development' (p.2). The members of the committee were: Harold Borland (Hull), Peter Foote (UCL), Glyn Jones (Newcastle), James McFarlane (UEA), Ronald Popperwell (Cambridge), Alan Robinson (Aberystwyth) and Irene Scobbie (Aberdeen). Ronald Popperwell was chairman, and Irene Scobbie was secretary. The gender distribution of the committee members (largely heads of department) was fairly typical of that time.

Much of the report is taken up with a detailed account of the provision of teaching, and associated research, in Scandinavian Studies in British universities in 1977. The number of universities listed as contributing to the subject is an impressive (and by today's standards, astonishing) seventeen. There were eight centres in England: Cambridge, East Anglia, Hull, London, Newcastle, Sheffield, Surrey and York; four in Scotland: Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling; four in Wales: Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Lampeter; and one in Northern Ireland: Belfast. Not all of these institutions had fully-fledged degrees in the subject, of course; some had a temporary or part-time appointment in one language, and some depended heavily on one 'ildsjel' who maintained their subject until it practically disappeared

with them, such as Brita Green in York or Oddveig Røsegg in Glasgow.

The report makes an attempt to divide these institutions into three different categories. Category A comprises the universities which offered at least three of the modern Scandinavian languages (usually Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) to honours level. Category B includes those in which there was more than one 'tenured' teacher of Scandinavian Studies, but where only one of the languages could be studied to honours level. Category C is composed of institutions with not more than one tenured appointment, or with temporary or part-time teachers, where an element of Scandinavian Studies was available as a part of some other honours degree. Table 1 sets out the position as it was in 1975-76, the latest year for which numbers were available. Cardiff and Lampeter are not included in the table as they had no dedicated staff; the report states merely that 'classes in Swedish language are available in some measure' (p.28) in both places. The table also indicates the number of honours degrees awarded in 1976. (I have simplified the information given here somewhat; the lists in the original report are hedged about with notes pointing out the contribution of other teachers who are not technically employed to teach that subject, the difficulties of giving comparative figures for Cambridge graduates because of the structure of the Modern Languages Tripos, etc. etc. But it gives a rough picture of the overall status quo.)

Information is also provided in the report about the teaching of Finnish at SEES and UEA, of Modern Icelandic at Leeds and UCL, and of Faroese at UCL, with further expertise at Newcastle, Reading and Trent Polytechnic. Staff members, library resources, societies, periodicals and major research achievements are listed. All in all, the report provides an encouraging snapshot of a thriving subject; as the authors point out, Scandinavian Studies was represented at 'every kind of British university: "Oxbridge", "Metropolitan", "Redbrick", "New", "Technological", "Scottish Greystone", Welsh and Irish' (p. 11). They further emphasize that, given the importance of relations with our Nordic neighbours, it is in our own interests to maintain this broad spectrum.

However, it is equally clear from the report that there was a perceived

threat to the subject in 1977; it speaks of the UK's 'present straitened economic circumstances' (p. 29) and the vulnerability of Scandinavian Studies as a small subject spread across many autonomous universities and which has difficulty defending itself when faced with a more rigid application of concepts such as 'staff-student ratios' and 'unit costs'. Cost-cutting decisions by individual universities could have catastrophic effects on national provision. (That this concern was widely shared across the sector is clear; my files also contain a paper written by James McFarlane in 1975 protesting against a proposal to cut the number of posts at UEA from six to three, and an article from *Aftenposten* in 1977 by the then Norwegian cultural attaché Tor Neumann headed 'Norsk i Storbritannia i en krisetid' urging the need for more financial support from Scandinavia.)

So what was to be done? The report suggests three possible alternative courses of action. Firstly, to increase recruitment of students to existing departments in order to achieve acceptable staff-student ratios. Secondly, to enhance effectiveness by way of collaboration between departments, e.g. shared appointments, joint teaching, peripatetic teachers etc. Thirdly, to rationalize provision by cutting some courses and concentrating resources in a smaller number of institutions, perhaps ultimately establishing a National Centre of Scandinavian Studies in the UK.

Not surprisingly, all three of these strategies encountered considerable obstacles. There was not a single department which did not strive to implement the first recommendation and increase the number of admissions; but at a time of falling recruitment in modern languages as a whole, this was a tall order. The second recommendation was to some extent stymied by geography; although there was some exchange of teaching between universities in the south of England and a considerable amount between those in Wales, distance made this kind of collaboration impractical for many institutions. And the third recommendation was the most controversial; if there was to be a Centre, where would it be located and who would move or surrender their posts / students / resources? The report concludes tentatively that 'London and Cambridge obviously have particular claims' (p. 39), but refrains from making a specific proposal as to location.

The fact that this report provoked controversy is clear from a six-page 'Supplementary Report' published by the committee the following year, after a somewhat acrimonious discussion at the second conference of university teachers in Norwich in 1977. The Scottish universities had obviously asserted their determination to make their own decisions about what happened in Scotland, and the committee had to reassure smaller departments everywhere that it did not wish to imply that resourcefulness and vitality were the preserve of larger ones, and that it had no intention of closing any flourishing centre of Scandinavian Studies, however small. There had also been an outcry about another statement in the report to the effect that 'the health of our subject in this country depends in the long run on the more vigorous recruitment of British-born scholars to the teaching posts available, and the progressive reduction of the present heavy reliance on Scandinavian-born scholars' (p. 39). The supplementary report avers that the committee had no intention of slighting the contribution of Scandinavian scholars or of restricting recruitment, but that it wished to draw attention to the plight of postgraduate students in the UK who were unable to progress to academic posts. There was no revision to the major recommendation of establishing a National Centre.

Looking back from several decades later, it may seem that this report had no effect at all; universities went on in the same way as before, and no institution offered in the short term to close its department or move its staff, students or resources. In part this was because the subject was embedded within different institutions in very different ways; and there was also a strong argument put forward for offering the Nordic languages in as many places as possible, as students of modern languages often discovered them after they had embarked on their courses. But it did focus people's minds on the national provision, and it did encourage more sharing of resources in various ways. The conference became an established Biennial Conference of the British Association of Scandinavian Studies, which thrived over two decades and became a forum for scholarship and the exchange of ideas; it met subsequently in Newcastle in 1979, Hull 1981, Surrey 1983, Lampeter 1985, London 1987, Edinburgh 1989, Norwich 1991, Surrey 1995, Hull 1997. It even published its Proceedings in later years (I have copies of

the last five volumes if anyone is interested!)

In the longer run, of course, the concerns expressed in the report about the threats to the future of the subject in the UK proved prophetic, as student numbers fell and one institution after another withdrew its teaching. Looking back from 2017, the 1970s now seem a golden age in terms of the spread of Scandinavian Studies across the British university system. Centralization was achieved in Wales when resources were moved from Aberystwyth and concentrated in Lampeter under the energetic leadership of Laurie Thompson, although when he retired the centre closed and effectively ended the provision of Scandinavian Studies in Wales. Northern Ireland lost its one lector. In Scotland, the committee's tentative suggestion of locating the main centre in Edinburgh was realized when in 1987 staff and resources were moved down from Aberdeen.

In England it can also be said that centralization has been achieved, though in this case it has been by default rather than by design. From the early 1980s, when cuts to higher education began to bite under the Thatcher government, departments which had been flourishing in terms of research or student numbers or (in most cases) both were closed one after the other: Newcastle, Cambridge, Hull, UEA. The Scandinavian cultural departments did provide substantial financial assistance, but that could not halt the trend. As each department closed, there was a short-term boost of student numbers to the others, but the decline in modern languages students overall, combined with the harsher economic climate, was hard to compensate for. Table 2 provides an illustration of this in terms of honours students at UEA over the decade 1993-2003; after the millennium, they fall off a cliff.

So UCL and Edinburgh are now holding the fort as the only two institutions left in the UK to offer a full provision of modern Scandinavian languages at honours level. They are doing so splendidly, with active teaching and research departments and a team of energetic researchers. All is not doom and gloom; the Nordic Research Network, which has just had its seventh meeting at the University of Aberdeen, provides a forum for postgraduates and early-career researchers to present their work and get their papers published, and there are still other pockets of expertise in aspects of the history and culture of the Nordic area. But a

decline in provision there has undeniably been. The opening statement of the Inter-University Committee's report makes melancholy reading in retrospect: 'Scandinavia is an area which – historically, culturally, economically, politically, strategically – is worthy of our best attention. Indeed, given the shifts and changes in the political and economic balance of Europe in recent times, it may seem that Scandinavia is an area for which, in relation to its importance, there is at present under-provision within the British university system.' (p. 3) If that statement could be made in 1977, how much more pertinent is it in 2017?

Category	University	Permanent fulltime staff	Lectors/ assistants	Joint appts/ part-time/ others	Hons degrees awarded
A	Cambridge	4	1	-	2
	Newcastle	5	3	1	17
	UEA	3	3	2	20
	UCL	8	3	3	12
B	Aberdeen	2	2	-	1
	Hull	3	1	-	6
C	Aberystwyth	-	1	3	2
	Bangor	-	1	-	-
	Belfast	-	1	-	-
	Edinburgh	1	-	-	-
	Glasgow	1	1	-	-
	Sheffield	-	1	-	-
	Surrey	1	2	-	-
	York	-	-	1	-

Table 1: Staff and students in Scandinavian departments 1975-76

	Danish	Norwegian	Swedish	Total
1993	4	9	8	21
1994	2	9	7	18
1995	5	8	12	25
1996	10	11	12	33
1997	8	8	12	25
1998	10	4	10	24
1999	5	4	10	19
2000	8	10	8	26
2001	3	4	12	19
2002	0	3	2	5
2003	0	6	3	9

Table 2: UEA degrees awarded with Honours in Scandinavian languages