

Comment & Debate

What is Scandinavian Studies? Reflections on a Region, a Discipline and a Department

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What is Scandinavian Studies and why should it have its own university department? These are questions that have, not surprisingly, preoccupied me during the last three years or so, a period during which I have had the honour to act as the Head of the only remaining university Department of Scandinavian Studies in England.¹ The boundaries of academic disciplines, and the ways in which these are institutionalised in university structures are fairly arbitrary of course. University departments come and go with intellectual fashions. My own alma mater, the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Exeter, and presumably a child of the 1960s expansion in the social sciences, ceased to exist nearly a decade ago when it became part of the Department of History. Doubtless new departments, centres and institutes have already taken its place. New calls for ‘inter-disciplinarity’ and for the breaking down of established disciplinary boundaries continue to generate administrative re-organisations: it was ever thus, one suspects.

Nonetheless, academic departments, and the disciplines that shape them, matter, as all academics know. Even matters as trivial as the adoption of particular referencing conventions are determined by discipline, and academic departments, like smaller units within any large workplace, carry their own distinctive sub-cultures and identities. All

1. Since I joined UCL in 2000, once thriving Departments of Scandinavian Studies have been closed at the Universities of East Anglia and Hull, following the earlier demise of similar institutions at Cambridge and Newcastle. Scandinavian Studies continues to thrive in Scotland, however, with a long-established department at Edinburgh University and a more recent one at Aberdeen.

university departments will also, from time to time, find themselves called upon to defend their subject and their existence to vice-chancellors, provosts and deans. Here a Department of Scandinavian Studies is rather unusual. We are, at least as far as our undergraduate programmes are concerned, a department of modern languages, but we are unlike most other language departments in that we teach several different languages, which, though sometimes mutually comprehensible, are definitely not the same. It would perhaps be more accurate to describe Scandinavian Studies as an area studies department, based on an official description of area studies programmes as 'emphatically multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, encouraging the analysis of an area from various approaches drawn from the arts, humanities and the social sciences.' (QAA, 2008) Moreover, as a one-off we have no national subject association or professional body to attach ourselves to. There are similar departments in the USA, Germany, Poland and elsewhere, but even these are relatively few compared to more 'traditional' humanities departments like History, English or French. More surprisingly, perhaps, there are very few similar departments in the Scandinavian countries themselves; that is, departments whose research and teaching interests go beyond the purely linguistic and literary. The one exception I know of is the Centre for Nordic Studies (CENS) at Helsinki University.²

Finally, the area in question is ill-defined: there is no such thing as 'Scandinavia' as a recognised geo-political entity. The question 'what is Scandinavian Studies?' can thus only be satisfactorily answered in relation to the more ambitious, and perhaps more interesting question of 'what is Scandinavia?' What follows is a personal reflection on these questions formed in response to my experiences of recent years. It is intended not so much as a self-justification as an attempt to stimulate further thinking and exchange on what I suspect is an endless – and scarcely new – debate about our department and our discipline. In writing this, however, I have also had the good fortune to be able to draw on a small departmental archive, consisting mostly of reports and other similar papers, going back to the foundation of the department at UCL in 1918.

The UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies

The UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies had, in the academic year 2007-8, ten full-time members of academic staff, whose research 'encompasses the languages, literatures, cultures and histories of all the

2. See the CENS website at <http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/nordic/english/index.html>. The same point is made by CENS' research director Henrik Stenius (2008).

countries of the Nordic region.' It was claimed that members of staff approached these 'in ways that are both multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary; that are both national but also comparative and inter-cultural; and that are synchronic but also diachronic, encompassing the period stretching from the Viking middle ages to the present day.' (UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies) The department's staff included one Reader in Icelandic Language and Literature, three senior lecturers in Swedish, Danish and in Nordic history; four lecturers, two in medieval Scandinavian studies, one in Scandinavian film and one in Swedish, and two UCL Teaching Fellows, one in Norwegian and one in Danish. The Department offered a BA in Scandinavian Studies (Swedish, Danish or Norwegian), BAs in Icelandic and in Viking Studies, and students also studied all these languages as part of other, combined degrees.

Like many other university language departments, the Department's historic strengths were in philology and literature, and for much of the post-war period it had a distinguished reputation in the field of medieval Old Norse studies, based above all on the work of its long-serving Director Professor Peter Foote. From its foundation in 1918, there were close links between the Department and scholars working in Germanic and English philology: its first two Directors, W P Ker and J G Robertson, held Chairs in English and German respectively, and its Director from 1934-42 (and Provost of UCL), Sir Allen Mawer (1879-1942), was a leading scholar of English place names (Ekwall, 2004). Many of the original students came to learn a Scandinavian language as part of their studies for Honours degrees in German.

However, the impulse behind the foundation of the Department of Scandinavian Studies was not entirely philological. Instead, its establishment, on the initiative of Professor W P Ker just after the First World War, 'was influenced by the desire prevalent after the war to do everything possible, through sound knowledge, to promote international understanding and good will.' (CPSS, 1925) At this time, it was noted, the University of London had departments studying the language, literature, philosophy and institutions 'of almost every important [for which read European, of course] nation of the world', and it was thus entirely proper that the three Scandinavian nations 'should become part of the work of the University of the Capital of the Empire.' The Department was established temporarily with three lecturers (in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) and an honorary director. By the academic year 1924-25, there were 47 students taking courses in the Department, and a series of public university lectures on the Literature and Life of the Scandinavian Countries was attracting audiences of 500 in total. The original aims were unchanged: '[I]t is difficult to over-estimate the value of lectures of these kind, in promoting a sympathetic relationship

between the Scandinavian countries and Great Britain.' (Ibid.)

From the start the Department's work was supported by a Committee for the Promotion of Scandinavian Studies (which still exists today), which was chaired by the writer and Ibsen biographer Edmund Gosse (see Thwaite 2004). From the mid 1920s, this committee played an important role in organising an appeal to raise the necessary funds for the permanent endowment of the Department of Scandinavian Studies. The appeal was connected to the 1927 centenary of University College, and launched with a concert of Scandinavian music in 1925. Its patron was the Danish-born Queen Consort, Queen Alexandra, who gave her name to one of the endowed lectureships; funds were also sought in the memory of W P Ker, who had died in 1923 (Report of the College Committee, 1926-27). In 1927 it was reported that the appeal for £10,000 had been over-subscribed, and the College was able to establish three permanent lectureships in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian (Ibid.).

As well as teaching 'full curricula' (not specified) in the Scandinavian languages and literature, the three lecturers continued to give the popular public lecture series. It is not clear from the departmental records we have what topics these were on, though Ibsen's centenary was marked in this way by Professor J G Robertson (Ibid.). The appointment of Sir Allen Mawer as Director in 1934 may have helped to steer the Department in the direction of medieval studies. His public lecture series on 'The Scandinavians and Medieval England', delivered in collaboration with among others the distinguished Anglo-Saxon historian F M Stenton, was reported to have attracted an average audience of 180 (Report of the College Committee, 1935-36). The story of the perennial British fascination with the Vikings cannot be discussed in detail here (Report of the College Committee, 1932-33; also Wawn 2000), but the Department's interests in the field were forged in association with the Viking Society for Northern Research, which deposited its library at University College in 1932.

The Second World War was a difficult period for University College, given its central London location, and bombing raids eventually resulted in the near total destruction of the library and the suspension of activities in most academic departments, including Scandinavian Studies. The College's Provost, Sir Allen Mawer, died suddenly in 1942, leaving the Department without a director. Those who sought to revive it after 1945 returned, perhaps not surprisingly, to the founding vision:

The original aim of the Department, of promoting international understanding through personal contacts and through fields of common interest in teaching and research is today an even more urgent requirement. After six years of material and spiritual catastrophe the widest possible co-operation is needed

for the re-establishment of academic standards (University of London circular, n.d.).

Like their predecessors in 1918, their vision for Scandinavian studies was a broad one: to re-establish the Department 'as a centre of interest and scholarship in the languages, literatures, history and politics of the Scandinavian countries.' (Ibid.) Although not documented in the sources I have read, it is entirely possible that the close links between Britain and Norway, forged during the Norwegian government's London exile, were also influential.

Scandinavian or Nordic studies?

To return to our original question, why *Scandinavian Studies*? Modern language teaching was, after all, generally organised along national lines in the first half of the twentieth century. Probably there were important practical reasons: then, as now, separate departments of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian would have simply been too small to be feasible. But there were also good reasons why twentieth-century Scandinavia should be perceived as a whole, perhaps more than any other group of independent nations elsewhere in Europe. In the mid-nineteenth century there had for a while been a political aspiration to unite the three Scandinavian countries into one, a project which eventually met its demise over the Swedish failure to support Denmark in its catastrophic defeat by Prussia in 1864 (Østergård, 1997). Had the pan-Scandinavian movement succeeded, then the department might well have found itself teaching not three languages, but one, 'Scandinavian', with its students required to practise the different dialects as variations on a theme.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the aspiration for political unity had given way to less grandiose schemes for cultural co-operation that did much to promote contact and exchange between the three countries, although they could not prevent the occasional flaring of hostility and tension, for example in the wake of the Norwegian secession from Sweden in 1905 (Sejerstad, 2005). During the inter-war period, intra-Scandinavian co-operation gained a new urgency due to the security concerns of small, weak and neutral countries caught between Germany and the USSR. As Norbert Götz has shown, the Scandinavian countries formed a co-operative caucus in international organisations such as the League of Nations, and they also gained a reputation in international peace-making circles largely through the efforts of statesmen such as the Norwegian Fridthiof Nansen and the Swede Hjalmar Branting (Götz, 2008).

It was also during the inter-war period that the Scandinavian countries began to attract international attention for innovation in economic and social policy. As Kazimierz Musiał has shown, in the 1920s most of this attention was directed towards Denmark, and in particular to the successful agrarian co-operative movement (Musiał, 2002). Only from the 1930s did Sweden start to make an impact on the world's consciousness, firstly through the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, which demonstrated the aesthetics of functionalist architecture and design to the world, and then through the innovative social and economic policies introduced by the 'Red-Green' government after 1933. The seminal text is generally regarded as the American journalist Marquis Childs' 1936 book, *Sweden – The Middle Way* (1948), which also extolled the Swedish co-operative movement as an example of how to make capitalism work in the pessimistic conditions of the 1930s (Marklund, forthcoming 2009). By the end of the decade, the Scandinavian countries stood, for those on the democratic left, as cherished examples of the ability of liberal democracy to resist authoritarian political challenges from both left and right (Childs, 1948; Simon, 1939).

By the time of the Department of Scandinavian Studies' fiftieth anniversary in 1968, the Scandinavian countries, and Sweden in particular, had garnered a strong international reputation in social and industrial relations policy, and the idea of the Swedish or Nordic 'model' was beginning to emerge. The Department's milestone was the occasion for a new public appeal, this time with the aim to establish a new position in Nordic history. In making this appeal, its organisers returned once again to the department's initial aspiration, to promote knowledge of the modern Scandinavian societies: 'People have become acquainted (often, it is to be regretted, very superficially acquainted) with Scandinavian ideas and experience in such fields as social experiment, housing, education, legal and administrative reform, industrial relations, pure and applied arts, and they have been not least interested in the advance of Nordic co-operation itself.' (UCL Scandinavian Studies, n.d.). Perhaps most striking here is the reference to Nordic co-operation, at a time of heightened interest in the potential for European integration as a strategy to overcome common economic and security problems. The Nordic countries were at this time seen as relatively advanced in this field, with the establishment of the Nordic Council in 1952, and a passport union and common labour market in 1954. In the late 1960s the Nordic governments were engaged in negotiations over a new scheme for economic co-operation, albeit one which was ultimately unsuccessful (Sonne, 2007).

The decision to make this a post in *Nordic* history raises a further interesting question. To some extent the terms 'Scandinavian' and

'Nordic' are used interchangeably in the English-speaking world at least, although the noun '*Norden*' (literally 'the North') is unfamiliar. Within the region itself, most people tend to prefer 'Scandinavia' to refer specifically to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, while the more inclusive 'Nordic' includes Finland and Iceland as well, together with the three autonomous territories: Greenland, Faroe and Åland. In fact, unlike Scandinavia, the term Nordic can claim to have some official or quasi-official status, through the existence of the Nordic Council and its associated institutions. For our purposes, the co-existence of these two terms raises some interesting questions about the boundaries of the region, and of the department therefore. Or to put it more directly: what about Finland and Iceland?

The preference for the term Scandinavian over Nordic might indeed suggest that the founding basis for the Department was, above all, language.³ It would be possible to make a case for including Icelandic on philological grounds, but Finnish was entirely different, and was therefore positioned elsewhere. But consider for a moment the precise timing of the Department's foundation, and the decision over the inclusion or exclusion of these areas looks much more like a historical accident. By 1918, Iceland had gained political autonomy in its domestic affairs, but it remained formally within the Kingdom of Denmark. Finland's claim to be considered a Scandinavian country, seen from the perspective of 1918, was far more dubious. Until 1917 it was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, and the civil war and turbulent first years of independence seemed to position the country far more easily with the successor states of the rest of eastern and central Europe, where indeed it was placed, as part of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) founded in 1915.⁴

In the case of Iceland, it seems that it was above all the growing interest in the medieval Scandinavian past after the Second World War that established Iceland and Icelandic (old and modern) firmly within the curriculum of the Department. The war had undoubtedly sparked British interest in the island anyway, given its strategic importance to the Allies and its eventual independence in 1944. In a way, though, Icelandic had always been present. W P Ker was doubtless not alone among erudite professors of English in having an interest in old Icelandic, even one that

3. Note, however, that 'Scandinavia' was used internationally in the inter-war period as the official designation for Nordic, e.g. the Nordisk Andelsforbund (which included Finland) was generally referred to in English as the 'Scandinavian Co-operative Wholesale Society'.

4. SSEES has since 1999 been part of UCL, but was until then an autonomous college of the University of London.

allowed him to teach it to his students, and in many universities, including University College, old Icelandic has always retained a presence in Departments of English (Chambers, 2004). The decision to introduce the teaching of modern Icelandic on a more permanent basis probably owed much to the efforts of the Department's long-serving director Professor Peter Foote.

The case of Finland is more controversial. The case for Finnish exceptionalism within the Nordic region is easily made, but it is equally easily over-stated, especially when driven by nationalism. Although not a linguist myself, I would even go so far as to argue that the case for linguistic exceptionalism is over-stated, on two grounds: Firstly, although Finnish is undoubtedly different in its structure, grammar, morphology, and etymology, it also shares some striking lexical and semantic similarities with Swedish, and there are many loan words (Engman, 1994, p. 65). In fact, these similarities are perhaps not so very striking given the centuries of shared history between Sweden and Finland. This history gives rise to the second objection to Finnish linguistic exceptionalism, which is that Finland was and remains officially a bi-lingual country. This should not be over-stated, of course. The Swedish-speaking minority is currently (2008) very small, comprising only 5.4% of the population. But for the historian, to write any history of Finland without a sound reading knowledge of both Finnish and Swedish would be unthinkable, at least for the years before 1917.

Moreover, a closer examination of that history suggests different ways of imagining it than the rather teleological and thus unsatisfactorily narrow focus on the post-1917 nation state. This is a point which applies, equally strongly, to Swedish history as well; indeed to the rest of the region. As the distinguished Finnish historian Matti Klinge pointed out some years ago now, there are different ways of imagining and writing the history of the northern territories now occupied by the nation states of Sweden and Finland. For most of the early modern period, and perhaps well into the nineteenth century, it might make more sense, for example, to distinguish between a developed 'core' region running along the Stockholm-Åbo axis (and perhaps including Riga as well), and a forested periphery uniting Karelia in the east with Lapland and Finnmark in the north and Värmland in the west. This, as Klinge points out, also corresponded to a linguistic division between Swedish and Finnish speakers (Klinge, 1983). Further, although it is tempting to think of 1917 (or perhaps even 1809) as some sort of caesura, marking the separation of the two halves of a former whole into separate entities with their own distinctive linguistic and cultural background, this too can be overstated. Not only was there an official Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, but there were also unofficial Finnish-speaking ones in Sweden: among

historically established communities in the Torneå/Tornio valley, and more influentially, large numbers of more recent migrants in industrial towns such as Västerås and Eskilstuna. The histories of the two nations remained intertwined throughout the twentieth century (Engman, 1994).

Finally, as the Finnish historian Monika Janfelt (2005) has discussed in a recent study of inter-war Nordic co-operation, both Finland and Iceland served important and distinctive functions for the construction of a Nordic identity. In Iceland's case this was as the bearer and guardian of traditions linking modern Norden with the Vikings. Finland could be regarded as a peripheral, border region, but this peripherality served an important function, by helping to make a distinction between twentieth-century Nordic co-operation and the wider political ambitions of nineteenth-century Scandinavianism. This in turn allayed the fears of some Norwegians in particular, for whom the possibility of closer Nordic co-operation could always be perceived as a threat as well as a possibility (Janfelt, 2005, pp. 149, 187-9).

Conclusion

I may be justifiably accused of navel-gazing, and more than likely this is of little interest to those outside Departments of Scandinavian Studies (or even those within it). But the aims of the founders of the Department were, as we have seen, quite ambitious and far-reaching: to promote tolerance and understanding between peoples across the North Sea in the wake of a catastrophic war. They decided to do this not along national lines, but by founding an institution for the region. In conclusion, the point I would like to make is this: it is the region as an entity, and not its constituent elements, that forms the focus of what we do in the Department of Scandinavian Studies. Our aim should not be to insist on the national uniqueness of the different Scandinavian countries, but to try to perceive them as a whole. This remains an important, but still under-researched area. As Henrik Stenius (2008, p. 65) has suggested, it is widely recognised that the Nordic region has many distinctive traits, but remarkably, this has not yet inspired any 'systematic investment in deeper comparative analysis of Norden as a distinctive historical region.'

I am not trying to suggest that the Scandinavian countries are all essentially the same, far from it. On the contrary, the differences within the region are central to any discussion of its culture and history. Why was the rural aristocracy weaker in Norway than it was in Denmark, and weaker again in Iceland? Why did there seem to be more support for revolutionary politics in Finland and Norway than in Sweden, and why did this result in an armed uprising in Finland but not in Norway? Why does

the Icelandic welfare model seem to have been influenced by American-style individualism and self-help at least as much as Nordic social democratic collectivism? These are historians' questions; scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds will have different questions. But to consider any of these questions in a purely national frame seems to me to be equally unhelpful. One cannot separate the history of Sweden and Finland before 1809, of Denmark and Norway before 1814 or Denmark and Iceland before 1918. Moreover, one cannot understand the early modern history of the Swedish kingdom except in relation to its main rival the Danish monarchy, and the same inter-relatedness applies to the twentieth century as well. For all the Nordic countries, the defining relationships around which national identity has been forged have been with each other, although this is not to exclude the importance of connections outside the region: with Russia/USSR, with Germany, with the New World, across the North Sea with the British Isles, and with the rest of the world.

There will always be a tension between this regional approach and national specificities. But let this be a creative tension, and not one which falls back on national canons and claims for national "uniqueness". In a twenty-first century of globalisation and inter-cultural exchange, the porous boundaries of the Scandinavian region may well serve as an ideal for a truly trans-national approach to the arts and humanities.

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