

## **Chapter 20 : The will But Not the Power (III) (1844-1859).**

*"The king may die, but he must not be sick."*  
Oscar I, 1859

Oscar's reign is usually summed up as he began as a liberal, was frightened by the unrest of 1848 and ended up a conservative.<sup>1</sup> But that because of his pedantic character, his serious illness or the growing complexity of society he did not achieve much, either as a liberal or as a conservative. The alternative version is that Oscar deliberately weakened his government by mixing liberal and conservative cabinet ministers. The government's energy was consumed in internal conflicts. Oscar's confirmation priest, Archbishop J. O. Wallin in his obituary is somewhat more benevolent:

If one examines his government's actions, it should not escape the attentive observer, that his entire life, all his endeavours, his every desire was to benefit his country and his people. He wanted to do this in the unassuming way of society's steady evolution; by a mature and conscientious examination of the wish lists of the time, and make the best choice. He was not deaf to the peoples demands, nor ignorant of their teachings. On the contrary, he was in many respects one of the most noble and high-minded of his time, a child of the Enlightenment. But he was a caution and calculating man, taking everything into account. Therefore, the many unfulfilled wishes of the Liberals.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe so. Oscar's obituaries tend, after a few opening words about his peace-loving nature and good intentions, to dissipate into all matter of things.<sup>3</sup> On his accession Oscar formulated his gaol as "that [he wanted] to improve the legislation and administration of the kingdom and thereby take the initiative, but to preserve his royal rights and be careful with political questions". A perfectly reasonable (but illiberal) objective for a king. A research review (too extensive to refer to here) supports this conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Reading it and other literature leaves a feeling that the large number of reforms carried out in Oscar's reign were not against his will but neither on his initiative. His much-quoted "popularity chase" seems to have been about symbolic acts and to instil all parties with hopes that were late or never realized.

I describe six aspects of Oscar's reign: His official image, the Scandinavian movement, the March riots of 1848, the reforms, his reorientation of foreign policy 1854-1856 and his medical history. Because of the departmental reform of May 16, 1840, Oscar had more difficulties than his father to exert his will at the cabinet meetings, but did it through private talks with his ministers & by pressuring them.

\*

### 1. His public image

The artist etc. Fritz von Dardel (1817-1901) was adjutant of Crown Prince Charles (XV) 1850-1858 and often met Oscar in that position. He has written down his impressions:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ulvros 2007b.

<sup>2</sup> Vallin 1859: ss. 71-72.

<sup>3</sup> AB 1859; Adlersparre 1859; N.N. 1859; Vallin 1859; Wall 1859.

<sup>4</sup> Pettersson 1982.

Oscar I was a dutiful and humane regent; under his government, the prison system was fundamentally reformed, spacious, healthy prisons replaced the barbaric burrows, wherein before criminals were packed together [1846]; he implemented the law of equal inheritance for men and women [1848] and extended religious freedom [1858], in a word he improved the lot of the downtrodden and left a lasting impression.

He was a law-and-order-loving man, more dedicated to improving than creating. He rarely asked for counsel; He treated his ministers and courtiers as tools and used them as long as they were sharp, and put them aside when they had become idle and worn down. He never had a favourite. [As a politician, he was well prepared, cunning and cautious. He did not want to openly break with any party but sought to instil hope in them all. In order to rule alone, he generally surrounded himself with 2<sup>nd</sup> tier advisers, with no great influence in the Parliament. In addition to these advisors, he often used disreputable but talented political agents, whom he had inherited from his father. These gentlemen had free access to the king's person, whom they amused with their talk. Even his sons have been used in such function.]

His sense of order also extended to the care of his own person; His head was beautiful, the eyes somewhat bulging, his gaze warm, sometimes sentimental, but the favourable impression was weakened by petty care for his looks. Thanks to the constant use of hair and moustache pliers, the curls were always laid in the same way and the moustaches, the goatee and the short sideburns were day after day identical; The voice and the gestures also had something artificial, the clothes are worn tight without a fold, it was something about the impression. I never saw this king fully natural except on the rare occasions when he was fierce or angry; Then the manhood burst forth, and then he was truly impressive.

In the later years he became absent-minded to a degree, and it often happened, that his thoughts did not match the words; so it could happen that after he stopped in front of a visitor and asked him a question, he did not take heed of the answer but instead remained silent for several minutes and then renewed his question as if he had not heard the answer.

King Oscar I was never popular, and this was largely because his appearance lacked the openness and cheerfulness that the public so much like to see associated with the royal family. When after some military display he was anxiously seen riding past the men in a canter with his chief stable master always by the side, the spectator were not by far as enthusiastic, as when his son the crown prince, Charlie called, appeared on a fiery horse, jauntily greeted the crowd and then left in full gallop.<sup>5</sup>

A comparison between father and son is inevitable. They were both careful with the exterior. The curls of the father were by no means natural either, but like the son he spent a long time each day with curling iron in front of the mirror. However, where the father made his will known through endless monologues, scolding or threats of dismissal, things calmed down at his son's councils. In the beginning Oscar held them twice a week & discussions could last for hours without him uttering a word. According to Ecclesiastical Minister Henrik Reuterdahl, during his time as minister in 1852-1855, Oscar only intervened on issues of sobriety and defence.<sup>6</sup> Later, during his illness, he received his ministers in private.

\*

## 2. Scandinavianism

<sup>5</sup> Dardel 1911: del 1, ss. 192-193.

<sup>6</sup> Reuterdahl 1920: ss. 330-350.

Scandinavianism, an initially Danish movement to “win back their lost Swedish provinces within Denmark's borders”, had existed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century but during the 1840s got a boost in the form of a Nordic student movement. Joint meetings were held: 1842 in Lund, 1843 in Uppsala, 1845 in Copenhagen. Oscar was distrustful - he even had the movement's intended 1844 meeting in Copenhagen cancelled - but then changed his position. The atmosphere at the meeting in 1845 was good and 247 speeches were held. The objective of the Danes was to obtain Swedish military assistance to defend Schleswig-Holstein, obtained from Sweden in the Treaty of Kiel. When the first Schleswig War broke out in 1848, Sweden-Norway contributed volunteers, but no regular troops. Then the movement had a slump but recovered. Its political peak was reached in 1856 during the Crimean war. Oscar received a student deputation and expressed his support: “Our swords stand ready for a common defence“ and “Henceforth war between Scandinavian brothers is unthinkable“. His son Charles XV pursued this policy as best he could. Although Sweden did not intervene in the second Schleswig War 1864, it supported cultural Scandinavianism.<sup>7</sup>

\*

### 3. The Mars riots of 1848

1848 was a troubled year for crowned heads. This was especially true of France where the monarchy was replaced by a republic, the so-called February Revolution. In Sweden, there were minor disturbances on March 18 and 19. Oscar had been to the Opera and listened to Jenny Lind when he on the way back encountered a demonstration. After listening to the complaints, he ordered the police to release those arrested. Placards, posters & pamphlets like the following were seized: “King Oscar is crap, an unworthy king to rule over the land of Svea, he is afraid of losing his crown, which is unworthy of the one who has the honour to sit on the throne of the Charles' and the Gustafs; Therefore citizens dethrone the coward, and proclaim the beautiful Republic this evening at Brunkeberg. Oscar is not good enough for King. Long live the Republic! Reform! Down with Royalty! Long live Aftonbladet, death to The King. Republic! Republic! The people. Brunkeberg tonight.“ Later it came to stone throwing & further arrests. Oscar had his four sons Charles (XV), Gustaf, Oscar (II) & August summoned. Oscar, his sons and the governor Sprengporten rode out to calm the crowd through their presence. This was partly successful. Oscar tried to determine if the protesters had any demands. A dialogue took place between Oscar & the crowd but unclear what was communicated beyond insults. After Oscar's departure, the shouting & the window crushing continued.

The next day, the demonstrations continued, but now the soldiers had orders to fire. The soldiers first retreated under a rain of paving stones, but then cleared the area with gunfire, bayonets and rifle butts. 18 people were killed and several hundred injured. There were rumours afterwards that Oscar had provoked the incident to make an example. Evidence of this was supposed to have been his and the others' acquiescence the first day. That does not seem likely. However, Oscar's resolute order on the second day led to congratulations from Nikolai I and others that he knew how to deal with the mob.<sup>8</sup>

Oscar interpreted the riot as caused by the workers' associations & newspapers and made many attempts in 1849-1851 to get at his opponents by restricting the right of association & freedom of the press. This he had most success with in Norway where the editor Magnus

<sup>7</sup> Termænius 1938; Tjerneld 1992; Ulvros 2007: ss. 205-211.

<sup>8</sup> af Edholm 1944: del 1, ss. 114-118; Söderhjelm & Palmstierna 1944: ss. 328-332; Ulvros 2007a: ss. 220-223.

Thrane (1817-1890) was sentenced to prison & then forced into exile. In Sweden it turned into a long war of positions that possibly explains Oscar's bad legacy in newspaper circles.<sup>9</sup>

\*

#### 4. Reforms

Oscar's social reforms were slow in coming and many of them were not implemented until Charles XV's prince reign in 1857-1859:

- 1846: Cell prisons instead of community sentences.
- 1848: Women's equal inheritance rights as men.
- 1858: Unmarried women over the age of 25 could apply to the courts to become emancipated and freely dispose of their money.
- 1858: State monopoly of religious services abolished.

The same applies to the economic reforms.

- 1846: the compulsory membership in guilds abolished in rural areas.
- 1854: the Parliaments decision on state-funded trunk railways (with privately funded branch railways).
- 1857: the birthright of immovable property abolished in towns.
- 1863: the birthright of immovable property abolished in rural areas.
- 1864: the compulsory membership in guilds abolished in towns.

The trigger for the abolition of the guild system appears to have been that the supply of licensed craftsmen never matched the demand, but that there was a comprehensive system of “unlicensed craftsmen” & exemptions, which undermined the legitimacy of the system.

The birthright of purchase or cultivation (odalrätt) was a provision that relatives had a purchase option on immovable property. It was a kind of equivalent to entailed estates. The trigger for its abolition appears to have been the same as for the entailed states. That the selling price was higher in a free market.

\*

#### 5. Foreign policy 1854-1856

Oscar's reorientation of Swedish foreign policy in the Anglo-French direction in connection with the Crimean War of 1853-1856 came to be his last significant achievement:

- According to a secret clause in the Treaty of Turku of August 30, 1812, Sweden should have come to Russia's aid when it March 28, 1853, was attacked by a coalition of Great Britain, France, the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire. Instead, Sweden-Norway initially declared it self neutral and later, by the November Treaty of November 21, 1855, joined the enemy camp. The November Treaty remained in force until the end of the union of Sweden-Norway.<sup>10</sup>
- In parallel, Oscar planned a military action to retake Finland. Since Sweden-Norway lacked a general staff and he himself was commander-in-chief, all planning took place

---

<sup>9</sup> Hasselberg 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Hallendorff 1918 & 1930; Eriksson 1939.

within the framework of his own court and military advisers & in secret. However, the war ended before the plans could be implemented. The project was not discussed in the Parliament, but there were diplomatic soundings with the princes Charles & Oscar as envoys. The Western powers protested, regarded the project as unrealistic.<sup>11</sup>

- Since Russia through the Treaty of Turku guaranteed Scandinavia's existence, there was initially little public support for an attack. For example, Russia had supported Sweden-Norway when it came to the rescue of Denmark in connection with Prussia's attack in 1848. The matter came in a completely different light when the Turku Treaty was published in its entirety in 1855 and the secret clauses on mutual assistance became known. After the Crimea War, Oscar decided to change the policy of Sweden-Norway in a Nordic-Russian-hostile direction, and so it has remained.<sup>12</sup>

Oscar's advocacy of this his policy was later cited as indicative of his style of government through manipulation. He had anonymously or through intermediaries published articles in both national and foreign press, for example in *The Times*, which he then quoted as evidence of his English support. In this he was like Bismarck, who used the method on a large scale, to indirectly control German opinion. Gullberg & Eriksson cite a number of examples.<sup>13</sup>

Eriksson also devotes a chapter to the Parliamentary corruption: Oscar often bought his majorities through dinners, Orders & government offices.<sup>14</sup> He managed to create a monarchic parliamentary group, the so-called “junker party”, which delayed the abolition of the Estates Parliament. The subsequent development, Scandinavianism as an attempt to strengthen royal power, was for the son Charles to deal with.<sup>15</sup>

Oscar also demanded that his ministers & his court accomplished something for the money (=demanded independent reviews on how they handled their work). The employees were very upset. Oscar's adjutant J A Hazelius: “Mayor features: vanity. Loves no one, neither loved back. Wants everybody to work their hearts out. Never gives anybody his protection. Abandons them when he doesn't need them any longer. Never rewards a service, since all service is considered an honour. Expects gratitude, never returns it in kind.”<sup>16</sup> Sven Eriksson has in his thesis devoted a whole chapter to Oscar's unpopular management policies. Especially unpopular was his way of bypassing the normal bureaucracy through his own political agents, the “camarilla”.<sup>17</sup>

\*

## 6. History of the disease

Oscar had an extensive medical history that this far afterwards is difficult to sort out. Starting backwards from the autopsy, the underlying disease appears to have been a combination of tuberculosis and syphilis. The cause of death was *paralysie générale*, a final stage of syphilis that occurs 5-15 years after the infection. Parallel to this, the heart was affected & he had a puffy, cyst or tumour in the cerebellum.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Lappalainen 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Ulvros 2007a: ss. 208-211.

<sup>13</sup> Gullberg 1952; Eriksson 1954: ss. 190-205.

<sup>14</sup> Eriksson 1954: ss. 206-214.

<sup>15</sup> Hallendorff 1923; Holmberg 1946; Lundh 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Johan August Hazelius. I: Eriksson 1939: s. 22; Elgklou 1995: s. 74; Ulvros 2007a: s. 270; Norlin 2015: s. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Eriksson 1939: ss. 21-29.

<sup>18</sup> Kock 1963: ss. 132-138; Sjöstrand 2008 & 2010.

At the opening of the body, the spine, which was believed to be damaged, was found in the normal state, but the brain was so affected, that the cause of the monarch's deadly disease should be sought here. Rob. Lundberg, who was present at the autopsy, told me that the feet of the deceased, as a result of the constant use of high heels and thick soles in order to increase the body length a few inches, adopted a flat shape, when the heel became wonderfully large and the calves disappeared.<sup>19</sup>

The anamnesis is unclear: Oscar is said to have been "sick" from childhood, perhaps a chronic infection, but the information is fragmentary. From 1830 he had symptoms that can be attributed to his tuberculosis. In 1837 he was convalescent & spent some time at the spa resort Ems in Germany. As for his syphilis, the subject is avoided and it is unclear when he was infected & by whom. The medical historian Nils Sjöstrand postulates such a long withdrawal period that it may have happened at any time in 1817-1831, and he thus would have infected all of his three families: Mistress Gustava Björklund + 2 children 1823-1824; The wife Josephine + 5 children 1826-1831; The mistress Emilie Höglqvist + 2 children 1839-1840. It is likely that he was infected by Emilie Höglqvist, possibly after her stay in London in 1839. More detailed information is given in the appendix.

There is a description of his symptoms after his visit to St. Petersburg in 1830 that suggests a brain inflammation or tumour even then: "same condition of h.r.h. that I have heard from others both before and afterwards: his appearance would change and become remote; that he in the middle of a conversation abruptly, for several minutes, with staring eyes, silent and immobile remains standing, all thought processes ceasing, accompanied by a spasmodic movement in the upper lip, which frightened at least me."<sup>20</sup>

Brain syphilis is an extremely serious affliction, and Oscar suffered from paralysis and increasing dementia from 1852 until his death June 9, 1859. At the end he could not move but was carried. Most of the time he slept. Sjöstrand speculates on whether the disease affected his governmental decisions, but this does not seem to have been the case. It may have contributed to the general stagnation though. The slow pace of reform after 1848 would not therefore have been due to Oscars' conservative policy but to his poor health. As his father used to say, "A weak king is an disaster for a country, worse than war".

<sup>19</sup> Dardel 1911: del 1, s. 185.

<sup>20</sup> 1:e hovmarskalk J O Nauckhoffs memoarer. I: Ahnfelt 1880: del 2, s. 134.