

Chapter 39 : King, the Arts & the Union (III) (1872-1907).

Royauté oblige!

Oscar II's favourite phrase

Charles's death was completely unexpected for Oscar. He had become accustomed to the idea that the rest of his life was living as a discharged naval officer, cultural personality, author & political accessory. Now, at the age of 43, he had to reconsider. As regent, Oscar mainly devoted himself to remote control of the royal academies, defence issues and the Union. Domestic policy during Oscar's time was mostly about conscription, basic taxes, and free trade. The foreign policy was a rather dishonourable dismantling of Sweden's ambitions as a regional power. In the obituaries, he seems anxious to down play its importance.

The myriad of details & the long time span has had the effect of Oscar's reign either being described as an ongoing hard to grasp process or as a before-after. Since he himself operated behind a smokescreen of words, court secrecy, conflicting messages, powers of appointment, fronts, lobbying, pressure groups, Orders, royal dinners, cronyism & festivities, his actions have been difficult to unravel. There is anecdotal information about how he personally intervened in Norway, foreign office affaires and cultural issues, but despite his memoirs, the nuts & bolts of his government are poorly known. Torvald Höjer summarizes:

As a young prince, Oscar II had played a leading role in the war party during the Crimean War, just as he 1863-1864 had been keen to assist Denmark. But as regent he made it his personal business to seek a more realistic orientation. ... The details of the reorientation of Sweden's foreign policy, which took place 1873-1875, are not known and may never be known, unless Oscar II's private papers, when they are once opened, provide new information. Clearly, the king himself played a significant role; through his widely noted trips to Berlin and Petersburg at the middle of the decade.¹

Strindberg describes his modus operandi:

The constitutional monarch, in theory an autocrat, in reality a political nonentity, has sought new ways for exerting influence. As he appoints all senior officials, civil, ecclesiastical and military, the regent has an enormous indirect influence, partly by appointing and partly by passing over. ... The kings formal powers ... are now zero, but he retains influence through doling out social prestige.²

It has been repeatedly pointed out that Oscar is “underexplored” - code word for the contemporary letters, diaries, memoirs, diplomatic reports, protocols etc. being incomplete or misleading. Since I describe Oscar from the current state of knowledge, I probably make him an injustice - but I think I can state that Oscar's often conflicting & counterproductive proposals caused conflicts & gridlocks in political life, but that this was glossed over. His own judgment was that he rarely got his way:

In my opinion, there can be nothing more demoralizing than being a constitutional monarch. I have been one for twenty years and I ought to know. To have an opinion

¹ Höjer 1942: s. 44.

² Järv 1968: ss. 29,618.

and not be allowed to act on it, but constantly be forced to listen and in most cases to follow – what can be more destructive for character.³

The quote is from September 6, 1892, when after 20 years of discussions the 1st & 2nd Chamber (=landlords & peasants) finally agreed on the issue of conscription & basic taxes. In the meantime, the Norwegians in effect laid down their defences. After 1875 there were no joint military exercises. Oscar's renown pacifism seems a conversion under the gallows.

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1. Popularity

On accession King Oscar is not supposed to have been very popular. Probably correct because he was almost unknown outside his circle of academics, courtiers, politicians & military. His coronation the following year in Sweden and Norway was a way to at least advertise his existence. Lantmannapartiet (the peasant party), led by Carl Ifvarsson, protested the high costs but relented. Oscar's image was both similar & different to Charles XV. Oscar was always depicted as a king or a well-dressed gentleman and as a moral and intellectual role model. Charles had a simpler more straightforward persona. Otherwise they were as alike as berries. Oscar even learned to ride and shoot to mimic his brother. Both were restlessly active without getting much done. Oscar represented all over the country - he must have personally met half the population, arranged in- & outgoing state visits with such long-distance guests as King Chulalongkorn of Siam, arranged large events & parties as soon as the opportunity arose and neglected no opportunity to publish his merits - There is a reason why his years of government is still called the Oscanian age. In 1897, he was described by Pall Mall Gazette as follows:

Oscar II is probably the most cultured Prince now sitting on any throne. Besides being a great linguist, speaking no less than seven languages perfectly, he is a poet and writer of great ability, and his poems are not only widely read throughout Sweden, but have been translated in several foreign tongues. A first-rate musician with a beautiful voice – an eloquent orator, and an enthusiastic sportsman – the Swedish King is all of these. But in spite of his many interests and accomplishments, he has kept his duties and responsibilities ever before him, and has been true to his motto: “Brödrafolkens väl” (The brother-people's good.)

Like the members of our own royal family, he is ubiquitous, and there is no other sovereign, excepting always Kaiser Wilhelm, who is more often on the move to be present at every national ceremony of importance or public utility. Personal contact and intercourse with his people is one of the secrets of the hold he possesses on his people's hearts. As an example of this may be instanced the public audiences he grants when in Stockholm every Tuesday at his great palace when in residence there or at Drottningholm. When the flag flies on the palace any Swede, be he rich or poor, can obtain an audience of his King. All the suitor has to do is to ascend to the first floor, sign his name in a book. and wait for his turn. And the King will refuse to see no one of his subjects, whatever his station, and will patiently go into his grievance and see if redress can be granted, staying in the audience chamber at times up till 12 o'clock at night. rather than disappoint any one.

The King's appearance is thoroughly in keeping with the man. Of majestic stature – he is over 6 feet 3 inches in height – with bright blue eyes of a peculiar charm, he

³ Hadenius & Nevéus 1960: s, 134. [Politikern Sigfrid Wieselgrens minnesanteckningar, 1899-07-26.]

gives one the impression of a rare intelligence and refinement, coupled with strength of character and a. great sense of responsibility

His smile is most captivating, and, once seen, not soon forgotten. There is something magnetic in his personality, and few men can inspire greater love or devotion.⁴

The obituaries explain his popularity somewhat differently. It is said to have been due to a certain moderation in the handling of his royal role. Royal, but no more than the circumstances required. For example, Karl was on first name basis with his surroundings. Oscar was not, but he listened carefully to what it had to say. He was also extremely accessible. Anyone could Tuesday & Friday 11-15 (?) apply for an audience at the castle. A hindrance to Oscar's popularity is said to have been his social adaptability. Oscar could switch between ermine trimmed dignity, informed art & weapons discussions, compassion for someone's accident and jump crow on children's parties. The same with his views. Which Oscar was the most "true" was guesswork. E.g. the French ambassador Gobineau in 1875 described him as lively, emotive & more anxious to please than to be consistent:

He makes himself friendly with every one, who approaches him: showers them with kindness, squeezes their hands and expresses confidence in them, seeks to induce the person he speaks with to believe, that only he possesses so precious a personal quality, continuous in the same way with someone else. One looks for an ulterior motive without finding any. He has now become the target of wits and the object of public mistrust.⁵

Oscar was anxious for good relations with the press, which usually treated him with kid gloves. Probably due to his combination of carrots & whips. Although Oscar did not normally give interviews - there are a few exceptions with French journalists - he ensured that friendly newspapers received free court bulletins, society news & the best places at events. The whip was the so-called prosecution rage - a counterpart to the German socialist laws (1878-1890). The charges were mainly targeted at the labour movement, but other groups were also affected. It was a combination cultural & political rampage too wide ranging to describe here: The strike at the Sundsvall saw mills in 1879, the lampooning of the Victoria wedding in 1882 (the anonymous authors, among them future politicians Karl Staaf & Hjalmar Branting, had the pamphlet printed in France)⁶, the appointment in 1883 of Carl David Wirsén as the Swedish Academy's secretary & the indictment of author August Strindberg (acquitted 1884). The first purely political prosecutions were against the agitators August Palm (2 ½ months 1887/88) & A H Janhekt (seven months 1888) and against the editors Per Eriksson (nine months 1888), Axel Danielsson (1 ½ years 1888) & Hjalmar Branting (3 ½ months 1889).⁷ The prosecutions continued throughout Oscar's reign.

As a former officer, Oscar was a friend of robust methods such as letting the palace guard remove unpleasant journalists, berate them in public and (at least once) floor them.⁸ Much quoted is his statement about the appropriate punishment of strikers: "Yes, they strike and fight so much these days! It was better in my youth, then there were forty lashes of the rod

⁴ Charming and cultured king. Pall Mall Gazette, okänt datum. I: New York Times, 1897-10-11.

⁵ Friis 1963: ss. 48-49.

⁶ Brakel m.fl. 1882; Michanek 1986.

⁷ Karlbom 1979; Bosdotter m.fl. red. 2012.

⁸ Haqvin 1911: s. 23.

and general satisfaction.”⁹ (This seems to have been because workers were subject to the same laws as soldiers.)

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2. Neutrality, the Union & the Kingdom

Oscar's foreign policy was to keep Sweden-Norway out of the major powers' mutual disputes and alliance systems. He was already in 1866, during his Crown Prince's period, set for a reorientation in a pro-German direction. The motive has been much debated, some have perceived an influence from his wife, but in his memoirs he justifies the reorientation by expecting more German wars, and it was best to have a good relationship with the victors from the outset.¹⁰

In 1875 he made a political tour to Denmark-Germany-Russia to get a hearing for his policy of neutrality.¹¹ The trip continued in 1881 to England, in 1885 to Austria & the Ottoman Empire and in 1888 to Italy, Portugal & Spain. It was something of a charm offensive & Oscar had good relations with the major powers his entire reign. In 1892, however, he stated in an interview that the Union's military power was the only reason for his policy of neutrality being respected.

You can see that I am being severely reproached, and yet I want nothing but to be fair. The union of the two halves of this Kingdom (?) is the absolute condition for its happiness, its peace, which has lasted for nearly a century. Divided we will fall or at least be subject to the vagaries of the great powers, against which we have so far been able to defend ourselves. For years Europe has been a tinderbox, and throughout all this time I have been able to keep my people safe. - Will it remain so if we go our separate ways? I say No!¹²

Contemporary literature on Oscar's combined policy of union and neutrality is very extensive. This continued. Concerning the dissolution of the union in 1905 there are over 600 works - debate books, chronicles, memoirs & memories (Haukaas 1956). After World War II, research on Oscar & the various crises began in earnest, based on declassified letters, diaries & archives (Wählstrand 1941; Lindberg 1950; Wählstrand 1953; Kartvedt 1956; Lindberg 1958; Lindgren 1959; Weibull 1962; Hadenius red. 1963; Hadenius 1964; Vedung 1971; Weibull 1981; Weibull 1991a: ss. 61-68; Weibull 1991b: ss. 31-35; Berggren 2012: ss. 85-129). Swedish research obsessed over the guilt issue: During Charles XV, Scandinavianism died. Under Oscar II, the Union. During the reign of Gustav V, neutrality. The Norwegian research was targeted on their political development: Parliamentarism 1872-1884. Autonomy 1894-1905. In 1973 Torbjörn Kjölstad published an overview of the still contentious topics.

In preparation for the 100th anniversary, further research took place within the framework of the Swedish-Norwegian network Project 1905. This concentrated on structural differences between the countries and was presented in three collections (Nilsson & Sörensen red. 2005; Stråth red. 2005; Sejersted red. 2005) and a number of stand-alone publications (Vedung 2002; Gamelién 2004 & 2012; Rodell 2005; Arstad red. 2007; Hemstad 2008; Björk 2016;

⁹ Stensson 1977.

¹⁰ Waller 1959.

¹¹ Utterström 1948.

¹² Figaro-intervjuen hos konung Oscar. Dagens Nyheter, 1892-07-16. [Översättning av den franska original-intervjun genomförd av Philippe Auquier.]

and others). Sweden's official position is in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs brochure "The Swedish-Norwegian Union 1814-1905: Conquest, harmony and divorce" (Nilsson 2004), also published in *Forskning & Framsteg* as "The Compulsory but Happy Marriage" (Nilsson 2005) & in *Populär historia* (Nilsson m.fl. 2005). Summary: The creation of the Union was the work of a single man. Its death was teamwork. The divorce appears to have been a not very exciting affair, with minimal repercussions. The Norwegians had managed to sabotage all attempts to integrate the two countries. When the Great Powers in 1905 were busy with the Russo-Japanese war and its aftermath they grabbed the opportunity to break away. Neither Oscar nor Gustaf (V) by then considered the Union worth a war. Prince Carl summarized the breakaway as "Now that the Norwegians absolutely wanted to get rid of the Union, it must be admitted that they with great skill and tenacity pursued this goal to the end. The men who led the separatist movement in Norway were not considerate, but consistent."¹³

Lindberg summarized Oscar's politics as "German orientation [as a defence against Russia], preserving what remained of the personal kingdom & conservatism in internal political and social matters".¹⁴ Oscar was, for example, uncomfortable with the new French Republic, kept it at arms length and the diplomacy boiled down to time and again referring to his French roots. Most famous is his refusal to let Sweden participate in the 100th anniversary of 1789. Him preserving the remains of the personal kingdom took the form that he & the surroundings pretended that the 1809 form of government was still in force & the Victoria lampooning of the 1882 "servile idiocy" has stood the test of time. King & subjects were co-actors in a theatre play: Oscar's coronation was very stately and he arranged several dynastic marriages in the old style. His son Gustaf (V) was married off to a German princess, his son Carl to a Danish princess, his grandson Gustaf (VI) to an English princess and grandson Wilhelm to a Russian princess. Everybody but the Liberals & the Social democrats rejoiced. However, despite all talk about the importance of the Union, he does not seem to have had any Union policy beyond crisis management. Prince Eugene's position was that Norway under Sweden's protection had been given the opportunity to develop into an independent state & wise policy was to accept the consequences.¹⁵ Which Sweden did.

Under Oscar, Sweden sold off its remaining colony of Saint-Barthélemy (1784-1878). This had been used for slave trade etc. and there is a hard to interpret aftermath. Sweden-Norway participated at the Berlin Conference in 1884/85 where Africa was divided into spheres of influence and a large number of Swedes later found a future as militaries and businessmen in Leopold II's private project the Congo Free State.¹⁶ Because the Free State was presented as a philanthropic project, it is possible that Oscar initially supported the idea. There were several examples at this time when monarchs hard pressed at home expanded abroad.

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3. Other politics

The Union was constructed such that Oscar was alternately a Swedish, Norwegian & Union king, depending on what was going on and where he was. This was impossible to keep up with and there was therefore a Norwegian governor who was Oscar's replacement. Charles had promised the Norwegians to abolish the post, not succeeded in doing so himself, but

¹³ prins Carl 1931: s. 411.

¹⁴ Lindberg 1950: s. 15.

¹⁵ prins Eugen 1942: s. 324, brev till C.A. Ossbahr 1905-03-28.

¹⁶ Nilsson 2013; Svensson 2014.

Oscar in 1873 did. In 1884 Oscar tried to appoint his son Gustaf viceroy, but the appointment was only in effect for one week. In 1891, the Viceroy post too was abolished. As King of Norway, Oscar had the right of veto against changes to the Norwegian constitution, which he 1872-84 was forced to abandon. (It has not been possible to find out how this absolute veto against constitutional changes came into being & if it was part of the Norwegian Constitution or the Union Treaty. Hildebrand (1945) claims that it was an interpretation by a Swedish political scientists, the validity of which was contested by the Norwegian left. Oscar did not have a corresponding Swedish veto, but he was able to dissolve the Parliament & call for new elections. This he could not do in Norway. The Union Treaty was difficult to amend because all parties (the king, Sweden & Norway) having the right of veto.

Another characteristic of the constitution was that Oscar, as a Union king, could pursue his own foreign policy as long as it didn't require money or resulted in some treaty. Probably the reason for his many trips & personal contacts. However, if he wanted to do something that required money or a signature, he had to request it from his Parliament. Charles John had money alongside the state budget, but Oscar does not seem to have had that. This took strange expressions such as the Union and foreign policy with the help of the sons was at times was as a family business. The wife is rumoured to have been one of his advisers and to have had a general calming influence, but that has not been possible to verify. In 1885, the Swedish Constitution was amended to give the Parliament more influence over foreign policy. The Norwegians also wanted more influence, which led to a 20-year conflict until the dissolution of the Union. Like Scandinavianism, the Union became a victim of democracy.

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From a political point of view, Oscar was something of a hero of the retreat who tried to keep up the appearance, which probably explains the lack of enthusiasm of the posterity for his reign. It was not just that Norway went its own way and that parliamentarianism gained ground. During his 35 years on the throne, he also managed to thoroughly alienate his surroundings. Maybe time ran out. His grandson Prince Wilhelm (1884-1965) writes of him in this spirit:

When I think of Grandpa, it's like something got in the way. Not that I have a hard time remembering him outwardly. On the contrary. At any time I can conjure up the image of his tall figure with the white, well-groomed beard which he carefully pulled out in a couple of sharp points to the sides; the good eyes, full of life and a certain playfulness, especially prominent when he told an anecdote in French or joked in the company of men; the sonorous voice with its jarring, typically Bernadotte r-sound and an articulation, clearer than many actors; the august conduct whose assurance and pomp had something in the real sense of the word royal over it, granting the whole apparition an obvious superiority [which he understood to exploit].

...

No, reconstructing the external image of grandfather is not difficult. It is etched in memory. But when it comes to deepening it and at the same time giving it the necessary background, the situation is more difficult. The man in purple yes, the man behind it no. Something stood in the way, a wall that could not be broken, a door, impossible to open.¹⁷

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¹⁷ prins Wilhelm 1939.

From 1887, Oscar began to behave in a way that the surroundings took exception to. His wife was convalescent after a uterine operation & Oscar took the opportunity to spend a few weeks aboard his yacht HMS Drott, a converted torpedo cruiser (launched in 1877, scrapped in 1923) and visit the seaside resort Marstrand. It became a habit. His wife never attended, and spent her summers in Norway. Several speculations exist about the cause: (1) They had a marriage of convenience rather than love & perhaps the conflicts surrounding the son Oscar's marriage to the maid of honour Ebba Munck at this time was too difficult to argue about. (2) Oscar's interest in the occult led to conflicts over their philosophy of life which he was unable to deal with. (3) It was also the case that a woman without uterus was no longer a woman. But mostly it was silence. Journalist Mathias Lehman has written a book about these 20 Marstrand seasons 1887-1906 where the wife is not mentioned at all.¹⁸ Oscar & his "drotts" socialized with the other bath guests under simple conditions. The atmosphere on board, as it is depicted in the versified logbook *The Drott Chronicle*, appears to have been over the top "butch". Oscar was too old for that, which did not impede the crew, however:

Another year, the king on a trip to Backudden commented on a lady companion in his suite being out of favour, implying that he avoided her. She despaired. The king had not given her his hand! During lunch, when good spirits ran high, rumour spread that the lady in question had fainted on a well cover nearby. The king said he would visit her, maybe bringing her some solace in the process. When the king grasped her hand, the beauty opened her eyes with a smile. The same lady had a year earlier had the good fortune to have her shoe adjusted by none other than the king himself. During a morning walk on Ko-island, she had stumbled due to the fact that one of her laces opened. The king, ever courteous, bent down to set it right. Surely she could, if anyone, have reason to be satisfied!¹⁹

Neither did the wife accompany Oscar on his recreational trips to Pau, Biarritz and other places, but visited her German family.

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From 1904, Oscar was seriously ill. He died on December 8, 1907 of atherosclerosis in the blood vessels of the brain and heart. The contributing cause was prostatitis.²⁰

¹⁸ Lehman 1931.

¹⁹ Lehman 1931: s. 243. [Okänt datum, omkring 1895.]

²⁰ Kock 1963: ss. 147-154.