

Chapter 40 : The Legacy.

Oscar has a combined political, literary and cultural legacy:

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A. POLITICS

As regent, Oscar mainly devoted himself to governing the royal academies at a distance, and to defence and union policy. Internal politics, the part that took place in the Parliament, was Oscar's time about military service, basic taxes & free trade. Foreign policy was a rather dishonourable dismantling of Sweden's ambitions as a regional power. In the obituaries, he seems anxious to tone down its importance. At the end his reputation was tarnished by the Union's collapse, which however was blamed on the Norwegians. Torgny Nevéus' summary in the Swedish biographical dictionary (1992) is vaguely patronizing:

The Oscar picture has undergone major changes. The depictions in the king's lifetime and the years following his death were highly respectful. One example is the biography King Oscar II (1897) by the conservative publisher Josef Linck. The work, which has an almost officious character, contains some valuable factual information but is painfully panegyric. The history of S.J. Boëthius (1925) is also very appreciative, emphasizing O's willingness to mediate and even out differences, to stand "above the parties", a view that can also be seen expressed in modern encyclopedias. A slightly more critical but still idyllic and mild picture is given in the compilation work From the Old King's Time (1939). In the decades following World War II, the perception of O became considerably more nuanced. The time gap had grown and more source material was available. A series of scientific monographs and essays in history and political science analysed O's actions as to ministerial crises and Union issues. O's own memoirs were also made public in the 1960s, but they do not make him a great monarch in the eyes of posterity. Other sources from this period also contribute to reevaluate O, not least C G Fleetwood's 1968 diaries. During the 1970s and 1980s, little new was published, except for G. Michanek's investigations, which thoroughly analysed O's actions in literary and other cultural contexts.

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B. LITERATURE

There are six references to Oscars' literary production: "Die Werke Oscars II" by Maximilian Schmitz (1890), the chapter "Konungens skrifter" (the king's writings) in Joseph Links biography (1897: ss. 89-132), a 1904 review by Hungarian Diencs Gagyhy¹, two Swedish reviews of Oscars memoirs (Nyman 1962; Elvander (1962) & the long essay "Skaldernas konung" (king of poetry) by Germund Michanek (1979).

Oscars' writings have a complicated publishing history (Wieselgren 1867: ss. 35-41; Carlander 1888; Almquist 1908; Nevéus 1992). In 1931 his correspondence with Prime Minister Arvid Posse (Thermaenius 1931), 1960-62 his memoirs & excerpts from his letters & diaries (Oscar II 1960; Hadenius & Nevéus 1960), 1981 his correspondence with Norwegian Marshal of the Court Fritz Rustad (Greve 1981).

¹ Diencs Gagyhy. Konung Oscar som skald. Kalmar, 1904-05-07, s 2-3. [Översättning från franska.]

King Oscar had while king his collected works printed, but these seem to have been shelf warmers. His late production was speeches and philosophical essays. The latter are only available in manuscripts.

Oscar wrote letters, diaries, poetry, poetry, speeches, historical science, debates, travelogues, memoirs & philosophy of religion. He is said to have been a little embarrassed by the poor quality of some of his texts, unclear which ones he intended, but like Charles's paintings they filled a function of both status project & relaxation. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the quality of the texts. The early judgments are respectfully bland. The later judgments ridicules them rather than analyse. In particular Michanek (1979) seems to have had a need to bad talk Oscar in all ways possible.

I confine myself to the speeches, the memoirs, Oscar's philosophy of religion & "the Oscanian age" (Sweden's analogue to the Victorian age).

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1. Speeches

Oscar's speeches have a bad reputation. His verbosity often conceals that he has nothing to say, or the amount of text, digressions, and similes make the reader lose the thread. Many of Oscar's 200 published speeches are actually incomprehensible. Dagens Nyheter's obituary had a quote purporting to be typical Oscar:

Two powers fight for dominion over the human spirit, while imprisoned within his corporal body. One serves the idea of the eternal, of the incorruptible, and refers the spirit of man, its origin and its final goal - both essentially the same - and seeks to induce his free will to confidently follow the path that leads to it. The other serves the finite and temporary, thus perishable, and seeks to induce free will to above all concern itself with what belongs to the world of the senses, which is its domain. Both rule over strong forces, both within and outside man; both are rich in persuasive gifts and enticements. The voice of conscience tells whichever path a man will follow, as does the testimony of world history, properly interpreted; above all religion with its hope for eternity, its promises of redemption from the coercion of time and victory over corruption. Man has in his power and earthly position received a lot to administer, for which he has to make accounts, and good intention are a mitigating factor even if you in the end will fail.²

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2. Memoirs

Oscars memoirs were published posthumously 1960-62 in three volumes. These were an attempt to allow posterity to judge his reign. The idea was four parallel depictions of Swedish, Norwegian, Union & Foreign Policy. Only the Swedish, Norwegian & parts of the Foreign policy was completed. The Swedish part contained two descriptions of the events surrounding Prince Oscar's marriage to Ebba Munck & Prince Carl's marriage to Princess Ingeborg of Denmark, But were censored by King Gustaf VI, on the grounds that they were about private family matters. A review of the Swedish part:

² Link 1897: ss. 92-93; Dagens Nyheter, 1907-12-09.

Oscar II is very much on his guard against parliamentary tendencies, in words even more than in deeds. He tries to explain away or reinterpret the parliamentary developments that actually took place during his reign, and he highlights those features which speak in the opposite direction. He sees parliamentarianism as a pernicious and unhealthy Swedish phenomenon, a »modern idol«, which has been playing its demoralizing game in the European continental states. Parliamentarianism goes against the character of our people as a whole, he sums it up in one place. ... He ultimately entrenches himself behind a last, ultimate line of argument: If since the establishment of the prime minister office [in 1875], the Council's foremost man has increased in importance, it is down to the conditions of the times and to personalities and could just as well have happened [in the old way] with a minister of justice!

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The impression of Oscar II in his memoirs hardly deviates from the earlier common conception of him. His tendency to vacillate, to nervously consider all the alternatives available, his anxious concern for royal dignity, his vanity and need for flattery, but also his religion are personality traits, which have long been known and accounted for. ... The memoirs reinforces the impression that Oscar II was an extremely conscientious and accomplished monarch, well acquainted with his Head of State duties.³

An article about Oscar's depiction of the government crisis of 1887-1888 concurs: "The king's influence on the selection of the ministers has obviously been overestimated. In fact, his task has more been to mediate and persuade those whose entry was requested from elsewhere. Oscar II has however knew how to play the cards he was dealt. In his speeches and writings, he has afterwards emphasized his own efforts and the victory of royal power during the government crisis of 1887-1888. In so doing, he has indisputably won at least one victory: the view of the king as "former of the government" [not the prime minister] has become the accepted version."⁴

A review of the Norwegian part of Oscar's memoirs comes to the same conclusions about Oscar's stealth version of parliamentarianism, here in connection with his handling of the veto question 1874-1884: "In a 1885 defence of his actions, reproduced in the memoirs, Oscar II energetically tries to exonerate himself from surrendering to parliamentarianism. Only the Swedish anti-Norwegian right-wing press could believe something like that! On that point, the royal author was, however, blinded by wishful thinking."⁵ It is probably more correct to say that Oscar tried to keep the facade intact. His views changed with time, however. His initial view was "I do not want to become a Parliamentary King like the King of Belgium". In 1884 though, he stated to his son Eugene that parliamentarism "was probably not so bad" as he had initially thought.⁶

The Foreign part of Oscar's memoirs is about Charles's crises, the Danish-German & Franco-German War. They are not discussed here, but are the best written. As for internal and Union policy (apart from the constitutional issues), he has nothing sensible to say, redacts what took place & puts the blame on others.

³ Nyman 1962.

⁴ Hadenius 1961.

⁵ Elvander 1962.

⁶ Meister 2018: ss. 134.

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3. Religious philosophy

Oscar was a Freemason & like Charles influenced by its occult tradition - cabbalism, hermetics, neoplatonism, theosophy, zenbuddism & number mystique. The message of a reality beyond the everyday was in good harmony with his philosophy of life elsewhere. There are 78 books of this kind in Oscar's Library, which he seems to have purchased after his 25th anniversary on the throne in 1897. There are also 200 books on general philosophy & 238 books on theology. Carlsson & Jacobsson (2000) summarized Oscar's religion as “an anti-authoritarian approach to religious issues, a belief in reincarnation, a disgust of the teachings of hell, and a belief in God's absolute power: It was best to accept the world as it was and not try to explain or excuse God's actions - that would be a violation of the supreme. The universe is governed by love and reason and you get the fate you deserve. What we interpret as evil is just the absence of God's love. Reflecting on one's fate gives insight into the supreme.” Oscar read the manuscripts load in a restricted circle, but nothing has been published. Oscars art curator Böttiger (regarded by the surroundings as Oscar's “soul doctor”) comments on why:

For those who have had the good fortune to be close to King Oscar, nothing is more significant of the main features of his being than the beautiful motto he has chosen for man: traversing the abyss, aiming for the heights. For he was perhaps first and foremost a seeker. It is part of his inner tragedy that the nature of his education - his lack of formal philosophical schooling - was an insuperable obstacle to his efforts to construct a coherent system. But perhaps, here in the end was one of those, not always understood, inner blessings, that from higher quarters occasionally come to people. For the old seeker was a mystic, and probably he would never have been able to build such a system, for which usual philosophy was inadequate. For him revelation was as important a source of knowledge as logic. With that guiding star he found many of the noblest delights of his life. Those who will once portray him has in this respect a rich and moving source in the many books, which filled with notes constantly followed him, not least his worn old Bible, the Book of Wisdom, which he so beloved, or for example Schure's “Les grands initiés” [on the secret message of world religions], which inspired him. With literature of this latter species, he worked with a schoolboy's patient striving, often groping due to his lack of logical training and with a touching sadness, when for example his ignorance of the Greek basic text forced him to send a painstakingly copied Greek expression to someone who had the good fortune to master this incomparable language of clear thought and beauty.⁷

Oscars' works were probably theosophic nonsense, but they are not public. To claim, as Mr. Böttiger did, that Oscar was incapable of logical reasoning is, however, to take it too far. His writings on the High Seas Fleet are, if nothing else, both stringent and logical.

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C. THE OSCARIAN ERA

⁷ Böttiger 1918.

Oscar was unpopular from the start and it got worse. It seems to have been due to the monarchy's dual roles in his time, as both initiator of the new Sweden & symbol of the old. As a political actor, Oscar II was ill regarded by both the high & low nobility, the old & new generation of liberals and the social democrats:

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The high nobility

The aversion of the high nobility seems to have been due to the fact that Oscar's political support was the new industrial & agricultural right, but has also been interpreted as a lingering bitterness against the rise of the Bernadotte dynasty. The bitterness is said to have remained Oscar II's entire life and e.g. Crown Prince Gustaf's marriage to Victoria of Baden has been portrayed as an attempt at national reconciliation, because her grandmother was King Gustaf IV's daughter Sophie. In 1892, Oscar's reputation abroad was such:

“It is a great mistake to believe that King Oscar is popular in his own country. He is hated in Norway, which aspires to become a republic, and regards the Crown as an incubus, while he is treated with downright disdain by the Swedes, especially by the nobles, who object to him both as a foreigner and a parvenu. Indeed, many of the great Swedish nobles absolutely refuse to go to Court, or in any way to pay him honor. They ignore him completely.”⁸

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The low nobility

Also the low nobility, that part that once formed the base of the official pyramid, blamed the royal house for having fallen on bad times. In the past, they had at least a guaranteed income. Now everything depended on them selves in competition with the new bourgeois. Many were radicalized during their meagre student years, but turned conservative when forced to find work. Verner von Heidenstam is often mentioned in this context.

There was an earlier debate that the circular movement of the Estates must have its way, even if the direction was down.⁹ A noble without means to a decent living is not worth much. You can not eat Orders.

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The Old Liberals

The aversion of the older generation of Liberals was more of a contempt for weakness. Best known is Adolf Hedin (1834-1905). In 1868, he published his speeches, “Fifteen letters from a democrat”, which was a general attack on the by now per definition bourgeois state: This was oversized, incompetent & ruined the country. As for the monarchy, he felt that it no longer had any role to play after the constitutional reform of 1866. The constitutional monarchy was theatre:

⁸ de Fontenoy 1892: s. 436.

⁹ Rudenschöld 1845.

"There was a time when the kingdom, so to speak, was the foundation of society and its development; this was due both to the nature of government and to great personalities. But times have changed enormously. If the citizens abide by the law, if the taxes are paid, if the public is inspired to great efforts by patriotic fervour, in a word, if society holds together and moves forward, no one can now say that in a constitutional monarchy this is to be attributed to the personality of the monarch, which can be very insignificant without any noticeable inconvenience, nor to the monarchy itself. Under such a changed monarchy, it seems to me most correct that the royalties do not make claims, which are not matched by internal content."¹⁰

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The New Liberals

Political scientist S.J. Boëthius explained the aversion of the younger generation of Liberals to Oscar II by noting that under him they never gained the influence they felt they were entitled to under the new constitution:

Five and thirty years the reign of Oskar II lasted. By only three years, it fell short of what was called the Carolingian autarchic era (1680-1718) [Charles XI & Charles XII] and by only two what was called the Gustavian era (from the 1772 revolution to the 1809 coup) [Gustaf III & Gustaf IV]. Considering the duration, we could therefore talk about the age of Oskar II, and this may be justified in other respects too. Not that he exerted such a dominant influence as the Charles father & son or Gustav III, but he was highly representative of his time, i.e. reflected its mentality. He had a warm understanding for the pursuit of spiritual and material development, which at the time was strongly asserted by the Swedish people and he supported it in words and deeds. It is clear from the political events that his share in this - however the judgment of the future may value it - was significant. In fact, his government is an era of constitutional history. When Charles John's system of government, which made the ministry subservient to the personal will of the king (the so-called one man rule), proved impossible to maintain, it had become necessary to change it, and in so doing it became clear that the government must have the confidence of the Parliament.

However, the implications of this were not clear. Two principles were in conflict: on the one hand, the King's constitutional right to govern the kingdom, and on the other hand, the Parliament's growing claims and influence. An effective attempt to solve the problem was found under the governments of Oskar I and Charles XV, not even under the latter, since the 1866 constitutional reform made the need for a new order even greater. The confidence of the Parliament was not an essential basis for the selection of ministers, but its absence made the government weak to the detriment of its authority. Oskar II's statesmanship is that he suggested a solution. It consisted in the king, while preserving his right to select his ministers, would use this in the such manner that the government was assured support by the Parliaments both chambers, which was in accordance with the constitutional House dualism. This principle was behind the tentative attempts at the beginning of his government, and during Boström's first cabinet it was almost completely implemented. Only twice - through the calling of Posse and Staaf to the office of Prime Minister - did he depart from it in favour of 2nd chamber parliamentarianism, but these were failures, soon abandoned experiments, and his government ended with a strong assertion of what had been the

¹⁰ Hedin 1868: s. 64.

main thread of his policy: rejecting Staaf's demands for the dissolution of the 2nd Chamber, the right of veto of the 1st Chamber was thwarted and brought about the Lindman cabinet, whose form of representation (increased middle class influence in the 1st chamber), however, pointed towards a new time. Therefore, the government of Oskar II has a place in our history, comparable to the Carolingian and Gustavian era not only by its length but also because it had, like them, a definite constitutional character: bicameral parliamentarianism.¹¹

[Boëthius is a bit cryptic. The Staaff incident is better known in Axel Brusewitz's version: On Monday, May 14, 1906, the Parliamentary debate on the voting rights bill of the Staaff cabinet began. In the 1st Chamber, the proposal was rejected by an overwhelming majority the same day. In the 2nd Chamber, it was adopted the following day by a considerable majority. On this occasion, Staaff, in a speech towards the end of the debate, characterized the battle with the notorious antithetical question: "Should the King reign with the support of the people or with the support of the lords?"¹² By dissolving his government, Staaff believed he could force a new election & once again present his proposition, this time possibly with a more positive result. He assumed (or at least hoped) that it would be impossible for Crown Prince Gustaf (who at the time was deputizing for King Oscar II) to form an alternative government, but there he was mistaken. It also turned out that the resistance in the 1st chamber was more due to himself as a person than to the actual proposition, which passed under his successor Arvid Lindman.]

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King Oscar II thus succeeded with the help of the 1st chamber (where the Conservatives were in the majority) in blocking the 2nd chamber (where the Liberals were in the majority) for almost his entire reign, and this was possible for King Gustaf V to continue until the 1919 general election. Subsequently, the changes to the electoral system left the Conservatives of the 1st Chamber in the minority. However, it is unclear what all this manipulation was aimed at. Two-chamber parliamentarianism was like an eternal equilibrium parliament. Some issues were completely impossible to pursue.

The Department History Committee (1990) has done a thorough review.

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The social democrats

The social democrats were during Oscar II's reign politically too weak to matter. The period 1866-1917 is known as the Bourgeois state.

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Herman Lindqvist

In 2022, the journalist & historian Herman Lindqvist published a comprehensive biography of Oscar II & his time. Because it lacks footnotes, it is difficult to refer to. In the preface &

¹¹ Boëthius 1925: ss. 260-261.

¹² Brusewitz 1951: s. 15.

bibliography, however, it appears that he had access to at least parts of Oscar II's private notes, letters, etc. However, the information about Oscar II's love affairs appears to have been taken from Sven-Eric Barck's *Royal gossip through a thousand years*, which makes one doubt also on the rest of the book.