

Chapter 9 : Swedish legacy (I) – “A French Marshal in Exile”.

As for Charles John's immediate legacy, he was both admired and loathed. I quote his aide-de-camp and adjutant 1831-1844 Samuel Gustaf von Troil (1804-1880).

On October 1 [1830] I began my guard duty as aide-de-camp. I had looked forward to this opportunity to be up close to this king who had made such an extraordinary impression on all who came into contact with him, including myself.

Charles John's personality was overpowering to say he least. It was such that he either was *under-* or *overestimated*. Many felt disappointed, usually because they [because of their poor French] did not understand him; others were enraptured. There was seldom a middle road. No one was indifferent. The nobility and a large part of the press, in particular towards to end, criticized what they called the system: The ageing king, the ageing cabinet (known as the geezers), the influence wielded by his excellency Brahe. But most of the nation, in particular the military, unconditionally supported the great commander, wise politician and humane regent,

That I belonged to the admirers goes without saying. The king had, shortly before my trip abroad, granted me a meeting that left an indelible impression on my young self, and now I hoped to re-experience it.

This was not to be. However kind, charming and obliging Charles John might be, he was king and I was not. He always kept his royal distance. Never confiding anything or giving me free access to his bedchamber that also served as his office.

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During the month of November 1836 I did my last aide-de-camp duty, and then was appointed adjutant. On March 1, I started to serve in this latter capacity and immediately realized the difference. If the aide-de-camp had no close access to the king's person, the adjutant and the lord in waiting had. With them, the king loved to discuss all manner of issues. They he used in all manner of positions to test their ability, and to them he felt able to confide without restraint, for the time ignoring all these French euphemisms. Such trust should never be abused. But regrettably many such utterances were passed on, and the kings enemies never neglected to use them as evidence of the kings true nature.

Especially the so-called morning visits, when those on duty entered to greet the king, left an indelible impression. Still unwearied of his daily governance, Charles John loved, for a half or whole hour converse his surroundings about about all matter of subjects. He often spoke of his former life and important events that had taken place during the revolution. His memory for details, historical knowledge and eloquence impressed us. One subject though was tiring in the extreme. Towards the end of his life, he became obsessed with financial science. This was one of the few subjects on which he *did not* have any superior knowledge. But like so many other great men, Charles John also had a weak side, showing itself through him believing himself to understand finances better than anyone else. When the king entered on this subject, we fell mute as Egyptian priests. Otherwise we joined into the conversation as best knowledge and delicacy admitted. It has been claimed that Charles John would not suffer contradictions. This is entirely correct, if you tried to interrupt him; But if you waited until the king fell silent and then looked doubtful, he almost always said: "Eh bien, mon ami, vous ne dites rien?" - and once these words were spoken, one could be certain that he would listen to opposing views. We seldom left the king's bedchamber without having learned something new or reconsidered something old.¹

¹ von Troil 1885: ss. 46-49.

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The person best fit to describe Charles John was his childhood friend, trustee, adjutant & assistant Louis Marie de Camps (1765-1844). Henrik Schönbeck (1810-1896) 1833-1835 tutored his children & has passed on some statements. De Camps was keen to highlight Charles John's greatness, but he also had some comments:

He [de Camps] once uttered: To me Charles John has always seemed great, indeed sublime when treating big issues and on fateful occasions. Then there was no obscurity, which his gaze could not penetrate, nothing that could disrupt his calm or his judgement. That's how I saw him on the battlefields and heard him in the councils. If even a volcano of indignation and resentment seethed within, or everybody had lost faith, it never showed in his appearance, words or posture. But on the other hand the most insignificant everyday event, an unseemly word or a suspicion, could bring about such outbursts, that he insulted even those whom he valued the most. The southern blood soon cooled, however, if somebody present knew how to divert his anger. This was not always the case, however, and then it could go on.²

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The origin of Charles John's Norwegian policy, general [de Camps] believed not to be Charles John himself, but a number of highly regarded Swedish statesmen. Of this he told me the following.

When Lieutenant Colonel and the Cabinet Secretary Count Gustaf Fredrik Mörner of Charles XIII was sent to Paris to convey the message about Charles John's election as Crown Prince, he also brought a letter from then member of cabinet, Count Baltzar Bogislaus von Platen, concerning a possible and desirable relationship with Norway. This letter was later printed as an appendix to the 6th part of the Schinkel Memories. Even before Count Mörner arrived in Paris, Charles John had obtained extensive and reliable intelligence about the members of the Swedish government and other men of influence within the country. Among these, he had primarily taken note of Count von Platen, who through his labours, his firmness and his love of the fatherland, appealed the most to him. When the first letter of political content that he received from Sweden was from him, and was delivered through a representative who enjoyed the trust of both the old and new court, it made an indelible impression.

It was well known to him that the vast majority of the country still wanted Finland back and that this had been the strongest reason for his own election. But he also knew that the previous election for the throne stipulated a voluntary accession of Norway to Sweden. He also knew that all of Sweden's great rulers had worked for, or at least wished for a such union. He saw this as far more beneficial and in the future safer than a renewed union with Finland. Although he did not see it as impossible in the short term, either in the way of the negotiations or by peace treaty between France and Russia, he perceived it as futile in the long run to hold on to Finland since Russia would surely try to recover it.

Thus he increasingly made Count von Platen's petition his. It became for him a Vade-mecum that he always faithfully nurtured, even when he found that only a few of the nation's men were of the same opinion and a multitude of obstacles existed to its implementation. Even von Platen's thoughts on providing the Norwegians with a constitution of their own, later supported by Adlersparre, were included to their full extent, and perhaps somewhat beyond, in Charles John's conception, and eventually

² Schönbeck 1878: s. 14.

implemented, despite the king, the members of the cabinet and the generals, whose most prominent representative, General Adlercreutz, insisted that Norway should be treated as a conquered country and subjugated to Swedish rule.

The fact that many of those above gradually retracted their initial position on this matter, had more to do with Charles John forcing them to do so than them changing conviction. "You who are young," the general [de Camps] added, "will probably experience the day when both history and public opinion recognizes the prescience and high-mindedness that led Charles John into granting Norway political independence. He did not want them to feel forced into a treaty contrary to their national sentiment. He wanted Norway to develop in parallel with Sweden, but as a sovereign country".³

But then reality showed its ugly head.

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Others were not so forgiving of their French parvenu. Charles John's Aide-de-camp (1812), Adjutant (1819), lord in waiting (1823) & 1st Marshal of the Court (1827-1832) Baron Johan Otto Nauckhoff (1788-1849) reflects in his memoirs⁴ on Charles John's unsuitability for his royal office. Most of his criticism can be brought back to Charles John's ignorance of Swedish conditions, inability to delegate, need to appear omniscient in every situation, inability to distinguish between the state's and his own interests, willingness to exploit those in a dependent position and his court's atmosphere of bragging, self-praise, gross flattery, cursing & subservience. In other words, Charles John behaved as if he were still one of Napoleon's generals & marshals:

It is known that Charles John started in a humble position in the French army, and that he, as well as others of the same descent, had the French revolution to thank for the opportunity to rise in the ranks. Information about his upbringing is scant, but we know he belonged to the less well-off middle class; His literary and social education must have been what can be expected from this - something that completely agrees with later observations. - "The heart of the child is wax; what you push down, never goes away" - and this is true: what the child hears, sees and experiences dwells in memory; much can be modified, abraded and hidden by manhood, when compelling circumstances and superior natural gifts unite - but the scars remain and show. He has no experience of serving the common good. No experiences of higher learning for the sake of it. Everything is about serving his own immediate interests, a trait extremely dangerous in a chief of state.

Bernadotte had reached 28, set in his habits, before even reflecting on a different life. Then he was propelled forward by the revolution. By nature endowed with superior intelligence and southern imagination – Napoleon described him as a man with "with Moorish blood" - he undoubtedly realized his need for an education on a par with his station but had only *les sociétés populaires et les bivouacs* at his disposal. In lieu of a higher humanistic learning he buried himself in military and political history. A career guide and vocational training of sorts. One may assume his genius classified the readings into a system and further pounded it into maxims of the type found in Tegnér's Svea. In passing I may remark that history is the only subject I have ever heard Charles John elaborate on. He revelled in making it come alive through knowledge, memory, discussion and imagination. There he shone.

³ Schönbeck 1878: ss. 7-9.

⁴ Nauckhoff 1858 & 1880.

Anyone who has experienced or read about our governments dabbling in business economics in the 1820s and 1830s must admit to it being rich in experiments, poor in results. Above I have hinted at the cause: Lack of knowledge, lack of perseverance. Time that should have been spent seeing the policies through, was spent pursuing his own interests, economic and otherwise.

The metamorphosis from bourgeois birth and citizen to member of an old royal family and heir to the throne was too sudden, not to intoxicate a person who was already familiar with that motto of self love – knowing it all. Arriving in Sweden he was on top of it surrounded by people who expected such. In Sweden *Noblesse oblige* in the worst possible way: appearance is more important than substance; everybody is to be treated according to rank; etiquette is all. Bernadotte needed an expert on the subject, someone of impeccable lineage, who lacked ambition. An instrument rather than a player. Happily for Charles John such a person was at hand, count Magnus Brahe [1790-1844].

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When doling appointments Charles John was in the habit of postponing it for as long as possible in order to take advantage of the situation. He liked to keep people on the grid iron. Often just to show them that he could. With time this created an incredible amount of indignation and resentment, and contributed to the country losing trust in him and his support dwindling.

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Still more dissatisfaction was caused by: (1) him preferring flattery rather than hard truth. (2) due to his lack of Swedish everything was filtered through his underlings leading to erroneous decisions. (3) the time and effort he spent on enriching himself rather than working for the common good.

I will return to the first two points. Here I will delve into the third.

Whatever his business reasons – politics, speculation or both – they were an unfortunate decision that made no money – 1 à 2 percent has been mentioned – and embroiled him in conflicts with the locals.

In a short time he acquired the following properties: Gellivare verken in Norrbotten [iron], Elfdals porfyrverk [granite], Stjernerund in Nerike [farming], Gammaltorps and Fremmesta in Westergötland, Norkärr at Dal and yet others, I think, in Bohuslän; Engeltofta, Skarhult and Bollerup in Skåne. The first costing 450,000, the second 500,000 and the third 300,000 rdr banko; in addition I think he bought a property in Södermanland in the vicinity of Svärdsbro, and lesser properties in Småland, in the vicinity of Fogelvik.

As an absentee landlord Charles John was a joke, issuing commands as if his employees belonged to the army, and he was largely ignored unless he refused to pay them, which he often did. His bedchamber cum office was year out and year in cluttered with accounts. His grasping nature was such that it had to be inborn.

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Charles John was extremely anxious to appear royal, craved deference and subordination, love and adulation. If it wasn't forthcoming he paid for it. Servants, officials, soldiers out of uniform and the like made extra money as cheer-leaders.

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In spite of experiencing it at a daily basis, it always amazed me how a person endowed with such piercing intelligence could endure, yes even seek, such impudent flattery, exaggerated praise and pure grovelling, that Charles John thrived on, but its

effect was always the same, putting him in a good mood, and maybe making him responsive to some suggestion.

But easy come - easy go is a recipe for suspicion and Charles John is evidence thereof. Lindberg has in his "contributions to Swedish history" listed a number of ridiculous conspiracies to which Charles John in his paranoid shadow-fear put credence and attributed to the dispossessed prince Gustaf of Wasa. - He may have shown courage in the field, but in the cabinet he was faint of heart: as witnessed by his network of spies searching for traitors among loyal Swedes, in the process sowing suspicion everywhere, even within families.

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He may have been a good commander, but not a statesman, not even an administrator. Being a powerful orator and surrounded by talented and serious advisers, he might possibly have become a successful regent. Now he was an obstacle. His battle field approach to civilian life made him never suffer objections, nor delegate. He wanted obedience, not advice. Promotion was through dedication to duty, not initiative, nor ability. (Unlike Napoleon who favoured ability. Their glory was his.)

Since Charles John's advisers were deficient both in French and the Swedish constitution, they were easy prey. It amused him to make long and evasive speeches on all manner of abstruse interpretations, with them as captive audience.

The long term effects of Charles John's promotion system was to gut the state of skilled people, both in the agencies and in the government proper, where the adverse consequences are still felt: I think this is the most serious charge to be brought against him. By promoting mediocrity and treating his civil servants with disdain he strengthened his own position at the expense of the state.

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Charles John thus through his political flip-flops, bullying, manipulation and half-truths made enemies even of his allies. Carl Axel Löwenhielm (1772-1861) - son outside wedlock to Charles XIII (?) & brother of Göran Löwenhielm (1771-1856) who ran Charles John's propaganda centre in Paris - thought he had Charles John's trust, but discovered after the publication of Schinkel's papers that Charles John possibly had duped him too. There is an unpublished vignette to his memoirs:

Now at last is the time to look back at C. John's vacillations and blunders. If he had acted honestly, he would as pledged to enter France, assemble a French army and dictated the Paris peace to his and Alexander's satisfaction. Now Alexander lost trust in him, he had no other ally, had to return to Sweden and take command of the campaign against Norway.

Whatever verdict history may have in store for C. John no one can defend the *infama félonie*, with which he broke all promises he made to the great princes of Europe and particularly with England, which for a year gave him such abundant subsidies to fight the Napoleon, with whom Bernadotte now wanted to reunite - and for money?

He should expect to lose all support and in addition his Swedish throne. Bernadotte might have thought that saving Napoleon would endear him to France, that then had him to thank for its salvation. Where else would he live with his ill begotten 70 million?

How much more incomprehensible will C. John's conduct become when one learns that, at the same time he had sent a Frenchman, vicomte de Vieul Castel, béarnes like himself, to enlist supporters in France to be proclaimed French king?

Vieul Castel found no one who wanted to know of Bernadotte and with good reason: half Jacobin - half despot – a Gascoigne chatterbox - no firmness of will - unable to subdue the other marshal under his sceptre - and yet Bernadotte had dreams - and likely already in Turku he had persuaded Alexander to support them!!!!

For my part, I know only one name for Bernadotte's dreams - and that is *madness*; His happy star, or rather providence, saved him from its consequences - and C. John, who never trusted the Swedes, yet died a Swedish king, the founder of a new dynasty, after having lifted Sweden out of the impotence in which he received it.

The union with Norway [1814], albeit badly executed, paying Sweden's foreign debt [1815] and abolishing the purchase of commissions [1833] are and remain great and noble memories of his government, and lucky he who in Wetterstedt, my brother and me, met people who saw him through, saved his hide and kept *quiet*.

Few are those who have had the opportunity to lean to know C. John's as well as myself. K. B. Steding[k] was only a court employee - the generals lacked sufficient French or felt obliged to listen to C. John's monologues until the end. Actual discussion was impossible for everyone except Wetterstedt, my brother and me, who not hesitated to interrupt him. The others were talked into the ground.

You can not deny C. John's genius for war, but on other subjects he did not make much sense, especially in finance.

The sum of my opinion about C. John, who I have served for 28 years, [is] - no religion – flexible morals – craves money, but not too concerned by what means – open minded but easily influenced – never forgets a friend, neither an enemy - does not know art, but is lavish towards artist.

You seldom knew “which” C. John you would meet – one day he was the Swedish prince – the next day the French Field marshal. One day Alexanders was his bosom friend – the next day »ce Polisson, assassin de son Père« [which was untrue]. One day consumed by hatred towards Napoleon whom he had helped dispossess – the next day still prepared to join him for a prize.

In sum C. John lacked morality and coherent views – only great at the battlefield – and otherwise a fermenting Gascoigne – and yet *a tool of providence* for Swedens salvation from infamy. C. John needed a guiding hand though. He found it in czar Alexander and then in me.

My own motives are evident. I worked for Sweden and thus for C. John. Alexander's motives are harder to discern. He may have been grateful for C. John not making trouble in Finland, but ignoring C. John's rapprochement to Napoleon and for many years to come remaining his friend, seems going too far.

I must assume, that in Turku Alexander encouraged C. John's hopes of becoming French king, maybe hoping to reconcile with the Gustavians by reinstating the son of Gustaf IV on the Swedish throne.

If so, I played my part by cultivating good relations with Alexander.

Thank God that all ended well in spite of Kiel and Moss.

At Kiel we were close to losing the subsidies because C. John delayed. In Moss he suddenly turned democratic and wanted to negotiate in the hope of Norway accepting him as king, if the Swedes changed their mind. What seems more likely is that in such case Norway would have elected a Dane.

In later years C- John realized his mistake and regretted his many concessions.

No, it required such a monarchic people as the Swedes to keep going until the end. 34 year translating each and every bit of paper unto French, listening on a garrulous king speaking a foreign language in a half comprehensible dialect. The members of cabinet where in fact political martyrs – badly paid – badly treated by C. John – and worse by the Parliament.

I have now put into writing what I think of C. John, this chameleon who within the hour could change his views and feelings and with no effort whatsoever reconcile the opposites of anything.

C. John lacked religion - maybe he professed to a dim deism. In any case he never took the sacrament, even though his confessor Bishop Hedrén spent the last 14 days by his bed.

Magnus Brahe, commendable for his tireless activities if the king, and who had been able to accomplish so much good in statesman's affairs, had reduced himself to the rôle of dry-nurse, only providing for C. John's physical well being.⁵

Fortunately Löwenhielm's suspicions that Charles John was planning to betray all his allies were based on loose rumours. Tingsten (1926) has studied the memoirs including the final vignette & been able to deny most except Charles John's personal behaviour. Charles John seems like his own worst enemy. The kindest explanation is that he wanted to know the reactions of the surroundings to his ideas: He therefore always said one thing in public, something else in private & implemented the third. The alternative would have been to sit quietly while the environment debated the options, but given them the opportunity to express themselves, surely their ambitions would grow & become a problem. That happened anyway.

By the end of Charles John's reign, everyone was thoroughly tired of him. Charles John had to write his own legacy, because no one wanted to do it for him. The extensive Charles John praise is from the 1st & 2nd World War when he was transformed into a Swedish national icon. The reason he remained was probably that Sweden's reputation could not suffer another coup d'état, forced abdication or election. At the end his position was too weak for him to do anything other than rule his court and his cabinet, which was tolerated because it didn't accomplish anything. But everyone was thankful for Napoleon being disposed, and Charles John had a part in that.

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I conclude the Charles John criticism with his Norwegian legacy. According to this, Charles John was a Swedish king rather than a union king, but above all himself closest. But since Charles John had actually liberated Norway from Denmark, the attitude was divided. To this was added the difficulty of understanding his person & motives:

The verdict against him as a person and as a field commander and statesman has changed with time and prevailing sympathies, and he was also sufficiently complicated to be perceived in quite opposite ways, - at once impulsive and calculating, world-wise and unrealistic, sometimes petty and sometimes magnificent, with the urge both to command and to make himself loved, sure of his own invincibility and yet suspicious, - a big child, but a royal personality. He did Norway two great services, first by detaching it from the Danish autocracy, then by asserting its sovereignty over the great powers; in both cases, however, his measures had greater

⁵ Löwenhielm 1923 & 1925.

effects than he himself had anticipated. As Norway's regent and king, he was otherwise essentially a restraining force; but by his ill-advised opposition he strengthened national feelings, - this is clearly seen in the struggle against his reactionary constitutional proposal, in the struggle about May 17 [as national holiday] and in the crisis at the dissolution of the Parliament [Storting] in 1836. In no way was he a *quantité négligeable*. But the result of his struggle was often the opposite of what he had wanted.⁶

Historian Alf Kaartvedt summarizes it as there are two Norwegian traditions about Charles John. One is represented by Yngvar Nielsen and Wilhelm Keilhau who saw him as a representative of the French Revolution; the second is represented by Ernst Sars, Sverre Steen & the political actors of the time who saw him as yet another Swedish monarch with delusions of grandeur.⁷

⁶ Koht 1936: ss. 211-212.

⁷ Kaartvedt 1964: ss. 241-266.