

Otto Nordenskjöld: ethnographer

by **Christer Lindberg**

Prologue: Dreamtime

Dream! Make your journey in dreams to the far corners of the world. The globe is great and all facets of life are strange and wonderful. Less than a year before his tragic death (06/02/1928), Otto Nordenskjöld encouraged young readers to “meet” foreign countries and peoples. Together with ethnographer Gunnar Landtman he compiled, in three volumes, a global survey in text and photographs (Nordenskjöld & Landtman 1927-1929). He did never see the last volume in print.

Most of Nordenskjöld’s own dreams of exploration had been fulfilled, perhaps with the exception of a Second Swedish South Polar Expedition. That project was initiated in 1913 with the formation of the Swedish Antarctic Committee and held regular meetings for five consecutive years. Plans for a joint venture with British scientists were outlined as well. The work was in vain, however. On September 10, 1919, the chairman announced the termination of the project. The World War had made such an endeavor impossible for practical, as well as financial, reasons (KVA: MS K.27). Disappointed for sure, Nordenskjöld instead begun preparations for his second expedition to South America.

The early years

Many young boys – among them Sven Hedin and Otto Nordenskjöld – were deeply affected by the triumphic return of *Vega*. Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld’s circumnavigation of Europe and Asia made him considered one of the greatest arctic explorers. His expedition had left the harbor of Karlskrona in June 1878 and reached the mouth of the Lena in the end of August. The *Vega* was

frozen in near the entrance to Kolyuchinskaya Bay on the Chukehi Peninsula from September 1878 to mid-July 1879. Freed from the ice the vessel reached St. Lawrence Bay on July 20, thus becoming the first ship to navigate the Northeast Passage. *Vega* returned home by way of Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Suez Canal, arriving in Stockholm on the 24th of April 1880.

Nordenskiöld's successful journey was a national triumph. Sweden was once more competing with the great nations England, Germany, and France – this time not in war, but in the peaceful name of science. Adolf Nordenskiöld break ways for further Polar exploration and set standard for scientific expeditions into unknown territories. He did also promote an interest for museum collecting. His earlier journeys to Greenland had secured substantial collections, and during the *Vega*-expedition he collected Eskimo artifacts at Port Clarence, Alaska. “The Nordenskiöld collection is sufficiently varied so that the items of material culture can be described and discussed within the following use categories: sea and land hunting, fishing, tools and manufactures, household equipment, clothing, travel and transportation, ceremonial equipment, personal adornment, tobacco complex, toys and games, and raw materials” (VanStone 1990:4).

Otto Nordenskiöld was ten at the time of his famous uncle's return. From that date his mind was set upon exploration of the unknown parts of the world (Munthe 1929:305). In a brief autobiographical sketch (KVA: Ms K.27), he remembered from his schooldays a great interest in travel narratives and maps. Otherwise, his strong topics were in natural science and in 1886 he enlisted at Uppsala University for studies in chemistry, geology, mineralogy, and mathematics. Influenced by lectures of Professor Hildebrandsson, he took a keen interest in geography as well, although it was not recognized as a natural science subject. Eventually he formed a geographical society in Uppsala (KVA: Ms K.27).

Completing his undergraduate studies at Uppsala University in 1889, Nordenskiöld pursued further studies in mineralogy and geology. In 1892 he left Sweden for a tour in England and Scotland. His Ph.D. was completed two years later after studies in Uppsala and Greifswald, Germany. Most part of the year after was spent in Paris for postdoctoral studies at *Musei d'histoire naturelle* (Munthe 1929). Back in Sweden, he often courted his uncle for advice and support for forthcoming expeditions. By this time he also provided numerous articles, including biographical entries of famous Polar explorers, for the national encyclopedia called the *Nordisk familjebok* (KB: R.36).

The Swedish Expedition to the Magellan Strait, 1895-1897

In 1895 – at the age of twenty-five – Nils Otto Gustaf Nordenskjöld of Sjögelö manor in Hässelby faced the challenge of his young life. Accompanied by engineer Per Dusén and Dr. Axel Ohlin, he embarked for the southernmost part of South America – Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Economical support came from Baron Oscar Dickson who always encouraged and promoted geographical exploration (Nordenskjöld 1907:3). Money also came from a grant by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and private donations by relatives (Nordenskjöld 1894:203-204). The main object of the expedition was to gain a deeper knowledge of the region's physical geography which would provide interesting comparisons with the Nordic countries.

The group made Punto Arenas base for excursions to the mouth of Rio Grande, Paramo, Lake Fagnano, and »Ultima Esperanza» (Last hope inlet). It was Indian country and Nordenskjöld encountered the Ona and Yaghan tribes. "I will never forget that Christmas eve then I made first contact with the natives. "They were almost nude in the cold weather!" The meeting occurred at a place going by the proud name »El Porvenir» – the future – which in fact it was just a poor assemblage of simple huts" (RA: Vol. 25). Further contact with the Yaghans gave him a "strong impression" of their mental capacity: "...they were not an unintelligent people." Their material culture was indeed simple, but "...this country is too harsh and poor to give them means and impulses for a richer life" (RA: Vol. 25; KB: Autografsamlingen). He wondered "what they might have achieved under more favorable circumstances?" (RA: Vol. 25).

Nordenskjöld made some ethnographical collecting for the Natural History Museum. It followed the usual selective principles of the time and the accompanied artifact descriptions were brief. In addition, he compiled a minor Ona vocabulary for publication in *Actes de la Société Scientifique du Chile* (Nordenskjöld 1897). By sponsor's demand, and almost certain without native consent, a number of skulls together with bones from three Ona's and two Yaghan's were brought to Sweden for examination by J. Vilhelm Hultkrantz (see "Zur osteologie der Ona und Yaghan-indianer der Feuerlandes" in Nordenskjöld's *Wissenschaftliche ergebnisse der schwedischen expedition nach den Magellansländern 1895-1897*).

Although Nordenskjöld gave a rather detailed description of the little known tribes, his accounts have been more or less ignored by South American specialists. Neither Julian Stewards' *Handbook of the South American Indians* (1945), with entries by John M. Cooper, nor Lucas Bridges' *Uttermost Part of the Earth* (1949) has references to his reports. By chance, however, Nordenskjöld's first field trip made a great contribution to South American ethnography. In a

cave at Puerto Consuelos (Ultima Esperanza) he found the remains of a prehistoric mammal supposed to be a *Neomylodon*. A couple of years later his cousin Erland Nordenskiöld – youngest son of Adolf Erik – organized an expedition to South America for further investigation. To make a long story short: Experiencing Indian life and culture, he soon shifted from zoology to anthropology making five more expeditions to Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Panama between 1901 and 1927. By his death in 1932, Erland Nordenskiöld was considered to be among the foremost experts on South American Indians in the world (Lindberg 1996).

For Otto Nordenskiöld himself the adventure gave two major impulses. He had been visiting the southernmost habitat of man and he was determined to push further south, to reveal the secrets of the Antarctic. Another thought that stuck to his mind were the revealing of ongoing encroachment on the Indians. He was shocked by seeing and learning how settlers, farmers and prospectors pushed away, and even hunted the Indians like wild animals (GEM B.24035). Two decades later, the Indians of Tierra del Fuego were gone as a result of systematic genocide.

Waiting for Antarctic challenges

Introducing his scientific report from the Swedish expedition to the Magellan Strait in 1895-97, Otto Nordenskiöld (1907:1) wrote: “At a time when the eyes of the whole geographical world were turned toward that portion of the earth, it seemed only fitting that Sweden’s sons and explorers, who have had so important and extensive a share in opening up the north polar territories, should be prepared to participate in similar labors in the south...” An expedition to the Antarctic Peninsula has been on his mind since the early 1890s, at the time of his doctorate studies in Uppsala. His goal was to explore the Antarctic environment from a modern geographical perspective (KVA: K.27). He was impatient: “I do not want to lose a single day in realizing my plans,” he wrote in an unpublished manuscript (RA: Vol. 25). Waiting for the opportunity to go south, Nordenskiöld traveled north, to Alaska and Yukon Territory in 1898 and to East-Greenland two years later.

It seems like restlessness and the spirit for adventure made him go to Alaska. No research was conducted, neither any collecting of ethnographical artifacts with the exception of some Haida and Bella Coola artifacts purchased in Vancouver. They were immediately donated to the

Natural History Museum (FEM: Nordenskjöld to Cederblom, 03/02/1899). The participating in the Danish Andrup's Expedition to East-Greenland in 1900 resulted in considerable collections of petrographic material from a number of interesting rocks (Nordenskjöld 1908:153). As with the Swedish expeditions, Denmark regarded it as a national commitment to explore unknown territories. The "civilized world" should learn about "primitive man, flora and fauna, and everything else that hitherto has been unknown." Denmark, according to the official declaration of the expedition, "...has a peaceful conquest to fulfill" (RA: Vol. 34). A substantial amount of money was available and the original expedition plan was scheduled for two and a half year in the field.

Nordenskjöld wrote a couple of reports about Greenland, including "Contributions to the geology and physical geography of East Greenland" and "On the Geology and Physical Geography of East Greenland". He did not do any official ethnographical observations – it was a task reserved for commander Andrup (RA: Vol. 34). Yet he went home with notes that would enable him to held public lectures on a wide range of topics pertaining to the Eskimo way of life. He regarded the Eskimo culture as one that had adapted to the natural surroundings in "a most wonderful way". No other small group of people in the world could match their achieving, both in terms of adaptation and in material inventions. Their culture was rich in myths and songs, displayed an extreme tolerance for human individuality and was yet able to retain a strong solidarity within the group. The colonial contact had provided new possibilities for the development of their artistic achievements, in the art of painting as well as sculpture (Nordenskjöld 1914:36-39). Merchants and priest contributed to the improvement of Eskimo life by building schools and churches. The colonial rule of Denmark met his fully approval with the exception of political attempts to control Greenland's trade and economy (RA: Vol. 34; Nordenskjöld 1914:42-44). It is quite obvious that Nordenskjöld's Christian conviction affected his views on native peoples and Western colonization.

Nordenskjöld made excursions to Iceland and Spitsbergen, 1904 and 1906 respectively, before going back to Greenland in 1909. Before of all of this, however, he would make the dramatic journey on the steam barque *Antarctic*.

Years of tranquility

With his public lecture “Two Years Amongst Ice of the South Pole”, Nordenskjöld faced large audiences in the United States. He toured Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Illinois in 1906 (RA: Vol. 26). At home he eventually moved to Gothenburg after securing a position at the University. He founded a geographical society in Gothenburg as well, and held regularly public lectures in geography and anthropology. He spent much time in archives and libraries, making research for *Kolonisation och naturfolken* (1914). The World War raged and in this work Nordenskjöld treated the struggle and competition – the *wars* – between man and nature, between individuals and groups, and between ethnic groups and races (Nordenskjöld 1914:2-3). He told his readers that he did not have the highest opinion of our Western civilization. Those who preached brotherhood and purity did not live by their words. On the other hand many indigenous peoples were cruel as well, practicing human sacrifice, slavery and sorcery (ibid:31). He put a moral emphasize on colonial rule – those nations who ruled the colonies had the obligation to let the profits gain mankind. If the natives could be turned to good and educated workers without the destruction of their own independent agriculture, then colonization has indeed been successful (ibid:145).

The turbulent years of war affected Sweden indirectly by starvation, epidemics and political instability. For the Nordenskjölds and Nordenskiölds the situation in Finland was of great concern. Science was suffering as well with all international contacts broken. Thus, the years of war became the years of silence, writing and waiting for Otto Nordenskjöld. He was deeply involved in the Swedish Antarctic Committee, but it was just talks and meetings about plans for a second Polar expedition. Nothing could be realized before the end of the war.

Finally the war ended, but so did also the dream of a *Antarctic II*. Encouraged by Erland Nordenskiöld, who was curator for the ethnographical museum in Gothenburg, Otto instead made plans for a second to South America. In his memo dated 27th of August 1919, Nordenskjöld presented South America as one of the most important field for scientific research. “The tasks to be performed in South America are bigger and more important than ever,” he declared. He embraced ethnography, archaeology, geology, zoology and botany in his research plan (RA: Vol. 26). He added that major industrial companies of Sweden, including SKF, should look towards Peru and Bolivia where a rapid economical development could be expected in the near future (RA: Vol. 26).

Nordenskjöld's anthropogeography

The ethnographical observations from the Indian tribes of South America can be found in two of Nordenskjöld's publications: *Från Eldslandet* (1898) and *Människor och natur i Sydamerika* (1923). He rewrote most of the latter for the German edition – *Südamerika: ein zukunftsland der menschheit* (1927) – but the section pertaining to the Indian peoples was left intact with the exception of added references to leading German anthropologists Koppers and Gusinde. Additional material can be found at the Riksarkivet (National Archives), mostly notes and manuscripts for public lectures and radio. The archive also hold a great number of photographs taken during the second South American expedition 1920-21.

Major geological and ethnographical collections were brought from Peru and Chile to Sweden. The ethnographical records were concentrated to Campa Indians of Peru and accompanied by material collection of fifty-nine items (GEM 1921.10.96-154). In addition, Nordenskjöld collected from the Cajamarquilla of Peru and Araukan Indians of Chile (GEM 1921.10.155-181 and 1921.10.68-95). A small collection of Nazca ceramics did also reach Gothenburg (GEM 1921.10.1-8). Archaeology and anthropology were viewed as two separate sciences, but within the Americanist field they both dealt with the same problem. History reconstructed the prehistoric epoch as a sequence of events and anthropology, complemented by archaeology traced this sequence of events based upon its consequences. Archaeology's potential lies in its capacity to disseminate understanding for those cultural changes which took place in pre-Columbian times via a systematic collection of descriptive data, and is able to organize all of this into chronological sequences. In the opposite direction ethnographical material could provide the basis for interpretation of archaeological artifacts.

Theoretically, Nordenskjöld belonged to the evolutionary paradigm. Despite distinctive characteristics, classical evolutionist theories were founded upon a series of related suppositions that make it possible from an historiographic perspective to view them as a paradigm. The point of departure was that socio-cultural phenomena were guided by laws which science could discover and that these laws operated in the same way in the present as they did in a distant past. The relation between the past and the present is constituted in a change which leads from the simple to the complex. Human nature is uniform and the power of development rests within the interaction of nature with the external surroundings. The cumulative result of this interaction is manifest in the levels of development of various ethnic groups and it is therefore possible to rank them hierarchically. Humanity's evolution could be divided into different stages and there existed

societies that still found themselves at stages through which civilized ethnic groups had passed; for want of data, the earlier developmental stages of civilization could be reconstructed through comparisons with such societies. Via this comparative method it is possible, with the assistance of these remnants, to determine the character of the lower developmental stages.

Geography was a further important complement. Nature forced a series of changes upon culture which could be traced through specific historical sequences of adaptation. The environment was primarily a limiting factor, but that did not exclude the possibility that the environment could also function as a cultural generator in the shape of new inventions. The combination of geography and anthropology, primarily represented by Friedrich Ratzel, was designated anthropogeography. Ratzel emphasized the interaction between man and nature and the topographic and climatic influences upon cultural forms. If we are to label the ethnography of Nordenskjöld, Ratzel's anthropogeography comes closest. My aim, Nordenskjöld stated, has been to follow the holistic geographical idea, i.e. to demonstrate the interrelation between culture, human life and nature (Nordenskjöld 1923:2). He never considered himself as working in the field of anthropology. Thus, Nordenskjöld the ethnographer was in fact Nordenskjöld the geographer. Nevertheless, he contributed greatly to the formation of Swedish anthropology by fieldwork, artifact collecting, and public lectures.

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