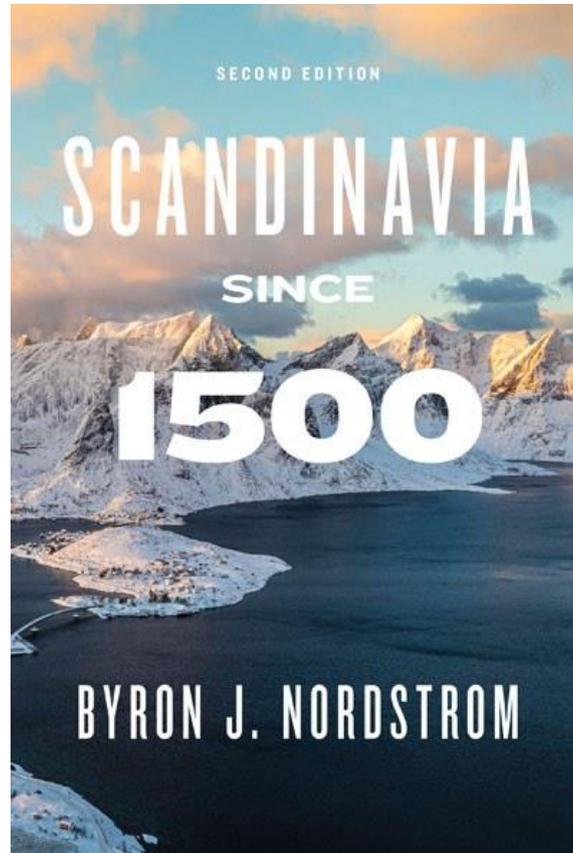


FROM REFORMATION TO THE WELFARE STATE



NORDSTROM, Byron J. *Scandinavia since 1500*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2nd edition, 2022.

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The University of Minnesota Press has a long history of publications that introduces the readers to a variety of topics concerning Scandinavian Histories, Folklore, religion or even the relationship between the Nordic countries and their immigration movements towards Midwest America, especially the state of Minnesota. This is verifiable if one delves into the list of books printed from the 1990s to today, such as *Medieval Scandinavia*, *The History of Iceland*, *A History of the Swedish People* (vols. 1 – 2), *The Promise of America*, *Swedish-American Borderlands*,

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Landscape of Desire or *Nordic Landscapes*. In that sense, the second edition of Professor Nordstrom's *Scandinavia since 1500* is another addition to such editorial line that presents to its audience the outlines of Nordic history from the Early Modern period to contemporary events in the 2020s.

Professor Nordstrom presents a difficult task: to summarize five centuries of history from a “conceptual region” (ix) that he calls Scandinavia. One must agree on how hard it is to provide accurate accounts from topics that varied from the Protestant Reformations to the Napoleonic wars and the rise of the welfare state. In other words, it may seem unreasonable to present a narrative that encompasses the *Carta Marina*, the rise of nationalism in the XIX century, the establishment of companies such as Volvo, the developments of Nordic literature and cinema, Ikea or the importance of Carlsberg Brewery founded in the late 1800s. But it is not.

Nordstrom covers these and other significant topics stating, from the beginning, that the book “is a very traditional history” specially in the sense that its structure follows the politics and international relations that concern Scandinavia. Although this is the main structure, the author describes different aspects of social, economic and cultural developments that occurred in the territories that compose Scandinavia or, used interchangeably by Nordstrom, *Norden*.

In fact, the question of interchangeability of Scandinavia and *Norden* appears briefly in a section that resembles a footnote or a glossary. Nordstrom discusses the origin of both words, and which one is used more often in different parts of the globe; Scandinavia being commonly used in the United States and *Norden* in Europe and the countries – Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Norway and Greenland – that geopolitically compose the concept. This is a complex conceptual history, a topic that has been under scrutiny in more recent publications (such as) but, for the sake of general description, this is not present for the reader.

In a sense, this is the general tone of the book: Nordstrom describes and narrates the general movements more than analyzes specific questions that resembles instructive and inspirational lectures for those who are interested in Scandinavian History. As an example, concepts such as “country”, “state” and “kingdom” are used – just as Scandinavia and Norden

– interchangeably, even though, from the political history perspective, they mean (or were used) in different contexts and periods. Again, this is not necessarily a demerit, since the objective of the book is to present the general movements that took place in Norden's territory.

Nordstrom starts his account with a description of the period that precedes the Early Modern. From the first records of human activity in Scandinavia to the Middle Ages, the author prefers to stress the continuities that “were in place [such as] political units (and their international problems and rivalries), social hierarchies, rural and urban economies, religious base [and] cultural heritages” (p. 16) that were the foundations for the emergence of the Early Modernity.

Early Modernity – also a concept that does not go into much scrutiny – comprises, in fact, the gross of the chapters. Seven chapters deal with the period from 1500 to 1800 and the main threads in historiographical accounts of Scandinavia. The “main characters” of such political history are Denmark and Sweden. For the most part of the book, these two territories are the central objects of the narrative: from the dissolution of the Kalmar Union to the intensified rivalry between the two crowns concerning the *Öresund* and the continuity of animosities until the middle of the nineteenth century, Denmark and Sweden were the dominant forces in the Early Modern period, controlling the peripheral territories of Iceland, Norway, Greenland, Faroe Islands, Finland and *Sápmi*.

These territories, in fact, are detailed in chapter 7 “On the periphery” and Nordstrom stresses the importance of qualifying this concept. What he proposes is that the “peripheral” status does not mean a place without history, but that they were, in fact, important for the formation of the Nordic context. Nordstrom also writes that “the peoples and resources of all these areas were exploited”, but advocates for the necessity of “careful scrutiny, and [...] other possible interpretations” (p. 141). Although the word “colonization” is rarely used to describe these movements, Nordstrom in another footnote/glossary discusses the Sámi peoples and their relationship with Norway, Sweden and Finland. This is interesting because he points to the asymmetrical tone that has guided these contacts that date from the Bronze Age and have only recently become topic of analysis such as the recent book *From Lapland to Sápmi* – also published by the University of Minnesota Press.

Nordstrom also points to the revolts that occurred in Norway until the last four decades of the eighteenth century – both in urban and rural settings – that were the platform for the common people to stress their “anger over social and economic privileges” (p. 157). Iceland also shares a part on these movements specially because Denmark held the monopoly of trade with that island and, by 1800, shrank the judicial prerogatives of one of the most important Icelandic institutions: the *Althing*. As a part of the Danish kingdom, the educated elites of Iceland were educated in Copenhagen and ended up being important for the development of the island.

From the beginnings of centralized states – which Nordstrom very accurately states the exaggeration of many historians that make on how efficiently governed and rationalized these political entities were – to the dawn of the bourgeois revolution of eighteenth-century, the Nordic territories were recasted and redefined even though “life probably did not change very much” (p. 189). From the emergence of Sweden as a great power until the remotion of a king and replacement with a French marshal, the monarchies of Scandinavia experienced a change in government: it was the end of Absolutism and the introduction of Constitutions that ended up defining the region for the next century.

One of the most compelling chapters of the book is Nordstrom’s account of the nationalistic movements that erupted in *Norden* during the nineteenth-century. The main question is how the nation became a pivotal idea in those societies, deriving from early centuries where the call for support was to a monarch rather than a state. Then, Nordstrom describes how culture was an important framework to define the national identities. The best examples stem from History, Art, Literature, Poetry, Folklore and Philosophy.

In that sense, language became an important concern, and the author describes different personalities either in Denmark, Iceland, Finland or Sweden that dedicated their lives to the study and advancement of Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Faroese and Finnish. Elias Lönnrot (1802 – 1884), for example, was responsible for the emergence of the Finnish national mythology after he published the *Kalevala*: a collection of songs and poems from the locals in eastern Karelia.

Another Swedish example is the establishment of associations (singular swe.: *förening*) and the *Historisk Tidskrift* (1881) dedicated to the study of the emergence of the Swedish state and its period of greatness. Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783 – 1847) and Harald Hjärne (1848 – 1922) laid the foundation for the bedrock in Swedish – and Nordic – historiography: the concentration of accounts that were integral to the nurture of national identities, focusing on the collection and display of objects and emphasizing “their own people and uniqueness” (p. 197).

The last part of the chapter deals with political nationalism, and Nordstrom charts the movements that contributed to domestic and international turmoil and the territorial changes that followed that. The Finnish wars of independence is such an example followed by their own discussion of which political system was to be implemented. From that perspective, Finland becomes an alternate example since it is the first republic in *Norden* almost since its inception. The second would be Iceland, but only in the mid-1940s, after a movement that started in 1918 that declared the island a sovereign state in personal union with Denmark.

The “road” to political democracy – in the words of Nordstrom – was the tonic during the late 1800s and beginnings of 1900s. Deriving sovereignty from the *people* and not the *crown*, these debates and movements in Nordic societies were the bedrock for new constitutions that became synonymous with “liberty”, “universal suffrage” and “democratic institutions”. Although sometimes Nordstrom portrays this path as the *only possibility*, he is far from being naïve, after all, “elites were replaced by new ones based mainly on wealth” (p. 218). Following that argument, what Nordstrom shows is how this new order was mainly sustained because of compromise or consensus from the political forces that emerged in the period.

Nordstrom deals with the changes in economy and society that took place in the turn to the 1900s and the substantial growth attributed to “peace, vaccines, and potatoes” (p. 235) is contrasted with two migration patterns: the first was the redistribution of people *within* the region, mainly from countryside to towns or other rural areas with opportunities. The second was the emigration, especially to North America, of 3 million Scandinavians. The author points to socio-economic and religious reasons that shaped the strategies of taking roots abroad. For the most part, these communities remained “ethnic” and constructed their

identity in the establishment of churches, schools, colleges, hospitals and other institutions – such as the Norwegian-American Historical Association (1925) or the Swedish-American Historical Society (1948) – that endorsed their culture and its advancement.

Even some of the national heroes and mythologies were celebrated in North America, becoming a part of these *in-between* identity. Some examples are the dubious evidence of Viking presence in the middle of North America, or the consumption of foods that no longer were staples in Scandinavia (p. 241). Gustavus Adolphus – the warrior-king of seventeenth century Sweden – became the name of a private university founded in Minnesota, a place where Nordic ancestry became a synonym; stamped even in their proud football team *Minnesota Vikings*.

Nordstrom delineates other crucial changes in those societies, especially the emergence of a working class, but also of the feminist organizations that started as early as the mid-1800s. The author offers two bases for that: the redefinition of the place of women in society, but also a part of the political democratization that began at the same time. With these two examples, Nordstrom seeks to confirm that historical changes became the tone in that Era where industrial expansion, resource exploration and sociopolitical “movements generated greater impacts than at any earlier time” (p. 261).

The last part of the book deals with “the twentieth century and beyond” (pp. 265 – 387). Here the *welfare state* – a concept often understood as synonymous for Scandinavia – becomes a central character of the narrative, especially as the culmination of each country’s own political, economic and social path. But, before delving into that, Nordstrom sets the tone for the beginning of the century, when the threat of a communist-inspired revolution passed quickly. The answers for that lie on different developments such as political reformism based on moderate agendas, material improvements – including lifestyle – the political culture that permeated Norden from the end of the 1800s. It is also interesting that the author supports the idea that the Nordic democratic path was paved by “peaceful histories”, even when confronted with evidence that “the government willingness to use force to quell disorder” (p. 276).

In that sense, far from being “ready” for a *welfare state*, what Nordstrom describes is a society that had trouble trusting their economic system during the interwar years. For a period, the anti-communist sentiment and political instability were the main traits, being substituted by moderate socialist coalitions that emphasized the unity of the nation. Although this is true – as the author uses several examples from different countries – it is possible to grasp the controversies of such societies as consensus became difficult and, as elsewhere in Europe, “radical right-wing groups appeared” (p. 287). Nordstrom does a great job addressing the question of collaboration in all Nordic territories, but especially Sweden.

Chapter 13 focuses on the problem of not having a defined *the enemy*. The author describes the specific struggles that Finland underwent as they fought three wars; but also, how Denmark resisted after its surrender in 1940 until 1945 not without notes on the problems of the collaborators. As in the case of Iceland, Nordstrom briefly describes the movement that led to the political independence of the island in 1944 in parallel with the Faroese discussions for autonomy.

In the last chapter – the Era since 1945 – Nordstrom emphasizes the uncertainties in political developments that started to permeate these societies present in all Western countries. In a sense, what emerges is the long-debated question of Norden as “paradise” or a region in crisis. The author alludes to three main issues: the different migration patterns since the 1990s – and how they changed the composition of all Nordic societies –; climate change and environmental degradation; and, lastly, the shift in security policies after recent Russian actions in Europe. Topics such as culture and other developments are also present, but more descriptive than analytical.

The author does not answer all these questions. It is, in fact, impossible to do so. Nevertheless, Nordstrom opens a path to discuss exactly how Norden will face the issues that were relegated when “the people (...) enjoyed the benefits, public or private, of their postwar prosperity with little regard for the future of the limits of resources, the exploitation of developing world’s labor (...) or environmental issues” (p. 387).

In general, it is a well-written piece and a great addition to all who are interested in Scandinavia. The book, a great source of inspiration for new research into Nordic History,

presents useful bibliography in English, that serves as introduction to robust discussions delegated only to the Nordic languages. As every concise narrative, some aspects are faded, but Nordstrom, after all, recollects the main threads and movements that help explain Early Modern and Contemporary History of such region.

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