

THE FIRST SWEDISH SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO AUSTRALIA 1910–1911

The First Swedish Scientific Expedition To Australia of 1910-11 is known to only a few Australians and in most cases to scientists – botanists, zoologists and ornithologists – rather than to historians or anthropologists. While the expedition leader Eric Mjöberg's book *Bland vilda djur och folk I Australien*, had been published in 1915 it generally remained unread on library shelves in Australia. Mjöberg's paper on the "Phallus Cult" in the northwest was published in German and has been referenced by several writers dealing with the topic of phallic stones and other objects in Australia. Expedition ornithologist, Rudolf Söderberg and a number of other scientists did publish a number of the 32 monographs, the official results of the expedition, in English, which explains the wider appreciation of the expedition's endeavours among the scientific fraternity.

My Kimberley Society presentation, kindly delivered by Kevin Kenneally on 7 May 2014, attempts to show the potential for further research into the contribution made by the journals and papers maintained or created by four expedition members, Eric Mjöberg, Rudolf Söderberg, Yngve Laurell (Ethnologist) and Cyrus Videll (Museum Preparator) into a wider understanding of life on the Kimberley frontier in 1910-11.

But first a brief history of how these documents came to my attention.

The expedition documents surfaced in 2004 when I was in Sweden working with Claes Halgren on the repatriation of human remains illegally collected by Mjöberg and Laurell. I found one notebook by Laurell (by chance) in the library of the Ethnographic Museum.

Other journals by Söderberg, Videll and Laurell were made available by the Söderberg family who made contact with Claes and me while in Sweden. There were also copies of a number of newspaper cuttings, and articles written by Söderberg that appeared in a number of magazines (not scientific journals). Söderberg wrote formal papers on Australian birds and became regarded as an expert on bowerbird playground construction etc.

The Ethnographic Museum and the Söderberg family held copies of many photographs.

The Mjöberg papers and photographs were later located by Swedish diplomat Rolf Ericsson at the Californian Academy of Sciences where they had been bequeathed by a benefactor who evidently had purchased them in a Sheriff's Sale after they had been confiscated (for reasons unknown) while Mjöberg was visiting the USA.

The Californian Collection included draft manuscripts, copies of published papers and photographs, as well as journals and daybooks from Mjöberg's trips to the Kimberley and later to northern and northeastern Queensland (1912-1913).

Finding the photos and the journals of Söderberg, Laurell and Videll drove home to me how little we knew of the expedition and I pursued the idea of getting as much as possible translated and out into a general arena. I sought and obtained permission from all holders of material to get copies into Australian Institutions.

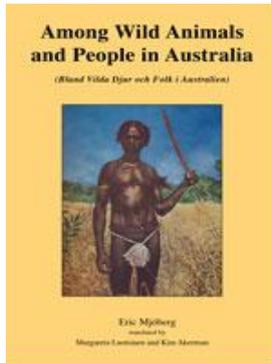
Since 2004 I have, with several Swedish colleagues worked on translating not only the journals that have been located, but also any Swedish newspaper cuttings I have been able to locate, papers from journals and magazines and also draft manuscripts left – particularly by Mjöberg, Söderberg and Laurell. While dealing with printed material was not really a problem, translating the handwritten documents was a different issue. These were often written in an abbreviated fashion with many scientific terms, taxonomic references etc., written in shorthand. In many cases the translators and I had to seek out reference works from the period to determine the animals and plants being referred to in the journals.

I also believe there must still be some journals missing – Laurell's notes for instance are really scatty and I would hope that somewhere he has left a better, fuller record – we can only hope if there is it will come to light.

To understand the social side of interaction between the Swedish expedition members and the Australians – indigenous and non-indigenous – I have compiled a list of peoples identified at the various stations, settlements and missions visited by them. Many people

have assisted me in either identifying or supplementing limited information on some of these folk. Invaluable assistance has been given in particular, by Mr Peter Conole, Dr John Norman and Mr Sam Lovell – all of who would be familiar to the membership of the Kimberley Society.

As well as the written records there are at least a hundred photographs detailing life at Mowla Downs (Mowla Bluff) on the desert fringe, Mount Barnett, in the central Kimberley and at Sunday Island. A real regret is that I did not have access to these images in the 1970s when I am sure many of the people whose images appear in the photographs could have been identified with great precision. As it is copies of these images have been returned to communities or are held on their behalf at the Kimberley Land Council.



In 2012 Hesperian Press published *Among Wild Animals and People in Australia*, a translation of Mjöberg's *Bland vilda djur och folk i Australien*. Other scholars are now preparing a translation of Mjöberg's other book *Bland stenåldersmänniskor i Queenslands vildmarker* – a popular account about his subsequent travels in Australia undertaken in 1912-1913. This will be released by Hesperian Press as 'Among people of the stone age in the wilds of Queensland', this year.

See [here](#) for a book note on *Among Wild Animals and People in Australia*.

It is hoped to have copies of the journals and the other translated documents placed in both State and federal institutions for the use of scholars in the next year or so. In the meantime there are many queries that I, and my colleagues, would like to have answered – In particular – Who was the Mr Richardson, of Cherabun Station who guided Eric Mjöberg through the St George Ranges?

I believe the value of these records lies in the fact that they are produced by non-English speaking Europeans, who are scientists of repute, and experts in their various fields. How they perceive the Australian frontier reveals perhaps a broader perspective than would have been achieved by English-speaking observers with closer ties to the people that they generally encountered.

I thank the Kimberley Society for the opportunity to present this brief report on the First Swedish Scientific Expedition To Australia of 1910-11 and again express my appreciation to Kevin Kenneally for delivering it at such short notice.

Kim Akerman

Works referred to in the text:

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