

SELTA: The First 25 Years, 1981-2006

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As an independent association of translators working from a single source language, the Swedish-English Literary Translators Association has always been a rare beast. There are a few similar groupings within larger, more broad-based societies: for example, in Sweden itself there is an English-language sub-group of the Swedish organisation Sveriges Facköversättarförening (SFÖ); in Britain the Institute of Translation & Interpreting (ITI) has various two-way specific-language sub-groups; and of course most translators' associations are effectively single target language in orientation. In recent years SELTA has encouraged translators from Swedish in the USA to form their own independent organisation, STiNA (Swedish Translators in North America), which was inaugurated in 2004, but with that exception we are not aware of any other associations of translators from a single language. Few would have thought that within a short period such a small and unique group of amateurs and professionals would be publishing a literary magazine, nor that by the end of SELTA's quarter-century this journal would be the respected and cited source of views and information it has become.

The original impulse for SELTA came not from translators themselves, but from two successive Swedish cultural attachés in Britain, and SELTA's continuing existence has owed much to the Swedish Embassy in London, to a sequence of supportive cultural attachés and counsellors and their office staff (not least Barbro Edwards for some 15 years), as well as to the support and encouragement of the Swedish Institute and Swedish Arts Council in Stockholm. In 1978, at the instigation of cultural attaché Ove Svensson and the Swedish Institute, a two-day conference of 30 participants from Britain and Sweden, including 18 translators and 5 publishers, was held at University College London. The intention was in part to discuss Swedish financial support for translations as well as the overall situation. The conference gave rise to summary articles in the Swedish book trade journal *Svensk bokhandel* and in the national daily *Svenska Dagbladet*.

The next cultural attaché in London, Terry Carlbom, arranged a one-day translators' conference in conjunction with the biennial Conference of Teachers of Scandinavian Studies in Great Britain at the University of Hull in April 1981. The speakers and discussion related almost entirely to Swedish, though it had been hoped that the programme would expand into pan-Scandinavian participation and topics. (That objective was actually realised at the next conference of university teachers, held at the University of Surrey, Guildford, in 1983, where a Scandinavian Translators Day was appended.) In August 1981 a group of British and American translators who had attended a colloquium in Mariefred organised by the Swedish Institute signed a joint declaration confirming the existence of the 'Swedish-English Translation Conference'. It was under this title that Terry Carlbom convened a seminar in London on Friday 13th November 1981 attended by six translators from Britain, one from the USA, some British and Swedish publishers, and a representative of the Swedish Arts Council, to air the views of all four groups. It augured well: the following morning five British and one American translator reconvened at the Swedish Embassy and agreed that the former would set themselves up as a steering

committee of a newly christened Swedish-English Literary Translators Association (SELTA) in Britain, and the latter, Thomas Teal, who in fact proposed the name, as a euphonious acronym, would explore the possibility of forming a sister organisation in the USA (an aspiration only achieved by other hands some 23 years later). From the outset it was decided to have two categories of SELTA membership: full (for those with published book-length or drama translations) and associate (for those with shorter translations published or a serious interest in becoming a translator). The intention was to maintain credibility as a professional association while at the same time encouraging new translators. The founder members were Patricia Crampton, Tom Geddes, Mary Sandbach, Joan Tate and Laurie Thompson.

The first annual general meeting was held in April 1982, with a membership by then standing at 9 full and 3 associate members. Officers and committee were appointed and discussion ranged over the Swedish, Finnish and Dutch translation subsidy schemes, the Swedish Translators Centre in Stockholm (Översättarcentrum), membership and publicity, and the creation of a book report scheme whereby SELTA members would write brief reports on Swedish books for distribution to selected publishers. From then on, meetings have been held once or twice a year; by 2006 there had been 39 meetings, all but one held in London, mostly at the Swedish Embassy, though twice in hotel conference suites, three times at University College London, once each at the School of Slavonic & East European Studies of the University of London, the Poetry Society, the Finnish Ambassador's residence, the library of the Swedish Church in London, and, in conjunction with the Conference of Teachers of Scandinavian Studies, at Lampeter, where it followed the Scandinavian Translators Day, itself by then an established adjunct to the sequence of biennial Scandinavianists' conferences held in rotation at various British universities.

By the end of 1982 SELTA membership had increased to 31 (13 full and 18 associate); in 1983 it was 42, by 1985 48 (20 full and 28 associate); it soon reached 50 and numbers have remained close to that figure ever since. Membership has been open to translators from Swedish wherever resident, with the exception of North America, both to keep membership within manageable numbers for its honorary officers and because the publishing scene in the USA was felt to be rather different from that in Britain. For similar reasons, SELTA has remained focused on Swedish and Finland-Swedish literature: to have become a Scandinavian translators' association would have imposed too great a burden on SELTA's secretary, not only in terms of member numbers but also in dealing with five disparate Nordic countries; even now, with Internet communication, a broader spread of work among its committee and officers, and with the best intentions all round, the difficulties of co-ordinating and liaising with five countries render such expansion rather impractical.

SELTA's book report scheme, conceived in advance of the first AGM, was of only limited success. From 1982 to 1996 members wrote 434 reports, restricting them to a single page in order not to undermine the paid commissioning of reports by publishers; 171 of them were written by the indefatigable Joan Tate, SELTA's first chair and most prolific of translators. A number of Swedish-language publishers supported the project by supplying their new books, which were then offered to members in SELTA's regular newsletter. Reports were distributed to about 20 British publishers. We have no evidence of their precise effect, though Swedish publishers remained positive about the role of both SELTA and its reports in raising awareness

of Swedish literature in Britain, and used some of the reports in their own promotional activities. In a few instances publishers actively requested reports. We continued the scheme even after the advent of *Swedish Book Review* in 1983, but once that was established, we discontinued sending them to British publishers in 1985, instead passing a copy of each to the original publishers for use at their discretion, and publishing a selection in *Swedish Book Review* alongside reviews, until the distinction was dropped and the scheme phased out in 1996. But it certainly increased the numbers of books read and reviewed, and doubtless brought many people into reviewing who might not otherwise have ventured there.

Although SELTA has always tried actively to spread information on Swedish translation matters to other interested parties beyond its own membership, at least until the advent of its website, the breakthrough into wider effectiveness came with *Swedish Book Review*, which began life as *Swedish Books*, published in Gothenburg from 1979 to 1982 by Jeremy Franks, edited by himself and Jan Ring. Doubting its financial viability, despite support from Sweden, he offered the title to SELTA. The committee decided to take it on under the editorship of Laurie Thompson, then about to move as lecturer in Swedish from the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, to St David's University College, Lampeter, where he expected initially to have some time to devote to editing a new journal. The committee appointed the first editorial board; subsequent changes have been made by the editor and existing board. A 12-page specimen issue, under the new title *Swedish Book Review*, was produced in April 1983 and the first full issue (52 pages) published in October 1983. This is not the place to dwell on the journal's contents or development, except to say that the first reviews editor was appointed in 1996, with a dedicated 'Bookshelf' section aimed at expanding the coverage of books to compensate for the cessation of the informative survey of new titles contributed by Göran Eriksson.

SBR has concentrated on the most recent Swedish and Finland-Swedish literature, aiming at both the publishing world and a general readership through articles, translated extracts, reviews and bibliographies. Its former themed supplementary issues on particular writers or genres have often been guest-edited to enlist particular expertise. It is currently distributed to readers worldwide, with a print-run of 1000 copies, and its usefulness in promoting Swedish literature extends through the lingua franca of English into many other language areas. Its contributors are recruited not just from the SELTA membership: it has always sought to bring in writers from elsewhere, though usually from outside Sweden. It has also striven to find a balance between positive promotion and objective criticism, to enlighten and entertain without academic pretension yet with informed insight. *SBR* has received regular financial support from the Swedish Institute and the Swedish Arts Council, consistent encouragement in particular from Helen Sigeland (recently transferred from the former to the latter in an institutional shift of responsibilities), a small annual grant from the Swedish Consulate General in New York for some years, and occasional finance from Finland.

SELTA's next important achievement was the establishment of the Bernard Shaw Prize for Swedish-to-English translation, awarded triennially. After some years of ambivalence among members about the merits of such prizes, Patricia Crampton proposed at the 1988 AGM that a prize should be set up and could be administered by the Translators Association of the Society of Authors. The idea was pursued, first

with an application for finance to the Swedish Publishers Association, which was turned down, and then with a successful application to the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation, a fund established to fulfil the wishes of George Bernard Shaw to use his Nobel Prize money for the promotion of the literature and art of Sweden in the British Isles, administered by a board of trustees and the Swedish Embassy. Permission was obtained from the Bernard Shaw Estate to attach his name to the prize, and the initial award was based on books published in the previous ten-year period and presented by Shaw's biographer, Michael Holroyd, in 1991. (Holroyd refers to SELTA, *SBR* and the Shaw Prize in the fourth volume of his biography, *Bernard Shaw*, 1992.) All genres of writing are eligible for the prize, and books are judged on their literary merit in translation. It still continues on a triennial basis, and the prize money has risen from £1000 to £2000. Further publicity has resulted from the involvement of the *Times Literary Supplement*, the British Centre for Literary Translation and the concomitant annual Sebald (formerly St Jerome) lecture.

The range of subjects discussed at SELTA meetings or aired in its regular newsletters to members has covered such topics as work in progress, relations with publishers, publishing developments in Britain, Sweden and Finland, Embassy activities, Swedish and Finnish cultural organisations, translation subsidy schemes, sample translations, support for translators, translation rates, literary agents, translation agencies, prizes, media coverage, book reviewing, drama, poetry, translators' associations, university language and literature teaching, conferences, literary festivals and book fairs.

Some dozen British and two Swedish publishers have taken part in discussions at SELTA meetings, and external speakers, usually supported by the Swedish Embassy, Swedish Institute, Finnish Embassy or Finnish Literature Information Centre, have included the critics or academics Ruth Halldén, Tuva Korsström, Birgit Munkhammar, Lars Lönnroth, Hans-Göran Ekman, Maria Schottenius, Dick Harrison; and the writers Sara Lidman, Tomas Tranströmer, Torgny Lindgren, Göran Tunström, Bo Carpelan, Gösta Ågren, Agneta Pleijel, Claes Hylinger, Björn Ranelid, Theodor Kallifatides and Sven Lindqvist. We have also had speakers from the Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian literature promotion agencies and from the Swedish Society of Authors.

Before the advent of its website, where similar information is now available, SELTA also kept a register of active translators which was provided to publishers and agents on request. It has occasionally intervened with publishers, theatres or the media on behalf of members.

Whatever else it may or may not have achieved, one thing is certain: it has informed and encouraged translators through their regular contact and shared enthusiasm. That in itself has made SELTA's existence worthwhile. Not all members have been able to attend meetings, though participation has been greatly aided by financial contributions for travel from the Swedish Embassy or Shaw Fund (ASLF). Translators are of course in competition with one another for work in a small market, but there has been little sense of rivalry, rather one of mutual support, though the perennial problem of turning aspiring into established translators involves both ends of that scale.

SELTA's work and achievements have been recognised by Sweden in the award of the Royal Order of the Polar Star to Joan Tate, Laurie Thompson and Tom Geddes in 1992 and the promotion of the latter to Commander in the same Order in 2006.

SELTA's impact on publishers or the wider world of books is impossible to assess, but in the thirty years of its existence at the time this article is being written, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Swedish books published in English translation annually, and this was true even before the very recent surge of interest in the genre of crime writing, where Swedish and Scandinavian literature has acquired a dominant role among foreign titles on the English-language and international market.

From 1981 until 2004 all SELTA's activities were administered by Tom Geddes, assisted by his wife, Carol. He was able to hand on the role of treasurer to Janet Cole from 2005 and stood down as secretary at the end of 2006. In 2005 Henning Koch, with external professional help, designed the SELTA website, which went live in 2006, managed by Peter Linton. Under the chairmanship of Eivor Martinus, all committee members are now actively involved in running the association's activities, and all the work of the association, except for some partial remuneration in the case of *Swedish Book Review*, continues to be done, as before, on an unpaid basis by elected volunteers with other full-time occupations.

Officers 1981-2006

President: Mary Sandbach (1982-1990)

Chair: Joan Tate (1982-1986); Tom Geddes (1986-1991); Patricia Crampton (1992-1996); Eivor Martinus (1996-)

Secretary: Tom Geddes (1981-2006)

Treasurer: Tom Geddes (1981-2004); Janet Cole (2005-)

Swedish Book Review Editor: Laurie Thompson (1983-2002); Sarah Death (2003-)

Assistant editor: Sarah Death (2000-2002); Deputy editor: Neil Smith (2003-)

Reviews editor: Irene Scobbie (1996-2000); Sarah Death (2000-2003); Charlotte Whittingham (2003); Henning Koch (2004-)