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A Concise History of Sweden

A comprehensive history of Sweden is much needed. Neil Kent's book sweeps through Sweden's history from the Stone Age to the present day. Early coverage includes Viking hegemony, the Scandinavian Union, the Reformation and Sweden's political zenith as Europe's greatest superpower in the seventeenth century, while later chapters explore the Swedish Enlightenment, royal absolutism, the commitment to military neutrality and Pan-Scandinavianism. The author brings his account up to date by focusing on recent developments: the rise of Social Democracy, the establishment of the welfare state, the country's acceptance of membership in the European Union and its progressive ecological programme. The book successfully combines the politics, economics and social and cultural mores of one of the world's most successfully functioning and humane societies. This is an informative and entertaining account for students and general readers.

NEIL KENT is Associate at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge and Professor at the St Petersburg State Academy of Art, Architecture and Culture. His latest publications include *Helsinki: A Cultural and Literary History* (2004) and *Trieste: Biography of a City* (2008).

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PREFACE

Sweden has long been a European country in a virtually unique position, both militarily and socially: it has avoided warfare for almost two hundred years and possesses a social welfare infrastructure that, decades ago, virtually eliminated extremes of poverty. To many, therefore, it may seem a land of milk and honey, a prosperous country in which people live in easy tolerance and harmony. The reality, though, is more earth-bound.

The Swedish social ethos which has informed its society and culture did not spring fully formed from the head of Zeus, but was moulded by the struggles, sacrifices, compromises and hard-bitten stamina of Swedes. The distillation is a society in which, at its best, the individual is expected to assume his or her civic responsibilities in the context of a highly ordered society. Individuality has its strict parameters and political strongmen rarely make headway. That said, the reigning dynasty of its constitutional monarchy was founded some two centuries ago by King Karl Johan, a powerful French field marshal and, before he changed sides, the protégé of Napoleon himself.

Of course, Swedish society has its own share of problems and these exert their own deleterious consequences. This is made clear, for example, by the so-called *Janteloven* (Law of Jante), as it is known in Swedish, first formulated by Axel Sandemose, the Danish author who settled in Norway, in his novel *A Refugee Crosses his Tracks*, published in 1933. He expresses the view that in Scandinavia, especially in the world of the provincial town, the individual impulse to

stand out, to assert oneself, whatever the field, will meet with hostility, incomprehension and contempt. In this world, uniformity and the maintenance of collective security and stability will almost always win out over risk taking and genial creativity by the individual. This may, at least to some degree, be true, as many prominent Swedes from the world of the arts, business and academia have complained. Yet Sweden has by no means been bereft of people willing to struggle against the odds, in a plethora of ways, enabling the country to overcome enormous geographical, climatic and other handicaps over the centuries.

Vis-à-vis other European countries, Sweden's geographical position, at first sight, seems hardly likely to have been favourable for its development into a rich, peace-loving and socially cohesive nation state. Originally composed of four principal territories, Götaland, Svealand, Norrland and Österland – the last now independent Finland to the east – Sweden is located in the far north of Europe, on the eastern side of the Scandinavian peninsula, which it shares with Norway, but dominates in size. Covering an area of some 173,732 square miles (449,964 square kilometres), it extends approximately 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometres) north to south, a distance similar to that between the south of Sweden and Naples, in the south of Italy. From east to west, by contrast, it extends only about 310 miles (500 kilometres). Therefore, despite its length, it is by no means a large country, only slightly greater in size than the American state of California.

Its climate has hardly been inviting, even if warmer than in most other parts of the world situated at similar latitudes, like Alaska, Greenland and northern Siberia, for the effects of the Atlantic Gulf Stream exert a considerable warming effect in most parts of Sweden in winter. That said, 15 per cent of the country lies within the Arctic Circle, an inhospitable area where in winter temperatures frequently fall to minus 40 °C. Although in the summer temperatures can rise well above 30 °C (86 °F), frosts can occur there in all but the height of summer. Its soil, at least in the south in Scania, is often highly productive but that in Småland is stony, a poor till, glacial in origin, like that which covers so much of the rest of Sweden. The growing season is, in any case, usually short and the winters long and hard. In Haparanda, in the far north, temperatures in June average a meagre

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15 °C (59 °F), and even in Malmö, in the extreme south, they are only 17 °C (63 °F). Crop failures have been frequent throughout Swedish history and famine was widespread well into the middle of the nineteenth century. Even now, arable land only makes up 7 per cent of the whole. Forests, on the other hand, predominate, covering almost 70 per cent of Sweden's land surface in the present day. In the far south, in Scania and along much of Sweden's western coast, they are deciduous, but in most of the rest of the southern and central parts of the country, they are mixed forests of typically northern European type. Only in Dalecarlia and Norrland do they become almost exclusively coniferous. While elk still abound in these forests in central and northern parts of Sweden, wolves have become a rarity and bears have long since disappeared.

Though crisscrossed by many rivers, of which the Göta, in the south, and the Torneå, in the north, are among the most notable, Sweden has no equivalent to the Rhine, in Germany, or the Mississippi, in the United States, in terms of significance for transport, since Swedish rivers can be frozen for almost half of the year. However, it does have three sizeable lakes, Vänern (2,156 square miles), Vättern (738 square miles) and Mälaren (440 square miles), all of which have considerable importance for the local communities round about them. Then there are the large Swedish islands of Gotland and, to a lesser degree, Öland, in the Baltic Sea, which in early days were by no means 'isolated', but were thriving centres of trade, only cut off when winter ice blocked the Baltic.

Its 2,000 miles (3,218 kilometres) of coastline, though useful for fishing, have made it vulnerable to attack by sea from neighbouring powers, in particular Denmark and Russia, with which it waged wars, off and on, for centuries, and in whose internal politics it often sought to interfere. It is, moreover, a fairly flat country, albeit with a mountain range along the extensive north-western frontier with Norway. There, in the far north, is Sweden's highest peak, Kebnekaise (Mount Kebne), which rises to a height of 6,926 feet (2,111 metres). Sweden, thus, has had no natural land defences, except in the north-west, with which to inhibit assault from beyond its borders.

Despite all these drawbacks, however, Sweden has managed to establish itself as one of the world's most economically developed

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nation states. Its market economy is thriving and the standard of its social welfare peerless, recent financial cuts notwithstanding. Its score on gender issues, especially the rights of gay and lesbian people, in particular, and women, in general, is also substantial. The decision of the current Swedish king, Carl XVI Gustaf, and his consort, Queen Silvia – the Brazilian-born daughter of a German businessman – in 1980, to make their eldest child, Princess Victoria (born 1977), heir to the throne proved to be a significant gesture in this regard, and served to increase popular support for the monarchy. Yet the most important fact remains Sweden's avoidance of active belligerent involvement in the violent conflagrations which have beset the world since the time of Napoleon, a status, in this respect, it shares in continental Europe only with Switzerland. It has also long served as a haven for hordes of refugees fleeing conflict in their own countries, not least Iraqis in our own day. These are no mean achievements and together they pose a fundamental question as to why and in which circumstances they came about.