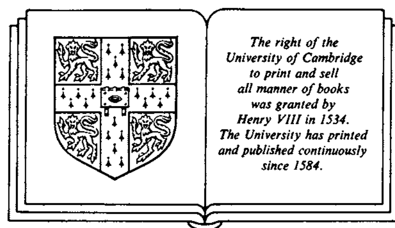
FROM OXENSTIERNA TO CHARLES XII

Four studies

MICHAEL ROBERTS



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Introduction

The four pieces which go to make up this book were written at different times and with different purposes in mind. No common theme pervades them; no link binds one to another. Each addresses a specific topic which happened at the time to interest me, and which it seemed to me had some interest in the general context of the period; and on each of them information in English was not easy to come by. The first of them originally appeared in *Scandia*, the third and fourth in *Karolinska Förbundets Årsbok*, and I am grateful to the editors of these journals for their kind permission to reprint them.

The first, that on Axel Oxenstierna's career in Germany from 1632 to 1636, was provoked by the publication in 1978 of what (alas!) seems destined, at least for the foreseeable future, to be the final volume of the great series of Oxenstierna's letters and state-papers which began to appear in 1888. Its publication passed, apparently, unnoticed: no Swedish historical journal remarked it. That seemed to me a regrettable omission. And so, after waiting a year or two, I resolved to attempt to repair it. I was in any case under an obligation to the Leverhulme Trust to produce a study of this period; and that volume which appeared in 1978 filled an important gap, making what had seemed to be a formidable enterprise a good deal easier. It was now possible to follow in great detail Swedish policy in Germany during the whole of this tangled period; and the story of the great Chancellor's fortunes and misfortunes shed much-needed light upon an aspect of the Thirty Years' War to which (with a couple of conspicuous exceptions)[1] little attention had been given since the days of Georg Irmer, Moritz Ritter, and Johannes Kretzschmar.

If then the essay on Oxenstierna began as something of a celebration, the two studies of Charles X represent the outcome of a pro-

[1] I refer to Sverker Arnoldsson's *Svensk-fransk krigs- och fredspolitik i Tyskland 1634–1636* (Göteborg 1937), and to Sigmund Goetze's important dissertation, *Die Politik des schwedischen Reichskanzlers Axel Oxenstierna gegenüber Kaiser und Reich* (Kiel 1971). But in this respect the situation has altered considerably since 1978.

tracted attempt to come to terms with that paradoxical and underrated monarch. When I was an undergraduate striving to get the hang of the seventeenth century, the only literature on Charles X seemed to be a solid chapter in the old *Cambridge Modern History*, and Emile Haumant's *La Guerre du Nord*. Half a century later the situation had scarcely altered, unless the enquirer happened to command a reading knowledge of Swedish or Polish. The result was a view of the king (generally accepted by most English historians) which was a travesty, or at least a caricature. Charles X was dismissed as a brutal and bellicose character, a conscienceless aggressor, an imperialist of the most deplorable type, who dragged his exhausted country into unnecessary wars, and was rescued from the consequences of his folly by the diplomacy of France. There is, of course, more than a grain of truth in this judgment. But in regard to foreign policy it more or less ignores a difficult question: whether after Westphalia territorial expansion was, or was not, an inevitable precondition for Sweden's survival as a great power; and the further question whether the programme of peaceful economic imperialism envisaged by Oxenstierna in 1650 was not perhaps a feasible alternative to wars of conquest, at all events in the short run. These are questions still debated by Swedish historians, and the answer to them is still not self-evident. Moreover, excessive preoccupation with Charles's wars has too often led non-Swedish historians to miss the remarkable range of his gifts and achievements: as a diplomat who in 1650 did more than any other statesman to round off the Westphalian settlement; as an administrator of marked ability; as a king who took the business of kingship with unrelaxing seriousness; as a consummate tactician in domestic affairs, no less than on the battlefield. As Stellan Dahlgren has demonstrated, the *reduktion* of 1655 was essentially his personal work, the outcome of his minute and expert calculations; and the more famous *reduktion* of Charles XI was firmly based on the work of his father. Charles XI was able to impose it on the high nobility at a moment when it was discredited and demoralised; Charles X, more subtle, far more intelligent, much more fruitfully laborious, manoeuvred the high nobility and the Council into accepting his *reduktion* at a moment when their strength had not yet been seriously impaired, and when their self-confidence was still high. Not only that: he was able to carry them with him in entering upon a war which the three lower Estates would certainly have preferred to avoid. To his aggressions they were in fact a party; and whatever blame attaches to his foreign policy must be shared (at least to begin with) by his Council. Charles XI's solution to Sweden's predicament – peace, renunciation of expansion, the balance of

power, independence of foreign subsidies – was a programme whose feasibility was at least dubious in his father's day. After 1675 absolutism had become conceivable; after 1680 it became almost popular; and Charles XI felt it to be essential to the programmes he had in mind. But was it conceivable or possible to Charles X? Did he seek to establish it? Once again we are confronted with a question still debated. So it seemed to me that it might be a useful service to attempt two short studies, having these controversies in mind: one on Charles's foreign policy; one on the constitutional situation during his reign.

The fourth essay, like its two predecessors, deals with a controversy. No ordinary controversy, confined to professional historians: this was the most far-spreading, at times the most passionate, and certainly the most protracted controversy in all Swedish history. The first shot in it was fired as early as 1719; the last, not until 1950. It concerned the circumstances of Charles XII's death in the trenches before Fredrikshald, and the issue appeared to be deceptively simple: did he fall by enemy action, and thus meet a death appropriate to a hero? Or was it a case of murder; and if murder, with what motive, and by what hand? These questions evoked deep and sometimes partisan feelings; and the answer to them might be influenced by such considerations as the lingering hope of reversing the verdict of the Peace of Nystad; or, as the Age of Liberty drew to its conclusion, by revulsion against its politicians, and detestation of its founders. But there was no getting away from the fact that Charles's death was of decisive importance in the history of his country. Absolutism collapsed overnight; the constitution of 1721 established the virtual sovereignty of the Estates; for two generations thereafter Sweden was ruled (and sometimes misruled) by the most representative and effective parliamentary institutions that contemporary Europe could show. Government by the consent of the governed, which the political nation learned and practised during the Age of Liberty, struck such deep roots into the national consciousness that it could never afterwards be eradicated. Thus in the long view what mattered was not Charles's life but his death; and when men disputed the manner of it they were not arguing about an event of trivial or transient importance. Moreover, to most Swedes, even though some of them might in retrospect disapprove of Charles's obstinate refusal to compromise, and almost all repudiated his absolutism, he nevertheless remained a national hero, and the suggestion that he might have been murdered by one of his subjects (or even with the connivance of his sister) was abhorrent. Yet throughout the eighteenth century curious anecdotes, family traditions, gossip retailed at second- or

third-hand, kept that suggestion very much alive; and they were given unmerited support by the farcically perfunctory exhumation of 1746: to such effect that the text-books of the early nineteenth century accepted murder as a historical fact.

Serious historiography began with Voltaire, though he was mainly concerned to vindicate the innocence of one of his countrymen. Jöran Nordberg's life of Charles XII, published in 1740, was a commissioned semi-official biography from which dangerous thoughts had been discreetly removed before publication. For the rest of the century there was really nothing. The most eminent historians of the time – Olof von Dalin, Sven LagerBring, Jonas Hallenberg – devoted themselves to other matters: to the demythologizing of Sweden's early history, in the case of the first two; to a great life of Gustav Adolf, in the case of Hallenberg; and all three left their major works unfinished. And this applies also in all respects to Erik Gustaf Geijer early in the next century. Not until the appearance of the Danish historian Paludan-Müller's examination of the problem in 1846 did it begin to interest the professional historians. Paludan-Müller was concerned primarily to demolish the fantastic constructions of Per Wieselgren, which represented the *reductio ad absurdum* of typical eighteenth-century attributions of guilt to this person or that; but it had the important effect of enlisting the interest of Anders Fryxell, a brilliant narrator, if a rather slap-dash historian, whose forty-six volumes enjoyed wide popularity. It was at the insistence of Fryxell, among others, that the exhumation of 1859 was carried out, this time with at least some attempt to give the appearance of scientific procedure; and its categorical verdict of accidental death seemed to relieve the Swedish people of a burden of guilt of which it had long been sensible. Provided, of course, that that verdict stood up to scrutiny; and there were those who felt (rightly) that it did not.

Thereafter historiographical fashions came and went, not least in regard to Charles XII. In the relatively liberal climate of the later nineteenth century, historians had, in general, taken a negative view of him: in the first two decades of the twentieth they were much more indulgent. The trend of this 'New School' was towards a general rehabilitation; and it engendered a feeling that yet another exhumation was necessary: an exhumation furnished this time with all the apparatus and expertise that modern science could provide. After all, with the bicentenary of the king's death imminent, it seemed that a decent piety demanded that the tenebrous circumstances surrounding it be cleared up.

But the exhumation of 1917, so far from dissipating all doubts,

proved to be the forerunner of two decades in which Swedish historians concerned themselves with the problem as they had never done before. They were in any case in the process of dividing into two camps, arrayed against each other on many a 'dark and bloody ground'. Some of their battles appeared, at that time, to be over fundamentals; but those of them who were revisionists did not fail to notice that Charles's death offered a suitable opportunity for a skirmish, and they did not fail to avail themselves of it. They found themselves by no means alone, though some of their allies were irregulars: despite the exculpatory verdict of 1917, the twenties saw a marked revival of the murder-theory; and the publicity which was given to it produced in the thirties a corresponding reaction among conservative historians, and especially in military circles. Each side in this combat had learned one thing from 1917: that it was essential to have recourse to the widest possible range of expertise. They found the experts very ready to oblige. But the effect of importing these reinforcements was unfortunately to make the issue so technical and so complex that few historians were now competent to command the whole field; though this by no means deterred them from carrying on the battle: in the dark year 1940 it reached a climax of acrimony.

Thereafter some of the steam went out of it, as the historians came to realise that this had become too hard a matter for them; by the end of the forties the paroxysm had passed; by the mid-fifties the exhausted disputants were content to admit that there was not much point in wrangling further over a problem which they could not solve.

This essay, then, so far from being a contribution to the controversy, is designed rather to celebrate its obsequies. Some gesture of the kind seemed called for, since for several years the false trails and alternative suspects had exerted upon me the compulsive fascination of a detective story. But now it was over – over with the last page torn out – and I need puzzle myself no longer to provide a credible solution to the mystery. But if I could not solve it I could at least commemorate it.