A Swedish-American Translator of Morris: Axel Lundberg
by Michael Brook

The political writings of Morris seem to have aroused comparatively little interest in Sweden. The national trade bibliography, Svensk bok-katalog, lists no separately published translation before 1917, and it appears that no translation of News from Nowhere has been published in book form. Yet a Swedish version of Morris' utopian romance began to be issued in the American Middle West in 1891, the year after its original publication in The Commonweal, and the year of its American publication in book form.¹

On 1 July 1891 the little Swedish-language paper, Gnistan (The Spark), published in Minneapolis, Minnesota, announced the forthcoming publication of its first serial, a translation by the editor, Axel Lundeberg, of News from Nowhere. This would be the first serial to appear in the paper, now in its sixth issue, since the editor did not want to publish commonplace novels, or anything already available in Swedish.

The next number of Gnistan came out on 15 July, with the first part of Lundeberg's translation, 'Från Framtidslandet, eller En tid af Hvila' (literally, From the Land of the Future, or An Epoch of Rest), on the front page, and further instalments were issued on 1 August, 1 and 15 September, 1 October, and 15 November. An apology for the non-appearance of the third instalment was printed on 15 August, the editor explaining, in a note dated two days previously from Galesburg, Illinois, that this was caused by his absence from Minneapolis on a speaking tour. Later interruptions and the

(NB-The footnotes for this article are grouped at the end of it.)
abandonment of the serial were not explained, and the paper itself ceased publication on 27 January 1892.

Who was this early translator of *News from Nowhere*, and what was *Gnistan*? Two biographical articles, by Ture Nerman and Don Heinrich Tolzmann respectively, give considerable information on Lundeberg's life in Sweden and America, so it will suffice here to give a few details of his first thirty-nine years. Axel Johan Mauritz Lundeberg was born at Börje, near Uppsala, on 13 August 1852, of a well-known upper class family (his cousin Christian Lundeberg, as prime minister, was to carry through the settlement with Norway in 1905, after the union between the countries was dissolved). He studied at the universities of Uppsala, Lund and Leipzig, and was connected with two papers issued by the prominent pacifist, Klas Pontus Arnoldson, *Fredsvänner* and *Tiden*. By 1885 Lundeberg had made contact with the infant socialist movement in Sweden, and he is recorded as the author of a pamphlet on trade unionism (*Om fackföreningar*, 1885) and as a translator of Lassalle (*Arbetarebeståndet och vår tid*, 1885).

It was in this year that he became part of the folklore of the Swedish labour movement: he and August Palm, for want of more comfortable premises, proof-read the first number of the newspaper, *Social-Demokraten* in a waiting room at Stockholm Central Station.

In 1887, the year before his emigration to the United States, Lundeberg visited Manchester to study the co-operative movement and report on it to the liberal newspaper, *Göteborgs Handels-och Sjöfarts Tidning*. That he was able to do this argues for his having already a good knowledge of English, which supposition is confirmed by the fact that one of his early occupations after arriving in the U.S.A. in 1888 was the giving of literary assistance to Hans Mattson in the compilation of his autobiography, 'chiefly in the translation and revision of his English diary entries'. Mattson, who was at the time Secretary of State of Minnesota, was an outstanding example of the Swedish immigrant who 'made good' in America.

Soon after his arrival in Minneapolis on Midsummer's Eve, 1888, Lundeberg, with the encouragement of August Dellgren, the city's Swedish Universalist minister, went to take a theo-
logical course at Lombard College, Galesburg, Illinois, his intention being to enter the Universalist ministry. He found Lombard disappointingly illiberal, in spite of Dellgren's claims that the Universalist and Unitarian churches were virtually the same, and was back in Minneapolis by February 1890, when he held his first Unitarian meeting. A Swedish Unitarian Society was founded in the following March.6

Writing later of that period in his life, Lundeberg said, 'My religion was in a word a religion of reason and my social outlook socialistic...'. He did not belong, he explained, to the Social Democratic Party (meaning the Socialist Labor Party, then the chief socialist party in the United States), since he did not entirely accept its programme, and because he believed in a gradual and peaceful advance towards socialism, not in revolution or acts of violence. 'My world view was thus more closely related to Edward Bellamy's than to those of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle, and was formed on the idea of brotherhood...'. From the viewpoint of later life Lundeberg thus describes the people who attended his lectures: 'a predominant number of materialistic freethinkers, a number of socialists, some theosophists and spiritualists, but only a small number of positive Unitarians'. The little society of heretics prospered, however; and 'It soon also became necessary to provide the new movement with its own paper... It was my aim to gather round the programme of this paper all the sound, independent forces among my compatriots, i.e. the Swedish-Americans and thus to found a Swedish-American press organ which would be completely free and independent of advertisers and underhand influence, something which was at that time completely lacking.'7

The paper was, of course, Gnistan, which began publication in the Swedish manner with a specimen issue on 28 March 1891, followed by semi-monthly publication beginning on 18 April and continuing until 2 December of the same year. The paper appeared weekly during December, but reverted to semi-monthly publication during January 1892, the last surviving number being dated 27 January. It gave support to the People's (or Populist) Party, but also published Henry Gaylord Wilshire's article, 'Why American Workers should be Socialists', as well
as contributions by Karl J. Ellington, a pioneer Swedish-American socialist and freethinker. While shortly after Lundeberg had to give the paper up he accepted the invitation of the former Baptist minister Theodore A. Hessell to become co-editor of the socialist paper, Facklan (The Torch), published in Kansas City, Missouri.

During its short life Gnistan paid little attention to movements or conditions in Britain, apart from the serialisation of News from Nowhere, but Lundeberg may have come into contact with Morris’ ideas during his visit to Manchester, where Morris had given the first of many lectures to the Ancoats Brotherhood in 1883. In any case, he was clearly sensitive to the climate of progressive opinion in his adopted country.

It seems that Lundeberg was chiefly attracted by Morris the utopian. Certainly there is much evidence that he was sympathetic to Edward Bellamy at this time. Gnistan began to carry advertisements for Bellamy’s monthly, The New Nation, on 15 August 1891, while the issue of 15 November advertised a Swedish translation of Looking Backwards. It published a number of articles on a proposed Swedish-American Nationalist (i.e. Bellamyite) community, while a Swedish paper in Ironwood, Michigan, carried a news item to the effect that Lundeberg and other Swedes were planning a colony on the lines of Looking Backwards or of the Kaweah Co-operative Commonwealth in California.

Kaweah itself, which was inspired by the Danish-American Laurence Gronlund, but which drew many of its members from Nationalist circles and had an active Nationalist club, was the subject of one of Lundeberg’s lectures to the Swedish Unitarians in Minneapolis. Morris’ lack of sympathy for the outlook expressed in Bellamy’s Looking Backwards is now generally known and in any case needs no explanation, but Lundeberg’s obvious admiration for both writers may not be unrepresentative of the temper of the early 1890s.

Did Lundeberg complete his translation? The letter from Galesburg, referred to above, suggests that he may have been keeping, or trying to keep, a couple of weeks ahead of his printer, but it is unlikely that we shall ever know the answer for sure, for a few years later, probably about 1895, he lost
his entire library by theft. Furthermore, Mr Tolzmann, who is familiar with the surviving papers of his grandfather, can find no such manuscript.

Lundeberg remained for the rest of his long life a questing soul, undergoing successive conversions to spiritualism, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, and the New Church (Swedenborgian), in the last of which he was ordained a minister in 1910. He remained a Swedenborgian until his death. Although he appears to have been inactive politically after his first years in America, he was re-discovered in the late 1930s by Ture Nerman, a historian of the Swedish labour movement, and persuaded to contribute reminiscent articles to Social-Demokraten, the paper he had helped to start fifty years before, and in these he re-affirmed his socialist beliefs. He died in Minneapolis on Christmas Day 1940.

FOOTNOTES

1 Aymer Vallance, William Morris: His Art, His Writings and His Public Life (George Bell & Sons, 1897), p. 347; Temple Scott, A Bibliography of the Works of William Morris (Bell, 1898), p. 15.


3 Drawn from Nerman and Tolzmann; Lundeberg’s two publications of 1885 are listed in John Lindgren, Det socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiets uppkomst i Sverige, 1881–1889 (Stockholm: Tidens forlag, 1927), pp. 330, 331.

4 Two undated autobiographical accounts by Lundeberg are to be found at the American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis: ‘The travels of a modern viking [sic] in Europe and U.S.A.’, in English, covering the years 1852–1888, and apparently in the handwriting of ‘Mrs. M. O.’ (cited hereafter as ‘Travels’); and ‘I Amerika’ (i.e., in America), a Swedish typescript with few corrections in what appears to be the hand of an old person (probably Lundeberg) (cited hereafter as ‘I Amerika’). The visit to Manchester is described in ‘Travels’, chap. viii, leaves 22–23; the work on Mattson’s autobiography in ‘I Amerika’, leaves 18–19. All translations from the Swedish are by the author.


7 ‘I Amerika’, leaves 25, 26–27. The typescript which contains a number of errors in the transcription of proper names, actually reads ‘Bellung’, but in view of Lundeberg’s interest in Bellamy (see below), it is virtually certain that he originally wrote ‘Bellamy’.


10 *Gnistan*, 1 September, 15 September, 15 October, 1891, 27 January 1892, all on p. [1]; *Blockadbrytaren* (Ironwood, Michigan), 8 January 1892.


12 This lecture was published as the second part of the pamphlet, *En lustresa genom helvetet, och Ett framtidssamhalle* (A Trip through Hell, and A Society of the Future) (Minneapolis: Grunlund Bros, [printed], 1891).


14 Don Heinrich Tolzmann to author, Minneapolis, 7 August 1972.

15 ‘I Amerika’, ch. 3–6, especially leaf 98.

16 *Social-Demokraten*, 9 March 1938, 15 January 1939.

17 *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, December 27, 1940, p. 20.

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