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## Foreign North: Outside Perspectives on the Nordic North

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The research programme *Foreign North* is a multidisciplinary study of how the Nordic North has been constructed in and by various languages and cultures, how outside constructions correlate with domestic images and how these perspectives change over time. The programme concentrates on outsiders' literary, artistic and scientific representations of the region from the mid-eighteenth century to 1914, a period when political and aesthetic models were much influenced by theories of the connections between climate and culture (Montesquieu 1748, Buffon 1749, 1777 [2001], Winckelmann 1764). The primary objectives of the study are to elucidate how the concept of northernness is represented in outside accounts of the Nordic North. A further aim is to illuminate how the understanding of the region as national (Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish) and European periphery emerges and is sustained in texts and pictures, and to develop a theoretical framework that may lead to a deeper understanding of how peripheries have been constructed historically. A central issue is to investigate how a categorisation based on the centre/periphery dichotomy relates to other interpretative paradigms. In this context, special attention will be given to the relationship between what can be termed an Arctic discourse and a Viking discourse in the works, that is, the correlation between the myth of the Nordic North as pristine land, providing aesthetic pleasure and mental access to a simpler lifestyle at a time when rapid industrialisation changed the face of Europe, and the myth of the region as the home of a strong, free people providing a common heritage for the rising European middle classes. In both these cases, however, the value of the Nordic North is located in the past, and a further area of investigation is how the link between past significance and present or future opportunity is expressed/depicted.

It is valuable to examine to what extent the perceptions transmitted by foreign travel writers reflect Swedish, Norwegian or Finnish central perspectives on the countries' northern regions and how far foreign commentators may have been influenced by the extensive nineteenth-century domestic mapping projects and scientific inventories. Comparisons with representations of other northern regions, for example in North America,

will yield information about what ideas pertain specifically to the Nordic North and what ideas may have a more universal application. Consequently, the programme also includes a comparative dimension.

Concrete tasks for the programme are to examine

- where the Nordic North is geographically and conceptually located in and by various cultures
- how visitors from various countries construct the Nordic North in their descriptions and to what extent different national understandings of the region can be said to exist
- how northern nature and the inhabitants of the Nordic North are described and categorised in texts and artworks
- what differences and similarities there are between men's and women's descriptions of the region and to what extent the landscape and inhabitants of the North are presented in gender-coded terms
- to what extent linguistic and literary factors influence the images of the North transmitted

In simple terms, outside constructions of the Nordic North may be summarised under the headings dystopia and utopia. Areas perceived as peripheral may function as mirrors of the present and be used either nostalgically or critically (Sörlin 1988). International research in the field of travel writing has paid little attention to the definition and function of a periphery, however, since most of the interpretative models used are based on post-colonial theory and primarily aim to demonstrate the imperialist and colonialist nature of the genre. Nevertheless, for the outside observer the periphery may contain opportunities and liberties not available in the centre. *Foreign North* will therefore specifically investigate the meanings assigned to the Nordic North as periphery in foreign representations and examine outside notions of where the periphery begins and ends. A particularly important aspect is the question of the borders of the periphery, and one of the aims is to clarify how the idea of the periphery as a buffer zone between the centre and the unknown emerges in nineteenth-century art, science and literature.

The North is a direction as well as a location, and as a result it is virtually impossible to formulate a

concise definition of the region (Atwood 1995). The Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin introduced the term *nordicity* (*nordicité*) to emphasise the fact that the North is a conceptual as well as a geographical region (1975, 1988). The term can be glossed as “the state, degree, awareness and representation of cold territoriality in the northern hemisphere,” and the territory of the North – Nordic or elsewhere – thus becomes the sum of how its physical, cultural and social parts are perceived. According to the definition used by the International Polar Year, IPY 2007-2009, the Arctic or Polar region is the area north of latitude 60, which from a northern Scandinavian perspective is quite far to the south whereas Montréal at 45° north is perceived as a northern city in North American terms. In the nineteenth century it was not unusual to see counties even south of the Scottish border described as “hyperborean” (“Recent Literature” 1890). It is clear that national and cultural backgrounds vitally influence the conceptions, and the boundaries of the North necessarily vary according to the describer’s position. The question of the geographical location of the Nordic North may therefore be less relevant than the question of the conceptual definitions. Since the programme is concerned with how the *image* of the Nordic North was constructed by outside commentators, a rigid geographical definition would be unnecessarily constricting, but in most cases, the works discussed will treat the northern parts of the Nordic countries, including Iceland and Finland, but usually excluding Denmark. Many writers use the term Lapland, but here, too, definitions vary, and it is not unusual – especially in fiction – that locations in the south of Sweden or Norway are given Arctic features.

Since travel writing is a main source for the images circulated in fiction and art and a main popularising channel for scientific discoveries, all the projects in the research programme take as their starting-point or their main focus selections from the body of foreign travel literature about the Nordic North produced between the mid-eighteenth century and the outbreak of World War I. In this period, the genre of travel writing became both more literary and more popular. Several hundred travelogues were published in the nineteenth century alone, predominantly in English and German, but also in a number of other languages (Bring 1954, Schiötz 1970). The European and American image of the Nordic North was to a very great extent formed by information and attitudes transmitted in such works and given wider circulation in fiction and art. Preliminary readings of travel texts and fictional

works show that there are great differences between how describers with different national backgrounds construct and present their pictures of the Nordic North. This means that an interdisciplinary approach combining literary, historical, linguistic and aesthetic analyses of the texts is necessary to produce a deeper understanding of the material. The co-operation between Modern Languages, History, Literature, Archaeology and Arts is a crucial difference between *Foreign North* and other investigations of travel writing, which are usually connected to a single discipline. The same is true for discussions of literature or art with a specific geographical focus. Limiting the analysis to works about the northern parts of the Nordic countries makes it possible to avoid generalisations based on theories that may not always be applicable to the North. At the same



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time, regions do not exist in isolation and their meanings are derived through comparisons and contrasts. To avoid arriving at just another essentialist model, it is therefore valuable to compare individual writers’ accounts of both northern and southern spaces when these exist, to compare outside descriptions with works produced by domestic writers and to compare representations of the Nordic North with works about, for example, the Canadian North. Studies of single works and

authorial voices provide a micro-perspective that allows greater attention to detail and makes it easier to detect contradictions between texts and even within single texts, while the collaborative work in the research group makes it possible to still give a more comprehensive account of foreign perceptions of the Nordic North.

Through critical readings of a considerable number of travel texts, analyses of fictional works and studies of artworks depicting the Nordic North, the research team intends to investigate how writers, artists and scientist make use of both explicit and implicit references to other works, both in their own languages and others, to develop concepts of the region. It is consequently necessary to recreate the whole, wide context within which this literature and art was produced. Questions that need to be considered are what literary devices are employed to create credibility in works that so clearly refer to previous texts, what other methods the writer uses to establish a reliable narrative position and what fixed points in text and picture locate the narrator/artist in a particular time and place. A closely related issue is by what means the producer creates an illusion of narrative presence and control of the time and place described. The answers to such questions may form the basis for a discussion of the writer's and artist's position as veracious eye-witness capable of delivering new knowledge and may illustrate how scientific claims are anchored in the works.

In economic terms, the period from the mid-eighteenth century to 1914 represents the transition from an essentially agrarian to an industrial society, and foreign depictions of the region frequently exemplify a move from a negative paradigm shaped by visitors comfortable in their own civilisation to a negative model, produced by travellers attracted to the still mainly agrarian Nordic North because of insecurities caused by the rapid changes in their own cultures. Ideologically, the early nineteenth century can be seen as the transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era, and taken as a whole and sometimes also within individual items, the works display a conflict between interpretations of the Nordic North that highlight utility aspects and interpretations concentrating on sensual experiences (Wolfzettel 2003). Stylistically, travel texts may adhere either to the sober and simple ideal characterising the scientific reports of the eighteenth century or to the more emotionally laden ideal emerging in the wake of Laurence Sterne's influential travel novel *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). A closer investigation of the genre may, however, also lead to a critique of the sometimes simplistic view of this

shift between Enlightenment and Romanticism (Batten 1978). A study of the relationships between travel literature, fiction and art may yield valuable insights into this issue.

At least in Sweden, the mental map began to alter in the early nineteenth century so that the previously prevalent idea that the country extends from east to west gradually changed to a view where Sweden was seen as extending from north to south. This means that the idea of centre versus periphery also began to be understood in terms of north and south. Thus, it is valuable to examine how far foreign describers' perceptions of the Nordic North reflect a Swedish (Norwegian, Finnish etc.) central perspective on the region and to what extent they may have been influenced by domestic cartographical projects and inventories of the northern regions (Eliasson 1999, 2002, Molin 2003, Nordlund 2001, Sörlin 1988, Widmalm 1990, 1992). The forms of colonisation and the administrative position of Swedish Norrland within the nation as a whole were patently different from the situation in European colonies in, for example, Africa or India, and this difference should have been visible to visitors. This does not prevent some foreign commentators from viewing the region in imperialist or colonialist terms, but there should be significant differences between outside descriptions of the Nordic North and descriptions of non-European regions. A comparative study of texts by writers commenting both on the Nordic North and on other areas, such as the Americans Bayard Taylor and Paul Du Chaillu, should give important knowledge in this respect. It is also of value to investigate which writers and artists appear to avoid colonialist interpretations, as seems to be the case with several German visitors, and to examine the possible backgrounds for this attitude.

One consequence of the shift from Classicist to Romantic ideals was that previously celebrated destinations like Italy and Greece began to be regarded as worn out. At the same time, Northern Europe was seen as more civilised and accessible for travel than otherwise tempting destinations like Egypt or India. A contributing factor that helped to establish the Nordic countries as alternative travel destinations was that the European continent was essentially closed to tourism during the Napoleonic wars 1793-1815.

The Nordic region became the locus of middle-class tourism and travel to the area differs from the eighteenth-century tours to the great cities of southern and middle Europe, that is, the more aesthetically oriented educational and recreational

Grand Tour undertaken by members of the upper classes (Bate 1970, Buzard 1993, Hulme and Youngs 2002). For travellers still intent on following the tradition of the Grand Tour, a visit, for instance, to Sweden could take in the southern parts of the country where there were cultural expressions that could be related to its ideals, while travel to the northern parts was usually seen as more exotic. The travelogues produced in the period indicate that many visitors were looking for unique experiences and expected to find an untouched wilderness in the Nordic North. In spite of this search for the exceptional, however, writers regularly apply recognised templates to describe the unknown.

The development of communications in the nineteenth century and the new social aspects on travel contained in the concept mass tourism obviously also influenced travel habits. Effects of these developments should be observable in the travel texts for instance in that already established travel routes are confirmed, moving the borders of the wild and exotic so that by the end of the nineteenth century these features are primarily associated with the mountain regions.

A driving factor for travellers interested in cultural history was the search for common Nordic or Germanic roots in an attempt to establish an alternative genealogy that could legitimise the new political and economic position of the middle class. In such cases, the Nordic North became a symbol of liberty (Barton 1998). Ancient Nordic history is often seen in unequivocally positive terms, above all because it is regarded as a source for the ancient history of the describers' own cultures and seen as a moral imperative for contemporary Europeans. Many commentators perceived the North as a repository of past customs, culture and literature (Wawn 2000).

Despite the great interest in ancient Nordic literature at the time, however, it was nature that was primarily regarded as noble whereas the peoples of the Nordic North were often perceived as unrefined. Particularly Anglophone writers sometimes imply that the old Viking stock has degenerated and that the true heirs of the Vikings are to be found in England or America (Taylor 1858). There was little of European sophistication in the few, small, relatively recent towns in the northern region, and many travellers remain silent on the topic. The Sami people are often viewed as noble savages in Rousseauan style, whereas settlers and farmers are placed somewhere between the wild and the civilised. The

clear contrasts between the light and warmth of the northern summers and the darkness and cold of the winters are used to give "natural" climatological explanations of the dispositions of the northerners, following Montesquieu (Castrén 1910, Blanck 1911, Frängsmyr 2000).

Against this background, the various projects making up the programme *Foreign North* will pay particular attention to issues such as how Russian perspectives on northern Fenno-Scandia relativises and problematises the dichotomy centre vs. periphery by placing the centre to the east rather than the west of Scandinavia, how writers struggle with questions of originality and authenticity and how various linguistic factors such as the use of emotion words, precise terminology or native vocabulary may influence the image of the region. Several projects look at the complexities of gendered representations of the North and others concentrate on the images produced in particular cultures, illuminating the differences between, for instance, German and Spanish representations of the area. Pictorial representations such as book illustrations or paintings constitute the material for some investigations while representations of the past through heritage sites and archaeological writing are examined in other projects. Special attention is given to presentations of northern peoples, the Sami population in particular. Although present-day cultural criticism recognises that the North as a location is mentally constructed, for centuries, scientists, scholars and others have discussed what natural characteristics can be used to define the region as a specific geographical area. The question of how the Nordic North has been identified in science is therefore an important subject for study. Finally, the programme includes an infrastructural project aiming to bring together the many perspectives, materials, discourses and representations of the study and make them accessible through a web-based interface.

*Foreign North* works on both a macro- and a micro-level, with the various subprojects attending to specific representations of northern spaces and the multidisciplinary set-up attempting to identify common structures and differences between the images produced in various cultures. Since *Northern Studies* is one of the Areas of Excellence at Umeå University, the research programme is very well-placed and can draw on results from a number of other, connected investigations.

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