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Grabbing the Future by the Tail A Conference of University Teachers of Scandinavian Studies

John Simpson

This conference was the first of its kind for Great Britain and Ireland, and was held in Aberdeen from 23rd to 27th March 1975. Most of the participants were university teachers in Britain and Ireland, but there were also some librarians, and some visiting speakers from Britain and Scandinavia; and we benefitted from the presence of Mr Agerbak from the Danish Embassy, Mr Neumann of the Norwegian Embassy, Dr Zettersten from the Swedish Embassy, and Mrs McNaught of the Danish Institute in Edinburgh.

Like many conferences, this one provided a splendid chance to see old friends and meet new ones. Unlike some conferences, it also had a clear and worthwhile purpose. There was general enthusiasm for furthering Scandinavian studies. Just as important in financial hard times, there was a mood of solidarity about defending the achievements that have been made. We hadn't forgotten that a member of the last Conservative government, for reasons that were perhaps not wholly academic, singled out Swedish as the sort of minority subject that ought not to expect too many more crumbs from the UGC cake.

The conference began with an account, from Professor Duncan Mennie, of the development of Scandinavian studies in

Britain. This paper was a model of wit and erudition, and one hopes to see it published.

We then heard reports of current developments in various parts of Britain and Ireland. Particularly interesting was Professor James McFarlane's explanation of how Scandinavian studies fitted into the interdisciplinary pattern of East Anglia. But Professor Peter Foote resolutely turned our eyes to the problematical future, and urged that Scandinavian Studies might require to be concentrated at relatively few centres, where the quality of research would be the hall-mark of their intellectual excellence: the corollary was that 'outposts' of the subject might have to be abandoned. These remarks were clearly intended to raise a stir, and they did.

In the afternoon we heard Professor Frykman of Göteborg, a well-kent face in Scotland, on the state of the humanities in Swedish universities, and on the government's attitude to higher education. Then followed Mr Peter Martin from the British Council, on the post-graduate scholarships available from Scandinavian countries; and Mr James Platt, of the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, on ways that his bureau might help Scandinavian studies. Mr Platt in particular struck some hopeful notes in an academic world that has allowed chill penury to get it depressed to an unwarranted extent.

On the second day there were separate Norwegian and Swedish programmes, both covering a lot of detailed discussion. High-lights were Mr Göran Huss of the Swedish Institute and Rektor Åke Leander on folk high schools; and announcements about projected lecture-tours by Norwegian authors, visual aids available from the Norwegian Embassy, a taped anthology of Norwegian literature forthcoming from Dr Popperwell and Mr Støverud, the *Studies in Swedish Literature* appearing from Hull, and a projected co-operative *History of Swedish Literature*.

On the final day Mr John Townsend described the Scandinavian books policy of the British Museum and University College London. Then Dr Alexander Cain and Mr Stephen Holland did the same for the National Library of Scotland: this was an occasion when the Scots could be proud of what had

been done.

Professor Gylfi Gislason clearly had the conference on his side when, in the course of a genial and informative account of the work of the Nordic Council, he suggested that one of the tasks of small nations is to ensure 'that man preserves the soul which God gave him as a birthright.'

The winding-up discussion ranged as widely and sometimes confusingly as is usual on such occasions. But some very important decisions emerged. On the suggestion of Dr Harold Borland of Hull, plans were made to give wide publicity to visits by Scandinavian guest lecturers. Dr Karin Petherick of London proposed a promising scheme for short exchanges of lecturers between Scandinavian departments. And a committee of seven was established — with representatives from University College London, Cambridge, East Anglia, Newcastle, Aberystwyth, Aberdeen and Hull — to consider how to co-ordinate Scandinavian teaching and subsequently to approach the UGC.

The conference was strongest in teachers of modern language and literature, especially those of Norway and Sweden. They are clearly the people with the main responsibility for the future Scandinavian Studies in Great Britain and Ireland. But the atmosphere of the conference was commendably ecumenical, and it seems proper to express some hopes with future developments and future conferences in mind: that the universities will repair their general neglect of Danish studies; that the vital culture of Iceland and of Faroe will be kept in mind: that Finland, though linguistically distinct, will find its due place in our Scandinavian studies: that teachers of history and the social sciences with an interest in Scandinavia will support the work: and that teachers of Old Norse/Icelandic, whose work is sometimes carried on in isolation from other Scandinavianists, will feel that this is their conference too. There are no times like hard times for holding ambitious views!

The drive and initiative of Miss Irene Scobbie and her colleagues at Aberdeen made the first conference an outstanding success. It is hoped to hold the second conference at the Univer-

sity of East Anglia at the end of the Spring term of 1977. University teachers with a Scandinavian commitment, who wish to be put on the mailing list, should write to Professor James McFarlane at the School of European Studies, University of East Anglia, University Plain, Norwich NOR 88C.