STIG CLAESSON'S *ANCIENT MONUMENTS*, THE END OF AN ERA.

Irene Scobbie

Slas – Stig Claesson – is a wellknown figure in Scandinavia, spoken of with affection by many, and appreciated as both an author and an illustrator.

He was born in Stockholm in 1928 and studied at the Stockholm College of Art. In the immediate post-war years he joined volunteers helping to rebuild Europe. The journey from neutral, unscathed Sweden to devastated parts of war-torn Europe made a great impression on him. He is a pacifist and an anti-nuclear armaments campaigner, and has an almost exasperated attitude to people who think issues can be settled by knocking other people about.

After Europe he then went further afield, married a French-Canadian and lived for a brief spell in North America. He is a prolific writer and illustrator and almost every year from the end of the 1950s onwards he has produced either a travel book (sometimes the text, sometimes illustrations, often both), or a novel, short stories or anecdotes.

His best novels include *Vem älskar Yngve Frej* (1968), (translated title *Ancient Monuments*), *På palmblad och rosor* (1975) and *En vandring i solen* (1976). They have all been filmed either for the cinema or TV screen and have become part of popular Swedish culture.

Although a Stockholmer born and bred Stig Claesson spent his childhood summers with relations in the country and this is often reflected in the way he contrasts town and country mentality in his work.

Claesson isn't a political animal. He is mildly middle of the road – the Swedish middle way, but there is nothing dogmatic about him; rather the reverse. In the late 1960s just before he started to write *Ancient Monuments* the Swedish intelligentsia had become intensely political, in most cases left wing. It was the period of American engagement in Vietnam and there was a great roar of criticism from Sweden. Jean Paul Sartre had been awarded the Nobel prize in 1964 and when he made the speech expected of literature laureates he attacked all literature not politically committed. This was grist to Swedish leftwing writers' mill. The Swedish communist party had acquired a leader of some stature, C H Hermansson, who disassociated his party

from Stalinism. China became a Good Thing, and the FNL movement grew in strength.

At this time Swedish writers were often asked to fill in questionnaires about themselves and their role in society. In 1967 a book entitled *29 röster 67* (ie 29 votes/voices) was published containing answers to some of these questions. The sort of questions asked were: What is your role in society as an author?; What are the most pressing political reforms in Sweden?; What do you consider the most important loyalties? etc. There was constant pressure to be – *engagerad* – "committed". Claesson answered quite simply that it was "pointless going beyond your capabilities, ie, your private experiences." That was the year before he published *Ancient Monuments* and it is not unrelated.

To put the novel fully in context however one would need to go back much further. Sweden was transformed from a backward rural country into a rich industrialised nation in a very short time. In the nineteenth century most Swedes lived in rural areas but then their industrial revolution started with a vengeance. The basic industries expanded first – timber, saw mills, paper and pulp, iron and steel, engineering. Large new farming machines affected agriculture; fewer farm labourers were needed but then other industries were being built up and the services industries followed : banking, insurance, food, clothing, travel etc., and these were located in built-up areas and absorbed the labour no longer needed on the land.

Development was held in check at different times – the General Strike, the Depression and then two World Wars – but in general there has been an unbroken line in industrialisation and rationalisation throughout this century.

The modern trade union movement was founded in the 1880s, as was the Social Democratic party. By 1932 the Social Democrats formed the government and continued to do so either alone or in coalition until the 1970s. Swedish governments from the 1930s onwards were interested in improving the material wellbeing of all the people – "folkhemmet" of P A Hansson's vision. By the 1960s there was a well-developed welfare service with child allowance, rent allowance, free education at all levels, adequate pensions, a good health service and a great feeling of material wealth reasonably well distributed.

The system worked reasonably fairly and efficiently but a great deal of bureaucracy was involved and in order to be competitive and efficient the leading politicians knew they would have to rationalise. By the time Claesson was writing *Ancient Monuments* many Swedes were beginning to feel that the individual was being sacrificed to the great god Efficiency.

There are just over 8 million Swedes in a country two and a half times the size of Britain. In the name of efficiency the government by the 1950 s and in particular the

1960s was encouraging people to leave their isolated homes and move into more populated areas. It would mean better schooling, housing, transport etc. But it speeded up the process, already evident, of depopulating vast areas.

People working in agriculture and forestry were greatly affected. Up to the end of the 19th century farmers and their families had cleared small areas of arable land from forest and stony ground. They planted mixed crops, kept a few domestic animals and lived poor but self-sufficient lives. By the 1960s the government policy was to single out certain places as "growth points" and to give grants to people who wanted to sell their small farms and move to those points (Umeå, Skellefteå, Östersund etc). Their hard-won arable land was allowed to revert to forest. The forestry commission needed very few employees to look after hundreds of acres of coniferous forests, and so small communities with their traditions simply died out.

Depending, of course, on how these things are measured the standard of living and of welfare was high. People who remained in the isolated areas would have a decent pension, a telephone, a refrigerator etc etc – but there was a sense of alienation. They saw the all powerful authorities (planning, no doubt, for the benefit of all), as anonymous and they had no way of asserting themselves. The "rational" view ignored the individual.

Once the process of depopulation had started it gathered momentum. State subsidies went to help the designated centres and there was little left for public transport in the "unviable" areas. Other services too compared badly with what was offered in the towns and cities.

It is this situation that Stig Claesson draws attention to in *Ancient Monuments*, not waxing indignant, strident nor rhetorical but, as he said in the questionnaire, through private experiences. Having spent a proportion of his formative years in a small rural society he understands the mentality of the people there. He presents in his novel four country characters at a place called Bråten: the shoemaker Gustafsson, who is 72, his sister Elna a mere 62, and their neighbours Eriksson and Öman, both 75. They are the only people left in what had been a thriving community.

The shoemaker is about to move the post box to the other side of the road (right hand traffic was introduced in Sweden in 1968). He is also going to put up a sign bearing the name of their village but when his sister happens to say that they are like ancient monuments he erects a sign saying *Ancient Monument*. As it is summer the sign attracts a few tourists. Gustafsson feels obliged to show them something so he leads them to the ruins of an old soldier's cottage.

Two of the visitors are from Stockholm, Pettersson a photographer and his girlfriend Anita who lives in the capital but comes originally from an isolated place in the far north of Sweden.

The book is melancholy but amusing too. The sadness increases for the reader as we get to know and respect the four old people and realise what hopeless odds they are fighting against. What they represent in the end is a whole culture that is becoming extinct, and in that sense the book takes on a universal character. People aware of threatened small communities anywhere will respond to the plight of Claesson's characters.

The threat is a "modern" one. Unlike Mrs Scott in Crichton Smith's *Consider the Lilies*, the inhabitants of Bråten own their own land and can't be put out of their house at the whim of a wicked landlord. Nor are they materially badly off. They have acquired in the last ten years a number of consumer goods. In Gustafsson's words, "we've never had it so good – or so bad". The threat is insidious – they are being locked into the forest.

At the start of the story we hear that they no longer have a bus service – it was no longer "viable". They belong to "det gående folket" ie the walkers of the world, the generation that didn't learn to drive. A trip to town means either an expensive taxi fare or being beholden to the only farmer still running a farm. (He, incidentally had inherited what was then considered a fairly large farm but, although enlarged upon, is now not quite large enough). A delivery van still calls once a week but they don't know how long it will continue. They find themselves obliged to buy in case it stops coming. It is a measure of Claesson's ability to present his characters that the reader becomes sad and indignant on learning towards the end of the book that the postal van will be phasing out its deliveries too, after the summer.

There is a kind of betrayal in the way society has treated these people, firstly on a "temporal" plane: transport has been withdrawn; the nearest doctors are hundreds of kilometres away; the district nurse used to call, but now conducts business by telephone etc. But there is betrayal on the spiritual plane too. Parishes have been amalgamated, the minister is expected to cover a much larger area – and of course the minister is also a product of the affluent society and he is on an extended holiday on the Canary Isles to help his rheumatism. (Again Claesson paints a different picture from Crichton Smith. The minister is rather a good soul, but he is old and has been given too much to do by "them".)

Claesson is at pains to show that there had been a sense of continuity in the past. The old soldier Yngve Frej had served under the old defence system (*indelningsystem*) which went back to the 17th century and lasted until 1901. Yngve Frej was born in 1799 and lived to be over 100, dying in 1901. His wife Josepha died at 103. Of the men now living at Bråten one is 72 and the others 75. Two remember Yngve Frej reasonably well and all remember Josepha very well. It is odd, one character says, that Eriksson has talked to Yngve Frej who was born only seven years after the assassination of Gustav III (1792). Yngve in his turn would have talked to people who were very much of the 18th century and would in turn have met people

who had lived in the 17th century.

Until the two world wars there seemed no reason to doubt that the pattern of life at Bråten would continue for ever. The shoemaker, a homespun philosopher, gives a kind of potted version of what then happened. "Rationing in World War I with ration cards and everything forced the whole nation to register ... They roped in a host of free men who had roamed freely until then ... In World War II the farmers and craftsmen were told that we were part of the country's livelihood. It was only ... an emergency measure but it fooled a lot of people. The farmers were given artificial fertilisers and seed for grazing land. And subsidies for clearing away stones. Before the war not even a horse-drawn harvester could be used on these pastures. Any kind of machine can go over them today. There's not a stone in them. The farmers ought to have realised it was pointless, but everybody was so enthusiastic about the future. They never meant the future in peacetime. After the war they dropped the whole thing and the authorities completely forgot about the small farmers." (p 79)

Claesson lets us see what has happened to a whole generation, not through statistics but through the old Bråten people. Gustafsson and his sister Elna were of a family of 15, half of whom died in childhood either of diphtheria or Spanish influenza. They are still in touch with the surviving members of the family but the latter never come visiting. Eriksson was one of 16. He is a widower with two children, one in Malmö and one in Stockholm. One of his sisters is in a geriatric home, the others are either dead or have emigrated to America – or both as far as he knows. Öman had 9 brothers, all of whom left Bråten when young.

The old Bråten people had assumed that their traditions were lasting ones, but again they suffered a rude awakening. A poignant picture of the new replacing the old is shown in the description of haymaking.

> "The haymaking had been the climax of the summer and had demanded the whetting of scythes, a great deal of good food and drink on the table, and fine weather. What did it involve now?
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> A young farmer bought Eriksson's hay and came along one morning with a tractor and a twelve-foot mowing machine. He cut the hay, bound it, loaded with a mechanical fork and drove off. It took about an hour !..
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> The first time they had sold the hay they had awaited the young farmer with great anticipation. Elna had cooked enough food for several days. But the men who came for the hay didn't even have time for a cup of coffee . Not even a cup of coffee! What kind of hay-making was that? In the old days they had got up early in the morning, gone in ranks with their scythes close on each others' heels, and the sweat had run down their necks and backs. Women had come out into the fields with baskets and laid out coffee and soft drinks, the kitchen

had steamed up with the heat, buzzing with flies. So hay-making had changed." (19)

Nine years ago Eriksson's farm had been a going concern, he had had three cows, two pigs and the dairy had still collected his milk, but now their only livestock consists of 15 hens. He hates them but at least their cackling breaks the silence.

So in less than nine years silence has fallen over Bråten. Claesson is skilful in capturing the difference between an idyllic Swedish summer and the desolate silence which threatens the Bråten people's very existence. The rare summer visitors coming to see the ancient monument catch sight of the old people "sitting on home-made garden furniture by a cottage wall admiring a small well-tended garden patch where peony roses bloomed under a gnarled pear tree. They had seen the potted plants in the glass porch ... They had been sitting in the shade of a tall apple tree on a lawn full of small white clover. Bees buzzed in the clover ..."

Later Pettersson the visiting photographer and his girl friend Anita go out onto the lake, which "lay as smooth as glass and the aspen leaves were motionless. The stream murmured and a roach splashed by the edge of the rushes. The dew began to fall in the grass and spiders made their webs in the low bushes. Far far away an eagle owl hooted at the milk-white moon ... Slowly Pettersson rowed through the water lilies and beyond the rushes." There he drew in the oars and let the boat glide.

But the idyll is fast disappearing. "I've got nothing against silence", he said (the shoemaker), "but in the past you could hear something when it was quiet. You could hear a shower of hailstones a long way away, you could hear somebody chopping wood, you could hear a bull bellowing, you could hear machines from the village ... Now all you hear is a sigh from the trees and a midge or two" And near the end of the book the shoemaker notices that "Birch, aspen, alder and willow had already grown high in the ditches ... No butterflies, no bumble-bees. There should be yellow and blue butterflies fluttering over the thistle and chamomile. Bumble-bees should be buzzing in the flowers. How long had the butterflies and bees been gone?" (138)

Despite its theme the book is neither too sociological nor desperately gloomy, for it contains some excellent examples of Stig Claesson's gentle irony and the kind of humour which makes the Swedes so fond of him. Some of the humour arises from his unexpected, sometimes even drastic remarks. The shoemaker tells Pettersson that Eriksson was sorry when he sold his last cow – and adds "Mind you he was sorrier still when he had to pay tax on what he got for her" (80). Elna is listening to the morning service on the wireless on Sunday morning – well actually he adds, they all were – for Elna is rather hard of hearing. Pettersson and Anita are on the lake on a lovely mild summer night and grow lyrical and intensely folksy "... Pettersson looked at her rosy, round cheeks and her blond hair ... He looked at Anita's breasts and legs and thighs ... and then "The bloody boat's leaking! 'Do a bit of baling out'."(89)

Sometimes the gentle humour comes from catching exactly the inconsequential conversation of people who have lived together for a long time:

> "'Eriksson doesn't look very well," Elna said.
> "Oh he's the same as ever," the shoemaker shouted. "He worries about nothing Always has."
> "He doesn't look well," said Elna.
> "He's all right," yelled the shoemaker. "All that commotion yesterday made him look more tired than usual."
> "There's something not quite right" said Elna ...
> When the shoemaker had finished eating and had half a cup of coffee left in his cup he got up and went into the room. He took a bottle of snaps out of the chest of drawers and laced his coffee with it.
> "I don't know what to do with myself" he yelled.
> "You'll find something to do!! if you can just keep your health"
> "Why should I be ill?" yelled the shoemaker. "You're such a pessimist."
> "Eriksson doesn't look at all well" said Elna' ...(59)

But a lot of the humour comes from the contrast between the town and the country mentality, in this case the mentality of Pettersson the likeable "wide boy" from the very heart of Stockholm and the Bråten people. When visitors unexpectedly turn up to see the Ancient Monument the shoemaker is shamefaced but Pettersson is simply full of admiration for the way he has fooled them.

What Claesson does in a sense is turn the tables slightly on the "townies". We often encounter in literature the country bumpkin being the butt of the town people's jokes, but here it is Pettersson from the city who is scared stiff by the country. In conversation with the shoemaker he was told "One winter a long time ago my uncle who lived with us went and sawed a hole in the ice in the middle of the lake. Then he crawled in. My father got him out but it was too late." (68) Pettersson has already experienced the isolation of the district. When he is on his way back to the caravan where he and Anita are staying he sees two elks at a distance.

> "Pettersson looked at the elks and the forest. The wind sighed in the tops of the fir trees and the leaves of an aspen tree rustled. There was a sighing and a rustling.
> "Christ Almighty" Pettersson said to himself. "Elks and all this bloody nature" ...
> He put the water on for coffee and Anita went out naked into the sunshine.
> "Put something on" said Pettersson. "There are two animals standing there gazing at us. We're going into town."
> "You are funny," said Anita. "Since when have you been a prude?"
> "I'm not a prude, I'm scared. Are those elks still there?"
> "Yes" said Anita.

"Damned animals. We'll eat inside then ... Put some clothes on ..." (70)

So the dealer in pornography has a great respect for the country. He goes on to say that "I spent my childhood calmly and peacefully in Stockholm . There was the odd scuffle outside Karlberg station. That was all. Nobody ever told me that one day I'd be standing face to face with an elk."

Later in conversation with the young farmer Wiklund he hears that his father drowned too, although that time it was an accident, not suicide. "You're just crazy you country people. For Christ's sake have a bit of consideration for a delicate soul from the town."

But when Pettersson leaves Bråten it is with a profound sympathy for the old people, and this is shared by the reader. In festive and rather inebriated mood the four Bråten people and Pettersson and Anita had marched to the ruins of Yngve Frej's cottage to propose a toast to the memory of the old professional soldier "Every so often you thought war had broken out ... You were right."(83) But the enemy had not been a foreign invader but had come from within – the planners and the politicians with their so-called progress.

The old people of previous generations had been terrified of the Workhouse. The enemy is still there even though it is now the old people's home and no doubt very clean and well run and comfortable. The authorities are always "Them". "They" got Eriksson's sister who was paralysed after a brain haemorrhage and in the end was too heavy for them to nurse at home . As long as Elna is active there is a woman about the place and they can ward off "them" – but Elna has got gall stones and isn't very strong. "One fine day they'll take us away", says the shoemaker "But I'll padlock myself to the house so they can't carry me off."(122)

It is a gently amusing but an essentially sad book, capturing the dignity of the tragic old people representing the end of a whole era in Swedish history

(Page references are to S. Claesson: *Ancient Monuments* transl. by I. Scobbie. Thule Press 1980.)