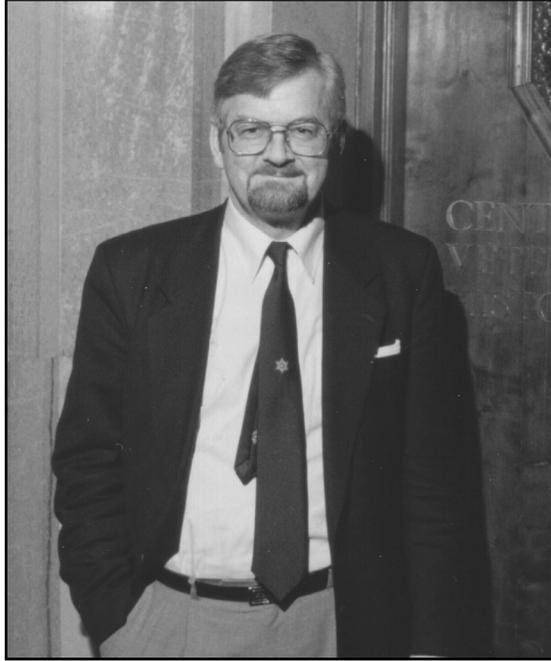

TORE FRÄNGSMYR



COURTESY OF THE ROYAL SWEDISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES. PHOTO BY BOO JONSSON.

8 JULY 1938 · 28 AUGUST 2017

Tore Frängsmyr, who dominated the history of science in Sweden from his chair at Uppsala University for a quarter century, began his literary career at the age of 14 by writing newspaper reports of the great events in his small village.¹ Since nothing much happened in Sjöbotten in Västerbotten and everybody already knew about it, he had to develop the capacity to string interesting stories together without violence to the facts—excellent training for a historian! No matter how clever, however, a boy reporter raised as a pietistic Lutheran on a farm in the backwoods of Northern Sweden, in a family of eight children, two cows, and a pig, was not an obvious candidate for a professorship in Uppsala. The sawmill in which Tore’s father worked to make ends meet provided only the raw material for books; of the end product, only religious tracts made it to the farm. The family’s chief entertainment was singing. Tore left Sjöbotten with a fine baritone voice (later much employed in rendering Swedish drinking songs), a lively sensibility of the role religion could play in everyday life, and a connoisseur’s appreciation of potatoes.

To complete his elementary education, Tore had to walk or ski to a village four or five miles distant from Sjöbotten. The nearest secondary school, in the mining town of Skellefteå, was 20 miles away. As there was no bus, he had to live there, on borrowed money. He read widely in philosophy, good literature, and, as a puzzling antidote to biblical literalism, paleontology and Darwinism. In 1958, having obtained a university grant, he passed through the “pearly gates and golden streets” (as he put it) of Uppsala. He was soon, but only briefly, disappointed. The literary history he had come to study was too loose in argument to satisfy him. For stronger stuff, he turned to intellectual history, whose professor, Sten Lindroth, liked facts and emphasized the history of science. A further attraction was the example of Lindroth’s teacher Johan Nordström, then retired but accessible, who had started the Swedish discipline of intellectual history centered on history of science (*Idé- och lärdoms historia*) through his publications and teaching, and by establishing a society (Lärdoms Historiska Samfundet) and a journal (*Lychmos*).

Lindroth allowed his few students their choice of thesis topics within his large domain, provided they chose Swedish ones and knew Latin. Tore chose earth history in the 18th century. He knew some paleontology and was on home ground with his protagonists’ problems

1 Personal information in what follows is drawn from my many conversations with Tore Frängsmyr; from the lengthy interview by Thomas Karlsruhn (“*Vetenskap och historia*,” *Arche - Tidskrift för psykoanalys, humaniora och arkitektur* 52–53 [2015]: 241–80); and from *Vem är det* 2007. It is a pleasure to thank Carl Frängsmyr, Karl Grandin, and Svante Lindqvist for their help, suggestions, and corrections.

in relating geology to Genesis. His thesis, *Geologi och skapelsetro* (Geology and the doctrine of creation, 1969), discusses the views of a half dozen Swedish savants by the old-fashioned rigorous textual methods of the history of ideas. He soon produced another work similar in scholarship but stronger in story line, *Wolffianismens genombrott i Uppsala* (The emergence of Wolffianism at Uppsala, 1972), an account of the uses made of Christian Wolff's rationalist philosophy at Uppsala from the 1720s to the 1750s. These works showed mastery of the genre, but the genre was not Tore's. In search of a wider readership, he followed up the geological theme of his thesis with a book on the discovery of the ice age in Sweden during the 19th century, *Upptäckten av istiden* (1976), and directed a project on "natural resources in cultural perspective." The collaborative volume reporting its results, *Paradiset och vildmarken* (Paradise and wilderness, 1984), analyzes the cultural, religious, and economic sensibilities with which we approach the use and abuse of natural resources.

The project on natural resources was a first fruit of Tore's tenure of the professorship that the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR) awarded him in 1982. The HSFR had been concerned that intellectual history was moving away from history of science and chose Tore to right the balance. Tore had acquired a generous conception of Swedish intellectual history during his postdoctoral decade at Uppsala, in part by writing teaching manuals with his colleague Gunnar Eriksson, and no doubt also by following the progress of Lindroth's *Svensk lärdomshistoria* (1975–1981), which, in four volumes, brought the story of Swedish intellectual development to 1809. Lindroth did not quite complete the last volume; filling it out and moving forward made a tempting project for a courageous wide-ranging scholar.

Tore's intellectual breadth combined with his practical wisdom made him the chairman, leader, and editor of choice when something big needed doing in the humanities. In 1979, the HSFR asked him to start a magazine, *Tvärnitt* (Cross section), which he edited until 1985. Tore immediately became chairman of the scientific advisory board of *Nationalencyklopedin*, which was completed in 20 volumes in 1996. He performed similar feats in history of science. In 1988 he acquired the editorship of *Les prix Nobel*, the annual proceedings and lectures of the Nobel Prize ceremonies, and became the first director of the Centrum för Vetenskapshistoria (Center for History of Science) at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, continuing in both capacities until 2005/2006. He was elected to the Academy in 1984, and, although scientists dominated the organization, Tore led the project that resulted in the Centrum.

Tore's monograph on Wolffianism presaged two directions of work. One—writing the history of the university in the city with the pearly gates and golden streets—began in earnest with the 400th anniversary (in 1995) of the university's second foundation. Tore was appointed director of the four volumes that would bring the official history (which had required eight volumes to reach 1793) forward to 2000. Second, the monograph on Wolff inspired Tore to write a synthetic account of the Enlightenment in Sweden, which he sensibly abandoned on discovering that there was none. Despite its strong showing in science with Celsius, Linnaeus, and many others, Sweden had not succumbed to the anti-religious program of the *philosophes*. Tore's announcement that a Swedish *upplysning* (Enlightenment) was a fiction owing to vague terminology met with resistance from historians who had written confidently about it. There is some autobiography in Tore's refusal of enlightenment to savants stuck in the sort of religion he had experienced in childhood and to historians seduced by the sort of terminological vagueness he had disliked in literary studies.²

In 1981 Tore started up the professorial ladder at Linköping University. He climbed there for only a year before he received his research professorship, which he decided to hold at Uppsala. The university made the appointment permanent in 1994. His book that year had the appropriate title, *Vetenskapsmannen som hjälte* (The man of science as hero), the hero being the polar explorer, especially A. E. Nordenskiöld with whom Tore identified (see Figure 1). Exploration is an international business, and Tore's light teaching load—25 hours a year—left him sufficient time for it. Lindroth had regarded international collaborations as a waste of time since his department focused on Sweden. Tore had freed himself from this philosophy in 1972–1973, when he spent a year at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and met English specialists in early earth history, Roy Porter and Martin Rudwick. He then made his international literary debut with a strong article on the cosmopolitan George Sarton, which, perhaps because he published it in a Swedish journal, did not receive the attention he thought it deserved.³

There followed several edited works in English and with English-speaking collaborators: *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work* (1983), *Science in Sweden* (1989), *Solomon's House Revisited* (1990), and (with Marco Beretta) *Sidereus Nuncius & Stella Polaris* (1997), a bilateral account of early scientific relations between Italy and Sweden. Another bilateral collaboration produced *The Quantifying Spirit in the*

2 Tore Frängsmyr, *Sökandet efter upplysningen* (1993), translated as *A la recherche des lumières* (Bordeaux, 1999).

3 Tore Frängsmyr, "Science or History: George Sarton and the Positivist Tradition in the History of Science," *Lychnos* (1973/1974): 104–44.

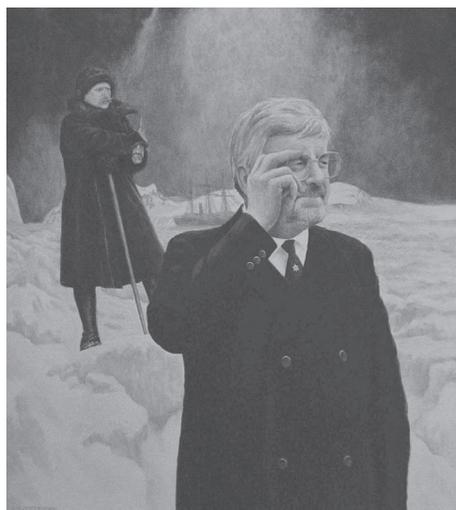


FIGURE 1. Tore Frängsmyr inserted into Georg von Rosen's famous picture of the Arctic explorer A. E. Nordenskiöld. Leif Zetterling's engaging counterfeit from 1993 hangs in the Center for History of Science that Tore founded at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. Courtesy of the Center's director, Karl Grandin.

18th Century (1990), edited by Tore, J. L. Heilbron, and Robin E. Rider. The title has “18th century” where “Enlightenment” might have been expected in deference to Tore's insights.

Further to outreach, Tore joined Giuliano Pancaldi, Dominique Pestre, and me to set up an International Summer School in History of Science that met every two years in Bologna, Uppsala, Berkeley, and Paris in rotation. It ran for some 20 years from 1988 until retirement of the founders brought it to a natural conclusion. The school established ongoing collaborations, brought several Russian historians permanently West, and taught timely subjects, sometimes at a high level. Tore gave details of its programs and publications in a report on the activities of his department up to 2002, when a large gift from Lisbet Rausing, herself a historian of science, transformed his personal chair into a permanent endowment.⁴ To bring Scandinavian activities in the history of science, including participation in the summer schools, to wider attention, Tore published a useful newsletter that he sent out gratis and continually for 40 or 50 issues.

It is scarcely credible that Tore managed to write a magnum opus while developing his international contacts and preparing doctoral students who would take up professorships in the history of science. This was *Svensk idéhistoria* (2000), his reconception and completion of

4 Tore Frängsmyr, *Avdelningen för vetenskapshistoria, 1982–2002* (Uppsala, 2003).

Lindroth's *Svensk lärdomshistoria* at twice the scale: two well-illustrated volumes covering Swedish intellectual history over the millennium ending in its year of publication. Tore's essays in journalism preserved him from the historian's fright of coming too close to the present. It was precisely his genre. He was a public intellectual, and a conspicuous one, as the man who passed the diplomas and medals to the King for presentation to the laureates at the annual Nobel ceremonies. His distinguished bearing was as familiar to viewers of the televised proceedings as was his byline to readers of *Svenska Dagbladet*.

When Tore retired in 2007 his main work was the volume of the Uppsala history covering the years 1916 to 2000. Cancer canceled his plans. Although he worked at it, he could not finish it, and his elder son Carl has now taken over. Tore's last book, however, shows no sign of weakening. *Pekingmänniskan* (2006) begins with his trip to China in 1995 as a member of a delegation to discuss Swedish-Chinese cultural relations. He was invited along as an expert in Chinese history on the thin ground that his book on the (Swedish) East India Company (*Ostindiska kompaniet*, 1976), a subject that Lindroth had recommended for his doctoral work, mainly concerned the company's business in China. During a visit to the site where three of a Peking man's teeth were found, Tore learned about a Swedish connection with the discovery. That put in motion the book on early man that consummated his old flirtation with evolution. His last article was a portion of a planned larger account of his exemplar, Johan Nordström.⁵

Tore's honors were many: prestigious prizes and medals, some of which decorated his *frack* on formal occasions; memberships in the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (in which he was a major voice), the American Philosophical Society (in which he took particular pride), and other honorific organizations; large research grants; and festschrifts at decadal intervals. The last of these, *Aurora borealis* (2008), was elegantly produced by Neale Watson's Scientific History Publications, which brought out many English-language books written or edited by Tore and his circle. Its title plays on Tore's pride in everything Northern. He valued among his greatest distinctions his election as Inspektor (honorary professorial supervisor of a student union) of Uppsala's Norrlands nation.

During the foundational decade between his doctorate and professorship, Tore produced more than books, monographs, and newspaper articles. In 1970 he married a fellow student, Birgitta Thunholm, who had helped to translate the English résumé published in his thesis. They

5 Tore Frängsmyr, "Humanisten Johan Nordström—ett femtioårsminne," *Acta universitatis upsaliensis, Skrifter rörande Uppsala universitet, B. Inbjudningar* 184 (2017): 9–38.

had four children. For many years Birgitta worked in a bookshop in Uppsala and knew the latest things worth reading in Swedish and English, and always could supply the correct English words if Tore faltered. Their home was a generous and hospitable place for visiting scholars. A large stone occupies much of the front garden. It bears the marks of glacial movement. Tore respected that stone and other evidence of slow but steady progress, like the continuing rise of the Scandinavian landmass since the last ice age—metaphors, perhaps, for the overall progressive, though sometimes retrograde, intellectual developments he wrote so much, and so well, about.

Elected 1999

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Author's Note

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