Round the World in Sixty Years

Patricia Crampton

Breakfast is important, and for me, since 1946, breakfast has been Swedish. No more boiled eggs (the smell had long been anathema to me, though it was a precious part of our wartime ration). Now I was a crispbread-eater for life; with jam, no more the detested marmalade – and *coffee*: never again tea for breakfast!

While my countrymen continued to endure their depressing start to the day, I had escaped, on the grounds that, as a freshly minted Modern Language graduate, I had never set foot on foreign soil, except in India, which didn't count, of course. I pointed out this omission to my father, who immediately assured me (I was under 21) that I would not be going to "war-torn" France or Germany. "Sweden?" I suggested, for no particular reason. "All right, if you have a proper invitation from a nice family." No doubt this will sound to younger readers more like *Cranford* than the middle of the twentieth century, but there it was.

It happened that a group of Swedish officers had visited Oxford during my last year. It also happened – I have absolutely no idea why – that I had been delegated to accompany them here and there – no doubt something to do with what my cherished Middle High German tutor (a Yorkshireman, who scorned, he often told us, "to call a whitewash broosh a powder poof") described as my practice of "entertaining the University" rather than preparing for my next tutorial (a wicked libel).

At all events, the Colonel in charge of this bunch had courteously invited me to call if I was ever in Sweden, so my father, a Colonel himself, was quite content. The letter I showed him was not written by the nice Colonel, nor was it written in Sweden – but I did visit the family, who were kindness itself, and one of whose two little boys is now – in his sixties – one of his country's greatly respected writers.

It was from their beach that I saw for the first time the magical, translucent jade of a northern twilight. Perhaps a poet has captured it – if so, I would love to know.

Swedish – the first sound of the language convinced me of recurrence, or something of the kind – as if I had known it long, long ago and had only to wait for the memory to be rekindled.

I read *Det Bästa* (the Swedish Readers' Digest) diligently: plenty of subjects, to increase my vocabulary, plus a usefully straightforward style, which would not overtax my ignorance. And I was entertained by customs now long extinct and certainly lost to us in England some time in the nineteenth century: taken by friends to a country house for the day, I was warned to make a slight bob to my hostess (my friend's father had slapped her face when she once omitted this courtesy) and to address her in the third person unless invited to do otherwise.

On the other hand, the three lively young people of the first family I stayed with for over a month, in Stockholm, would laugh themselves silly over my hand signals when driving (this was 1946, and Sweden had forged ahead of us in many other aspects of daily life).

The greatest gift of all, of course, was the exhilarating ease of jumping on a streetcar and trundling off to hear Jussi Björling sing at the Stockholm Opera. I collected the "vinyls" later, in England, but alas, they, with Björling, are long since gone.

Back to England after another two months, eager to start work as a translator, but one more tiny episode, directly related to my happy months in Sweden, was to find a rather pleasing, if ironic echo many years later. On returning home, I wrote to the Anglo-Swedish Society, introducing myself as an Oxford Modern Language graduate who had fallen in love with Swedish, and intended to follow it up. Could I keep the linguistic contact going in some way, through them? There was no reply.

But now it was time to find a job, preferably using German, my "main" subject at Oxford. I'm sure the University Appointments Board has taken several leaps forward since, but it was then in the care of a dear old lady on whom the new, women-workers-loving world had not quite dawned, any more than it had on St Hugh's famous principal, Miss Gwyer, with her immortal "*Is* there such a profession?" when I told her I was going to be a translator. So I went off to the Higher Appointments Board in Tavistock Square, and was told that the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, then in progress, had asked for two more English translators from German. I applied at once, and was told to attend a test in London the next week. We were allowed dictionaries – mine were still in Gothic script – and this was just as well, since in my sound 18th-19th century German, *Wirtschaft*, for instance, meant an inn, whereas by 1947 it was unlikely to refer to anything but "the economy".

I had an amazing two years – privileged, shocking, life-changing – spent all my spare time with a very special group of friends (who are lovingly traced in a more personal memoir) – and returned in 1949 to my own beloved country, where everyone, including my own parents, preferred not to ask, not to think, not to know anything at all about the death camps and everything that preceded them. Only my cousin John, a coeval child of Empire (I do hope people haven't forgotten their Kipling stories altogether– he still has a lot to say to us) asked me, very quietly, "What do you really think?" And he was probably the only person to whom I could reply: "There, but for the Grace of God..."

In the next six years, I worked, first, for a huge international company, as their "Head of Translation". Actually there was just me, and my industrious secretary, but I began talking to the translation agencies and the few freelances, for anything that came our way in the non-European

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languages, which was useful later, when I worked as a freelance myself. More interesting was the next international company, whose monthly bulletins I produced in English, from the mass of new engineering and scientific ideas constantly emerging from a world released from the demands of the military. Quite a lonely job, in my big library, even with the firm's scientific whizz-kids available for consultation. So I welcomed the opportunity to become the translator/conference organiser for the NATO Parliamentarians, for whom I regularly took a very merry team to Paris (the organisation's main centre) and once to America, where we toured the new giant aircraft carrier, and descended into the depths of the earth to see a beautiful abacus standing beside one of the brand-new colossal computers, both dwarfed into insignificance by the incalculable menace of the Red Telephone – through which the President of the United States could release The Bomb. In the Pentagon, I listened, with awe, to the best interpreter I have ever heard.

By this time my husband-to-be sometimes came over to the end-of-conference parties in Paris, and in 1957 we married and I started work at home, as a freelance translator. This was when the lovingly nurtured Swedish made an unexpectedly lively comeback, with complete translations of a monthly Swedish medical journal (incongruously, perhaps, the many months of translation for the appalling Doctors' Trial at Nuremberg had vastly enlarged my medical vocabulary) and still more interestingly, a regular Swedish political booklet, for which the NATO background was very helpful. Of course there was plenty of German and French translation as well.

And now, at last, the books. It started with reading and reporting on foreign books for publishers and in the 1960's and 70s English publishers were at last eager to take on the Europeans. The first book I translated, in 1960, was a Danish novel, *The Small Flag*, about the work of the UN peace forces on a Far Eastern frontier. It was a good story, but the publisher insisted on cutting the very moving finale, and the Danish author had not the necessary muscle to stop him. Neither had I, but this vandalism was a spur to later work on the Translator's Contract – all we had then was a scrappy little Letter of Agreement. And at about the same time, in Paris, the UNESCO General Conference at last agreed to include the study of translators' rights on its agenda and sought material from FIT (Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs) – only to decide that translators were "already assimilated to authors in most member states" and that FIT's own proposals were "outside UNESCO's competence". But we knew that a start had been made.

It was the second novel, *Naked in Piccadilly* (from Spanish, 1961) that was the real turning point for me as a translator. Well-reviewed in *The Observer*, it earned me a letter of invitation from George Astley, at the Society of Authors, to come and see him, with a view to joining the infant Translator's Association. Wrapped tightly in my fur coat (no one threw paint in those days) I tiptoed in to the office of my future close friend and ally, unaware that the TA was then barely more than a gleam in George's eye.

Eighteen more translations followed through 1961-68, from Danish, Norwegian, German, French and Dutch, before the first Swedish

translations, a series of books, by Ann-Mari Falk, Siv Widerberg, Harry Iseborg, I. and L. Sandberg and Sven Christer Swahn, which were just what English publishers were seeking for a new appeal to young readers.

And in the same year, 1968, a Committee of Experts was invited by UNESCO to examine "the moral and material situation of translators". With this, at last, the essential nature of the translator's contribution was recognised, and once again, very slowly, the wheels began to turn.

In 1970 the translation of Thor Heyerdahl's *Ra Expeditions* was offered for competition and I was lucky enough to get the job, though there was an awkward moment when he announced that I should come and stay at his Italian vineyard while I worked. The existence by then of Harriet, aged seven, and Dan, five, fortunately made this impossible. This translation was important for two reasons: firstly, it moved the Institute of Linguists to offer me membership of their Translators Guild (TG), together with some nice prize, and secondly, it is the first book marked in my record with the welcome initials "PLR". I had represented translators on the SoA/WAG (Society of Authors/ Writers and Artists Guild) committee thrashing out the authors' Public Lending Right for library borrowings, which, though small in financial terms, marked the recognition, at long last (it was A. P. Herbert who fired the first shots, in the 1920s) of the author's contribution to the United Kingdom's unique public library system. Later hard work, through FIT, among other organisations, gradually helped to introduce the system in many other countries. The translator's share was less than the author's, of course, but still a valuable addition to our always modest income.

Twenty-five translations later, including eight from Swedish, of which Hans-Eric Hellberg's "Maria" books earned a "decency warning" in the publisher's lists (a poor response, we thought, to Swedish frankness over bodily functions) came 1974 and *Karlson on the Roof*, the first from Astrid Lindgren. Then, in 1976, after another thirty books from several languages – including Swedish – *Karlson Flies Again*.

Also in 1976, the UNESCO draft recommendation for the protection of translators was submitted to a committee of governmental experts. The UK government not only entered the *only* "No" vote: it commented "HMG gives fair recognition of status to translators" (based solely on conditions for translators in the Civil Service!). George Astley and I finally tracked down Ivor Davis as the UK delegate to Paris – and acquired a crucial ally, now armed with genuine information from the experience of the TA and the TG (which I was chairing at the time). FIT invited George and me to join their delegation and – in the face of a general lazy attempt to put everything off again for a few more years – we won, we won! Years later, it was with great pride that I received the FIT medal "for world-wide services to translation".

"In some cases the *translator* will be protected under copyright when the *author* ... does not benefit from this protection." A simple statement, and the summary of a revolution. Nor could we have imagined, way back then, the inspiration we would one day receive from the direct action of Swedish authors in support of Swedish translators under threat.

Ten books later, in 1978, came Astrid's *Mardie* (Madicken), followed in 1980 by *Mardie to the Rescue*, and in 1982, after another eight books, *The*

Robber's Daughter, which won the Mildred Batchelder prize for the best children's book in translation published in the US that year. In 1982 also, the translation from German of *Marbot*, by a Nuremberg companion, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, won the Schlegel-Tieck Prize and the same year saw the welcome founding of SELTA, which met with wonderful support and enthusiasm from the Swedish Embassy. We have already passed our twenty-fifth birthday – outdone (no contest!) by the Astrid Lindgren centenary. Perhaps we could share 2012 (our thirtieth anniversary) with the Olympics...?

A particular joy was the translation, in 1984, of Astrid's moving story *My Nightingale is Singing*, followed by the charming *Dragon with Red Eyes* (on which, surprisingly, I was asked to give a dissertation at Cambridge, attended by a number of very excited Swedes, among others). The beautiful autobiographical piece, "I Remember", appeared in the prestigious *Signal* magazine, in 1988, in celebration of Astrid's eightieth birthday, followed by a few belated fragments, and finally, (one must presume) in 2002, *Sunnanäng*, a translation of which I had already recorded for my own enjoyment, was published, as *The Red Bird*, by Scholastic in America.

It was, of course, a special pleasure to translate, for Astrid herself, her newspaper piece "My Cow wants to have Fun" – a characteristically lively attack on the trammeled life of most farm cows, contrasted with Astrid's vision of cows munching grass in the open, amongst their fellows. Her request followed a letter in which I mentioned my son as an animal liberation activist, which of course appealed to her very much. Of all children's authors, she must have been the most bombarded by letters from all over the world – and yet, when I was off to Vienna, I think to receive the F.I.T./Lindgren prize (not the huge one that has since been set up, but still a great encouragement) – she took the trouble to write, congratulating me, and warning me that on her way, not long before, to receive another award, she had suffered quite a serious injury to one leg! I was to be Very Careful...!

Working on the TA and TG Committees brought invitations to enjoyable soirées at the French, German and Italian Embassies, to celebrate the award of the relevant translation prizes. (By now, there would scarcely have been room for them all on the average social calendar, if they had not all been brought together into a single event.) I became obsessed with the need for a Swedish translation prize, and once the SELTA committee had agreed, correspondence with the Swedish Embassy began – and went on... and on... Personally, I was concerned by the apparent lack of funds for translation and publication of examples of Sweden's fine literature, until someone suddenly remembered that George Bernard Shaw had left the money that went with his Nobel Prize, to "assist in the dissemination of Swedish culture to the people of the British Islands". Then, with the enthusiastic backing of the Cultural Attaché at the time, Torsten Kälvemark, at last the lovely money found a worthy home, and the Shaw Prize was born (and flourishes). I have also been a judge on the Aristeion, FIT/Lindgren and Marsh Award juries, and served on the Arts Council Translation panel.

In addition to the many roles mentioned here, Patricia Crampton was also Chair of SELTA 1992-96.

Yet another adventure began with IBBY, the International Board on

Books for Young People, dedicated to greater worldwide understanding through children's books. I spent eight years, four as its president, on the Hans Christian Andersen jury, which votes for one children's author and one artist as the winner of the biennial HCA awards. I subsequently travelled with IBBY to Teheran, Cyprus, Belgrade, Japan, China and Thailand, after which I was overwhelmed to receive the 1990 Eleanor Farjeon Award for services to children's literature. By then I had translated some 200 books for children and over 50 for adults. Every book has brought its own pleasure.

In 1999 my husband died peacefully in his sleep, and I stopped translating. There had been some particular magic about the forty years of freelance work in harmony, in our own home... Just one exception: Dick Bruna's "little square books" about Miffy, among others. Since discovering that his easily remembered verses could be translated into English verse, he has asked me to translate each new book as he finishes it. Plus his entire backlog...

On Patricia's translation of the Miffy books, see:

Catherine Fuller, "Patricia Crampton, Translator of Dick Bruna", *In Other Words*, no.26, winter 2005.

In 1947, when I started work, translation was still officially described in Britain as a *croft industry*. There are now at least a dozen major literary translation prizes and thousands of well-paid jobs in industry and the international organisations. A linguist's life is not so hard, after all.

When I made that first journey to Sweden in the SS Saga in 1947, I could never have dreamed that I was embarking on a sixty-year voyage of adventures, almost all of them pleasurable!

Details of some of the organisations mentioned:

FIT (Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs)
2021 Union Avenue, Suite 1108
Montreal (Quebec) H3A 2S9, Canada
www.fit-ift.org

Translators Association and **The Society of Authors**
84 Drayton Gardens
London SW10 9SB
www.societyofauthors.org/subsidiary_groups/translators_association/

Chartered Institute of Linguists
Saxon House
48 Southwark Street
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www.iol.org.uk