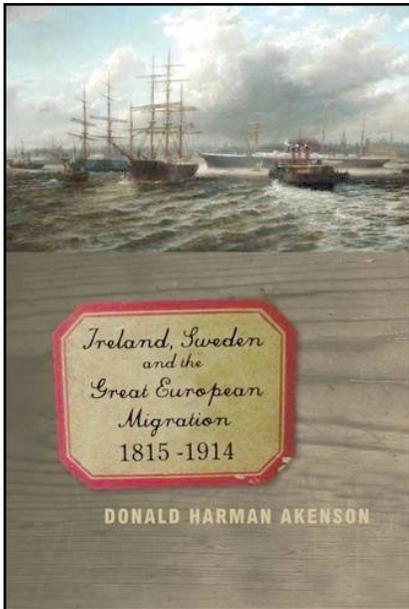


BOOK REVIEW

Submitted by Mary Ferm

IRELAND, SWEDEN AND THE GREAT EUROPEAN MIGRATION 1815-1914

By Donald Harman Akenson, McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, Montreal (2012)



When I first picked up this book at a conference, I was familiar with the Great Irish Famine (1845-49), although my Irish ancestors had left Ireland by 1800. However, I had never heard of the Swedish Deprivation of 1867-1869, and I knew my husband had ancestors who immigrated to the US from Sweden in 1868 (Augusta Mathilda Anderson, changed to Slattengren) and in 1880 (Olof Wilhelm Ferm). Always looking for historical background other than that of royal or military leaders, I hoped this would tell me more about the lives of the Fermes and Andersons. I was not disappointed.

In Sweden, for at least two generations after the event, the Great Deprivation of 1867-1869 was clearly marked in personal memories. However, it was not an easily defined regional or national phenomenon. It was severest in the five administrative counties of historical Norrland, and also in parts of Dalarna and Smaland, and these geographic pieces do not fit well together. While they were not famine years in the Irish sense, they were known by the Swedes as "the wet year, the dry year, the hard year".

These were the descriptions given by people, used to year after year of barely scraping by, to three years that were really difficult. The agronomist for one county travelled around in 1868 teaching how to make bread with mosses and lichens. The most common survival food was bread made from the layer just under the bark of pine, spruce, elm and birch. In Finland, one twelfth of the population died in one year. Written by an academic in search of a comparison with which to examine Ireland's "exceptionalism", it can be a little heavy in the early chapters on assumptions used in past historical studies. However, even the author's explanation of why he chose Sweden as a comparator is illuminating, pointing out, among other things, that in the mid 19th century, both countries were part of the "poor European periphery", and both only indirectly affected by wars. While growing up in Ireland meant "preparing to leave it", Sweden had a parallel situation in which almost one fifth of Swedish males born 1861-75 had emigrated by the early 1890s. (O.W. Ferm, born 1853, left 1880.) Even the discussion on the difficulty of arriving at reliable numbers of immigrants notes helpful facts, such as the rates of re-immigration, labor immigration to Europe, and the reminder that immigration from both countries was part of a Great European Migration (1815-1914). (Akenson contends this was one of the "truly freak phenomena in human history"—the pain experienced by migrants at home and the pain they inflicted, even indirectly, in their new land, is continually "an ever present drone-bass in our consciousness".) The book is quite readable, and even amusing at times—for example he notes that Swedes allegedly preferred sex to alcohol as a primary means of social diversion, in contrast to the Irish. In both countries, once out-migration began, it became part of everyday experience for the entire population.

There is much that is useful to a genealogist, including an explanation of the history of boundary changes in Irish and Swedish counties, discussion of poverty, population trends, and slow rates of industrialization. (O.W. Ferm's ancestors had been blacksmiths and ironworkers. Akenson states that the Swedish mining and iron industry shifted from household economies to more modern production, partly accomplished by the mid-1860s.) While my interest was mostly in the Swedish situation, all comparisons between the two countries illuminate life in Ireland as well.

Perhaps the statement that struck me most, as a genealogist, was in the introduction: "Some knowledge that is common in one generation becomes virtually unknown in the next." Every day things such as making a living were not considered worth even writing about at the time, so we don't hear about them. Re-imagining every-day lives of ancestors is hampered by this attitude, and this book helps counter that.