

Michael Branch 1940–2019

One of the most internationally renowned researchers in Finno-Ugrian studies, Professor Michael A. Branch of University College London, died after a long illness on 17 June 2019. He was born on 24 March 1940 in Langley, Kent, grew up in Eastern London and retired from his position as Director of the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies in 2001.

Throughout his career, Michael Branch served as a university lecturer and academic administrator at the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, where he was based since autumn 1967. After three years as Assistant Lecturer in Finno-Ugrian Studies, he became a permanent lecturer in autumn 1970 and was appointed Reader in Finnish Studies in autumn 1977. On 1 October 1986, he was appointed Professor of the same subject. In addition to his academic career, he would eventually take on important administrative duties at the university. He served as Director of his School from autumn 1980 until his retirement in 2001. Along with his official duties, he was either a member or chair of numerous governing bodies, and he represented the university in several external organisations. The School had been merged with the University in 1999.

It is evident that Michael Branch had an interest in the Finno-Ugric peoples and their languages from an early stage. The problem was that when he began his studies in 1959, no British university offered Finnish Studies as an accredited course, which is why he chose to major in Hungarian studies with Swedish as the subsidiary subject, graduating in the spring of 1963. His Hungarian studies lasted four years. They also included a course in Hungary, which would be of great significance for his future and not only from an academic point of view: it was there that he met his future wife, Hannele, whom he married in 1965. This tied him in many ways to Finland, where he spent most of his summer holidays and did research at archives and libraries.

Although the Hungarian language was the main subject of his studies in the early years, he had a strong interest in Finland and the Finnish language, and in the academic years 1961–1962, he was able to study Swedish in Helsinki thanks to a scholarship granted by the Finnish State, while also beginning in-depth studies in Finnish. The following year, he received a three-year British postgraduate research grant, which he used largely in Helsinki, focusing on his doctoral thesis and, at the same time,

familiarising himself with history of research on the Finno-Ugric languages. He became acquainted with the topic of his doctoral thesis, the Finnish linguist and researcher Anders Johan Sjögren, in the autumn of 1963 after completing his BA degree. His decision to study Swedish had therefore been a fortunate one, as it gave him access to Sjögren's world: according to the practice of time, Sjögren wrote most of his texts in Swedish, even though his mother tongue was Finnish. It is not at all impossible that Branch's interest in Sjögren was inspired by Professor W. R. Mead, as he was one of the supervisors of Branch's doctoral dissertation and had an excellent knowledge of Finland and its circumstances. His other supervisor was Professor Aulis J. Joki from Finland, who was also a true expert on the topic of Sjögren. Branch's dissertation, *The development of A. J. Sjögren as a scholar and his role in establishing Finnic studies as an academic subject*, was accepted in 1967 at the University of London.

In 1973 Branch published the printed work *A. J. Sjögren: Studies of the North* (Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne 152. Helsinki 1973), in which he elaborated parts of the themes of his dissertation. To quote his own words: "The main emphasis of the dissertation, which examined the development of Anders Johan Sjögren as a scholar and his contribution to the establishment of Finnic studies as an academic subject, was mainly biographical. While Sjögren remains the subject of the present work, it is concerned far more with the evolution of a single idea, the affinity of the Finno-Ugric languages and peoples as seen from Finland, from 1770 until the middle of the 19th century, and the methods by which that affinity was determined. As such, this book is as much concerned with the history of ideas in Finland as with the early history of Finno-Ugric studies."

The printed work was the first of a planned set of two parts. It examined Sjögren's intellectual development as university student, his move to St Petersburg in 1819 and his fieldwork expeditions in Northern Russia in 1824–1829 to study the languages, traditions and history of peoples related linguistically to the Finns. Upon his return to St Petersburg, he entered the employment of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, first in 1829 as an assistant and in 1832 as an Extraordinary Academician. He worked as an Ordinary Academician between 1844 and 1855.

Already the subject of the doctoral thesis and the approach required for it ended up determining the direction of Branch's research. The approach to the research was historical, and it focused primarily on the Finno-Ugric language groups and their oral traditions, language and history. The main

area of interest was Sjögren, to whom Branch devoted the greatest attention until the end of his career as a researcher. And, when it came to A. J. Sjögren, Branch undoubtedly became the leading authority on his subject. Gradually, his perspective expanded and he also began looking into the development of national identity and the factors influencing it, particularly among the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia. One of his great role models was Miroslav Hroch, Professor at the Charles University in Prague.

Branch never got the opportunity to write the planned sequel to the first volume of his printed work *A. J. Sjögren: Studies of the North*. The materials stored in the Soviet Union were not accessible at the time, and by the time the doors opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Branch's responsibilities as Director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies did not afford the freedom needed to carry out the research. However, his plans had already changed by then, and new projects filled his time even after his retirement.

Despite his demanding official duties, Branch published a large number of studies and articles. In addition, he was either an initiator or editor in charge of various large-scale publications intended for an international readership. Thus, in 1977, together with Professor Matti Kuusi, he edited a broad, Finnish-English bilingual folklore anthology entitled *Finnish Folk Poetry: Epic*. As its translator he managed to procure Keith Bosley, who later gained many merits as a translator of Finnish-language literature. And in 1985, which marked the 150th anniversary of the Kalevala, he republished the English-language Kalevala, *Kalevala: The land of heroes*, published originally by W. F. Kirby in 1907, which he edited and expanded with an introduction and notes.

A notable work in terms of its scale was *The Great Bear: A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages*, which was published by the Finnish Literature Society in 1993 and to which Michael Branch was invited to contribute as a main editor. The basic concept of the publication was developed by Professor Lauri Honko, and the editorial team also included Senni Timonen. The actual texts in the anthology were once again translated by Keith Bosley. This large anthology, about 800 pages in total, was carefully edited with each section introduced by a specialist's essay. The 450 poems, songs, spells, prayers and laments in the original languages and in English convey the worldview of pre-literate peoples and provide an insight into their lives. The texts illustrate the beliefs, perceptions and artistic genius of fifteen peoples scattered across

Northern Europe, deep into Russia and beyond the Urals, and of the Hungarians in Central Europe.

While Branch continued to carry out his duties at the School and his diligent publishing, his interest in Sjögren took on an ever more diverse form. In fact, Sjögren gradually became the dominant focus of his activities, especially after his retirement. In honour of the 200th anniversary of Sjögren's birth, Branch organised an international conference under the heading "Identity and the Writing of National Histories in the North-East Baltic Region in the 18th and 19th Centuries" in Iitti, Finland, in 1994. The organisers also included the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies. The presentations given at the conference were published in 1999 as a book edited by Michael Branch entitled *National History and Identity: Approaches to the Writing of National History in the North-East Baltic Region Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Studia Fennica Ethnologica 6. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society 1999).

Michael Branch considered it necessary to connect Sjögren's thinking to a wider international context. As part of these efforts, a second international conference was held at the Kymenlaakso Summer University in Kouvola, Finland, in June 2006. The supporting organisations behind the conference were University College London and the Finnish Cultural Foundation. The theme of the conference was the formation of national identities in Russia among its different nationalities. The speakers were internationally renowned experts on questions of nationality, including Miroslav Hroch. With great care, Branch collected the conference presentations into a wide-ranging publication, spanning more than 600 pages, entitled *Defining Self: Essays on emergent identities in Russia seventeenth to nineteenth centuries* (Studia Fennica Ethnologica 10. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society 2009). The work is perhaps the most important scientific publication on this subject.

Michael Branch repeatedly highlighted the unique significance of the materials – journals, correspondences and collections of data – that Sjögren left behind. In Branch's view, Sjögren's research could shed light on the early stages of the nationalities movement of the 19th century, for example, as both a cultural and political phenomenon, especially if the materials were examined in the light of the latest research. When discussing the importance of the materials, he states emphatically: "I am not aware of any other Central European nationalist who would have left so much first-hand personal material on his own mental development and the shaping of his ideology."

Even before his retirement, at the end of the 1990s, Branch raised the idea of publishing a critical, scientifically edited online version of Sjögren's journals. Thanks to his own research, he was well acquainted with the journals and understood their significance for research on Sjögren and his influence. In his view, the journals, which spanned as long as half a century (1806–1855), were a unique series of sources also on a European scale. With his characteristic tenacity, he began to promote the realisation of his idea and also persuaded the author of these words, who was tasked with organising the major project. The project was launched in 2001, with the aim of producing a scientifically edited critical edition of Sjögren's full journal, the scope of which was 8,352 handwritten pages.

Without Michael Branch's input and expertise, the online publishing project would never have got underway. He did great work in defining the objectives and editorial principles of the project. Once the project had begun, and especially after his retirement, Branch supervised the work and participated in it himself. Unfortunately, his illness interrupted his participation in the project work, which was therefore interrupted for a few years. Fortunately, before long, Finnish researchers were able to resume work on the publication. This said, the goal would no longer be to produce the kind of critical text edition initially envisioned by Michael Branch, but rather to publish the basic text of the journals. The resulting publication is now available to researchers at <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/177355>. Alongside the journal project, he worked for a long time to get a significant portion of A. J. Sjögren's correspondence published. This work was unfortunately left unfinished. Fortunately, however, his material has been recovered and is available to researchers in the manuscript collections of the Finnish Literature Society.

It can be said that Branch was a key figure in disseminating interest in the Finnish language and in the research and history of the Finno-Ugric languages, both in the English-speaking world and more broadly. He had extensive international contacts, which he vigorously exploited, and his activities were widely recognised. This can be seen, for example, in the high decorations he received not only in Finland but also in Estonia, Latvia and Poland.

Branch himself has characterised his activities and their context as follows: "As Director of the School, my academic career moved in many new and interesting directions, as the School worked with various institutions establishing British and other models of higher education, and at the same

time seizing the numerous opportunities to work more closely with colleagues in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In retirement I have happily seized the opportunities which had opened up allowing closer collaboration across a wide-field of common academic interests, with my main interests primarily in the life and times of Anders Johan Sjögren.”

In addition to research cooperation, Branch also contributed to the promotion of Finnish culture in Britain in many ways. For example, when the Helsinki University Library (now the National Library of Finland) began publishing the Finnish literature quarterly *Books from Finland*, he was initially a key figure in the project and participated in the publication of the journal until the end of 1979. Thanks to his expertise, the journal was able to adapt its editorial principles to meet the expectations and habits of a foreign readership. At the same time, he successfully promoted the translation of Finnish literature into English.

While working to make A. J. Sjögren and his life's work better known, Branch did not forget the birthplace of his subject. He forged close contacts with Iitti, Sjögren's home municipality, and its cultural circles. In 1989, he gave a presentation at the 450th anniversary of Iitti, and later, his relationship with Iitti grew stronger and led to a number of significant projects. On his initiative and with his help, the A. J. Sjögren Society was established in 1991, and he was invited to serve as an honorary member in 2001.

In fact, it is astonishing that, alongside his university career, Branch was able to create another full-scale and successful career as researcher and promoter of research in Finno-Ugrian studies. That would have already been enough for the life's work of a single researcher. This is a testament to his immense passion.

As a researcher and promoter of research, our friend Michael Branch was a recognised member of the Finnish community of scholars in Finno-Ugrian studies.

Esko Häkli