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***TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME***

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA  
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



Helsinki 2013

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**Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto**  
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# LIKE-MINDED SCHOLARS THROUGH THE CENTURIES: MISSION GEORG AUGUST WALLIN

Patricia Berg

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Kaj Öhrnberg's interest in the Finnish Arabist and explorer Georg August Wallin (1811–1852) was, according to what I have been told, awakened in the late 1970s after reading the introductory chapter to *Källan i fjärran öknen* ("The spring in the far desert"), edited by Göran Schildt (1976). In the introduction, Schildt presents some dubious assumptions about Wallin's person (for example, that Wallin was infected with syphilis in Paris in 1843, or that Wallin remained a true Christian and maintained a critical distance to Islam throughout his life). Already as a youngster in 1966, Kaj had bought the Elmgren edition, in which part of Wallin's letters and diaries are published.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, he felt that such assumptions by Schildt were not correct and even denigrating to Wallin. Myself, having known Kaj for only about five years but working closely together with him during this time, I can without effort imagine the moment 35 years ago when Kaj read the introduction by Schildt, found it to be offensive, and decided to respond to it in a manner that would do justice to Wallin.

At that time, Wallin and his work were fairly unknown, even in Finland. The best way to lift Wallin from the shadows and make him better known to the general public was to publish his texts and make them more accessible. Wallin died at the young age of 41, and he never had a chance to publish his material himself. Moreover, a large part of his work is written in Swedish. Without being used and cited by international – or national, for that matter – scholars, it has fallen into oblivion. Elmgren and Tallqvist published part of the Wallin material, but in these editions the original texts by Wallin were censored and the style of writing was conventionalised.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a new edition was needed, which Kaj hoped would be translated, over time into Finnish, English, Arabic,

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1 *Georg August Wallins reseanteckningar från Orienten åren 1843–1849.*

2 *Georg August Wallins reseanteckningar från Orienten åren 1843–1849; Bref och dagboksanteckningar af Georg August Wallin.*

and Persian. The Wallin archive is situated in the Finnish National Library in Helsinki, and Kaj started his work by going through and organizing the archive, and by compiling the corpus of texts that would be included in the future edition. Due to other projects Kaj was involved in, as well as teaching at the University of Helsinki, it would take more than three decades before the first volume was published in spring 2010.<sup>3</sup>

The current project *Georg August Wallins Skrifter* (“Georg August Wallin’s writings”) was launched in 2008 by the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland. From the late 1990s, the society had been interested and involved in Kaj’s work on the Wallin material, and it was thus natural that it should be the one to take on the publication project and its financing. I had been working at the Society since 2005, and as an editor I was in charge of publishing the travel diaries of two other explorers.<sup>4</sup> After the completion of the second diary, I was asked by the editor-in-chief about my next project. One of my fellow editors mentioned Wallin and his texts that Kaj had been working on for some time. Since I am an Egyptologist, it was suggested that I might be interested in working in collaboration with Kaj on the publication of the Wallin material.

In 2008, the publishing arm of the Society moved to a new location in Helsinki. At the house-warming party I spotted Kaj standing by himself, scanning some bookshelves. Later he told me that he had had a bad conscience since he had not advanced with the Wallin edition, and so he came to the party to show the people in charge of the publication section that he was still interested. Normally Kaj is not the kind of person you would find at these kinds of events. Like many others, I had attended his introductory course to Islam and had great respect for him as a teacher and scholar. It took me a few glasses of wine to gather the courage to approach him, but after stepping forward and introducing myself, we rather naturally started talking about working together on the Wallin material. Kaj had in the past mostly worked alone, and at first he was somewhat cautious of this young woman who eagerly presented him with her views on plans, timetables, and deadlines for the project – things that still today are not Kaj’s favourite topics. He was, however, too polite to avert my proposition, and naturally he also wanted to proceed with the edition. Even though we previously did not know each other, from the outset we got along very well, and his knowledge of the material and my knowledge of publishing critical editions seemed to form a good basis for collaboration. I am very thankful to Kaj for allowing us the opportunity to work together – the project was his and had been for several decades, and it

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<sup>3</sup> Wallin *Skrifter* 1.

<sup>4</sup> Sahlberg *En resa kring jorden 1839–1843*; Hornstedt *Brev från Batavia*.

was by no means self-evident that he would share it with me. I find this little anecdote of how he and I came to work together a good example of Kaj's lack of prejudice and his ability not to pigeonhole a person according to gender, age, or any other external attribute.

After meeting a couple of times, Kaj and I decided to put together a project plan and present it to the board of the Society. The plan was accepted some months later, and in 2008 we started working together on the Georg August Wallins Skrifter Project. We had also included in the plan an assistant, who would be in charge of the illustrations and the indexes. As Kaj was not used to working in a group, he did not at first find it necessary to have an assistant, but after meeting and getting to know Kira Pihlflyckt – who fit very neatly into our little team – he did not make any further objections. Thus, from the beginning the editorial team has consisted of three persons – Kaj, Kira, and me.<sup>5</sup>

According to the original publication plan, one volume would be published each year of the project – except for the second year, when we would publish two volumes. In all, the edition would include six volumes. Therefore, we were to release the first part in 2009 and the last in 2013. Kaj was sceptical about our ambitious plan, especially considering that Kira and I would only be working half-time, but he did not take deadlines too seriously. After a while, however, he realised that we were actually expected to keep the timetable, and it did not take long before Kaj gave me the nickname “yläkerran piiskuri” (‘the task-maker upstairs’; upstairs being where my office at the University is, whereas Kaj mostly uses the computer room on the ground floor). Of course, despite our best attempts, the timetable slipped; the first volume was published a whole year after the scheduled date. After that, however, we have established a well-functioning routine and have been able to keep up the pace. We have published one volume a year since 2010 and, if everything goes well, we will publish the sixth part in 2015. Originally the edition was supposed to consist of six volumes, but because there is more material than can be fit into that, it looks as if we will probably end up with seven or even eight.

In the original publication plan, we had divided the workload rather strictly between us. Kaj was to be in charge of editorial texts (e.g. introductory articles, translations, and commentaries). To my lot fell the editing of original texts and writing the text-critical section of the manuscript. Kira's task was to be in charge of the illustrations and indexes. Anders Carpelan has been the graphic designer

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5 The editor-in-chief of the Society, Nina Edgren-Henrichson, has also been involved in planning the project and some practical work, and editor Jonas Lillqvist has proofread the editorial texts included in Part 3 and 4 (Wallin *Skrifter* 3; *Skrifter* 4).



of the project since the beginning, and he also quite naturally found his place in our small and rather eccentric team. Initially our views of what the books would look like and include differed from each other. Kaj, for example, did not want to write commentaries on the original texts written by Wallin, and he was not intending to translate into Swedish the texts written in foreign languages (in this case all other languages than Swedish). My strongest argument for these – actually, my only argument that has had an impact on Kaj – is that our purpose is to make Wallin more well-known by publishing his texts, and it will only benefit Wallin if we do this in such a manner that readers who are not familiar with his time and world are also able to read and understand the material. Even today, writing the commentaries constitutes a nightmarish drama for Kaj, and each year the commentaries are handed in last. On the other hand, one of his favourite parts of the work process is choosing the pictures for the book covers. Already in the first year of the project, Kaj selected the covers for all the volumes (then numbering six) and ceremoniously presented them to Kira and me.

Over the course of the years, our strict publication plan and workload division have blurred. Currently, as we prepare the fourth volume, all three of us are working with the whole manuscript, reading and correcting each other's texts. We work rather freely without much interference from the Society, a rarity today for which we are very grateful. Our meetings mostly consist of Kaj coming to my offices at the University or at the Society during his daily round, or all three of us meeting at the Society. In the beginning, most of the meetings began with Kaj announcing (with a frown), "We have a problem." Usually the problem was not too difficult to solve, however, and the work could continue after a short discussion. For the meetings, Kaj often brings some of his highly valued books for Kira and me to read. His face takes on a concerned expression when handing these over, since my coffee cup – although several metres away at the other end of the table – in Kaj's opinion is too closely situated to his books. As the project advances, we face less and less problems, while at the same time we get better and better at foreseeing and solving them. We celebrate the publication of each volume by eating and drinking wine together. Kaj is in charge of the wine, while Kira and I take care of the food. The topics of our discussions vary: most commonly we start out with Wallin, but end up talking about anything from soccer and wine to sumo wrestling. Kaj shares small anecdotes from his student years, and Kira and I tell him about technological advances and what it is like studying at the University today.

During these conversations, on several occasions we have also talked about how Wallin came to be so important for Kaj. It is quite clear to everybody that the two of them share many characteristics. Wallin, as well as Kaj, was a Finnish Arabist

with interests in foreign languages and distant (in this case mostly Eastern) places and people. However, Wallin wanted to learn by living among the (indigenous) people, in their own environment, and therefore he left Helsinki in 1843 to travel to Egypt. He would be gone for seven years before returning to Finland in 1850. Over the course of the time he spent in the Middle East, Wallin settled in Cairo. From there he undertook journeys within Egypt, as well as three lengthier journeys eastward through the desert to the Arabian Peninsula, Sinai, Syro-Palestine, and Persia. Kaj, on the other hand, favours staying in Helsinki, preferably in the centre where he lives and works. His daily routine includes a long walk, during which he visits the cemetery of Hietaniemi where the graves of his parents and Wallin are located. His last visit to Cairo was in the 1970s, and he has never been to the Arabian Peninsula. Kaj has learned about foreign languages and peoples mostly by studying them through books and scientific journals, but he also has a large network of international colleagues that visit him in Helsinki and correspond with him frequently.

Before his travels to the Middle East, Wallin studied at the Imperial Alexander University, which today is the University of Helsinki. Of the classical and oriental languages, he took lectures in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Greek, and Latin. In addition, he knew German, French, English, and Russian. Kaj as well has studied and knows most of these languages, and he undertook his studies at the same university, to some degree even in the same department.<sup>6</sup> After completing his candidate's degree, Wallin wrote his docent's thesis (Wallin 1839) and thereafter went to St Petersburg to conduct further studies in oriental languages. In St Petersburg, Wallin met the Egyptian Muḥammad 'Ayyād al-Ṭanṭāwī. They became close friends and it was al-Ṭanṭāwī who encouraged Wallin to travel to the Middle East in order to familiarise himself with various forms of Arabic. Even though Russia is close to Kaj's heart, he did not meet his al-Ṭanṭāwī in St Petersburg, but in Helsinki. This was Sahban Mroueh, a Lebanese student who came to Helsinki in the 1970s to study. Kaj and Sahban became good friends and worked closely together in the 1970s and 1980s, amongst other things on the Wallin material written in Arabic.

Despite all these outer similarities, Wallin and Kaj represent two totally different kinds of personalities. In the end, perhaps it is the differences and not the similarities that draw Kaj to Wallin. Kaj is very fond of his own daily routines

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<sup>6</sup> Wallin was appointed Professor in Oriental literature in 1851, and he worked at the University for about one and a half years before his death in 1852. Oriental literature as a subject was later a part of the Department of Asian and African Studies (today the Department of World Cultures). Kaj also studied at this department and thereafter taught, amongst other things Islamic culture, for several decades.

and therefore admires Wallin's courage to leave the safety of his home and visit (for him) unknown places and people. He also admires Wallin's determination not to give in to demands made by colleagues or contemporary academic conventions, choosing to stay true to his task and perform it in the best way possible. Many would say that Kaj has done the same, and at least to me he represents a strong and independent will and a dislike for controlling authorities (and rigid dress code rules). Wallin was certainly not an easy person to get along with; he easily got irritated and had more opponents than friends. Kaj, on the other hand, is one of the few persons I know that is liked by most people.

In 2011, Wallin's 200th anniversary was celebrated. A workgroup, including me and Kaj, arranged an exhibition at the National Library in Helsinki and a one-day international seminar. The second volume of *Georg August Wallins Skrifter* was released.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Sofia Häggman published a book on Wallin's travels in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> As a result of these efforts, Kaj, Sofia, and I were as a group granted the 2012 State Award for Public Information. The prize ceremony was a fine moment, and even though we are only halfway through the project, we felt that the main purpose – to make Wallin and his work better known – has taken a big step forward. As always, Kaj was concerned with all the fuss, but he comforted himself that the prize was foremost in honour of Wallin and our role in the ceremony was mainly as stand-ins for him. We agreed that Wallin probably would have been pleased with the prize, and maybe even a little proud.

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<sup>7</sup> Wallin, *Skrifter 2*.

<sup>8</sup> Häggman 2011.

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