

STUDIA ORIENTALIA
EDIDIT SOCIETAS ORIENTALIS FENNICA
XVII:1

GEORG AUGUST WALLIN
1811—1852

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HELSINKI 1952

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On October 23, 1952 we celebrate the centenary of the death of our illustrious compatriot, Georg August Wallin, professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Helsinki.

Wallin belonged to the group of those genial pioneers who abounded in our country during the first half of the nineteenth century. Because of his field of work which took him as far as the deserts of Arabia and because of his consequent remoteness from Finnish cultural life and the briefness of his teaching activity, he left but a feeble personal imprint upon the academic youth of his time. Nevertheless, his invincible determination and his endurance bequeathed us an ideal undimmed by time. He was a man who never lost sight of his chief goal, even though it under hardships and misfortunes of fate could not be reached, often remaining a desert mirage which on the approach of the thirsty wanderer disappears into nothingness.

Wallin was born on October 24, 1811 in the parish of Sund in Ahvenanmaa (Åland) where his father was first county-clerk, then bailiff. In 1817 the family moved to Turku (Åbo), thus ending Wallin's Ahvenanmaa-period, not, however, without leaving indelible impressions in the boy's mind. In Turku he attended the Cathedral School, remaining there even after his father moved to Helsinki in 1825 to occupy a new post. It has been said that the boy Wallin was so busily engaged in helping to extinguish the great fire of Turku in 1827 that his own home, complete with contents, burned down. After the fire he was removed to Rauma where he also attended the Cathedral School for one year. But after a quarrel with his teacher

he left and prepared for his matriculation examination privately. He registered at the University in 1829.

Wallin's outstanding personality and the talents which later contributed to his success as an explorer were already perceptible in his youth. Sailing played an important rôle in the boy's life and increased activity in this sport hardened him spiritually and physically; indeed, his ambition to go to sea was only thwarted by the entreaties of his parents and by the unfortunate death at sea of an elder brother. His playmates respected and had faith in his judgment. He was not loquacious but straightforward, always ready to defend his opinions, even with violence. His sense of humour and desire for adventure caused one of his schoolmates to say about him later: »In 1826 there was a boy at school in Turku who was endowed with a sterling character, individuality, talent and the courage of a lion.» But he was also known to be somewhat on the lazy side, although this may have merely been a way of asserting himself. When he was not sailing or participating in schoolboys' pranks he sat in his room, playing flute or bassoon, for his dedication to music, begun in his youth, was to be lifelong. Thus, when he finally settled down after his trips to the East, he doubted whether he could ever conform to the mode of life known as Western civilization; but when he heard Beethoven, his favorite composer, in Cologne, he knew that he could never leave Europe forever.

Even after registering at the university Wallin devoted no special energies to his studies which, according to the customs of the time, were more varied than thorough. Required courses were not to his liking and he was not interested in a career. It is not known why he began to study Oriental languages, but we do know that he devoted a great deal of time to university social life. He was the undisputed leader of his circle of friends who performed countless feats usually associated with nineteenth-century student life. He was also one of the students suspended in 1834 for participating in an unauthorized gathering. While in Helsinki, he did not neglect his favourite sport, sailing, nor did his interest in music abate; on the contrary, the opportunities offered by this cultural centre increased it: he partic-

ipated in various groups and eventually played double-bass in the various public orchestral concerts. His musical activities are not without significance in connection with his later polyglotism inasmuch as it was through music that he came into contact with various touring virtuosi from whom he had occasion to learn foreign languages, a study to which he already devoted keen interest. According to his contemporaries, Wallin had the gift of learning to speak and write languages with great facility. Although he had not yet left Finland, he had a command of Latin, German, Russian, French, English and, to some extent, Arabic, which he had learned from a Tatar mullah in Suomenlinna (Sveaborg).

He passed his candidate's examination without special distinction and received the degree of Magister Philosophiæ in 1836. Now he was at last free to study Oriental languages under the guidance of his teacher and friend, Prof. Geitlin who, among other things, also had a practical command of Arabic and Persian. Wallin's dissertation, »The differences between classical and modern Arabic» appeared in 1839, and in the same year he was appointed Docent. But at the same time his financial situation became critical due to the loss of his father and it seems that Wallin entertained hopes of entering the foreign service (in the East), for which purpose he left for St. Petersburg in 1840, to study at the Oriental Seminar there.

In St. Petersburg Wallin soon concluded that his plans to go to the East as a diplomat could not be realised. Nevertheless, he remained there for two entire years, studying Arabic, Persian and Turkish under native teachers. He was especially fond of Tantāwi, his teacher of Arabic. In St. Petersburg Wallin also made the acquaintance of the well-known linguist A. J. Sjögren, by whose family he was always cordially received. Sjögren's influence on Wallin was considerable, but unfortunately we do not know whether or not Sjögren attempted to convert Wallin to the study of Finno-Ugric languages, for it is obvious that Sjögren was aware of Wallin's talents and his suitability for linguistic field-trips. It is perhaps to Sjögren's credit that when, in 1842, Wallin applied for and received the newly announced travel-scholarship, he planned an extended

voyage as far as central Arabia. Upon his return, Wallin intended to pass through territories inhabited by Finno-Ugric and Turkic speakers perhaps with the intention of later studying their possible mutual relationship. From this information we glean that Wallin was at that time not indifferent to Finno-Ugric (and Altaic) problems. It is not known with certainty whether Wallin mastered Finnish but from 1832 on he was a member of the Finnish Literary Society and when, in 1838, there was talk of sending an expedition to the Finno-Ugric speaking peoples in Asia, Wallin's name was proposed alongside that of Castrén, even if the latter had an advantage because of his previous training and experience.

When Wallin received the scholarship his joy was boundless, especially since his competition, consisting of such figures as M. A. Castrén, F. Cygneus and others, was not negligible. But rather than leave in haste, he remained some time in St. Petersburg, gathering information and advice from his friends and teachers, especially from Tantāwi. While in Helsinki, he attended a course in general practical medicine, an idea which was to bear fruit in the desert. He was ready for his expedition in the spring of 1843.

Over Lübeck, Hamburg and LeHavre, he proceeded to Paris where he remained for some time for reasons of health and research. He left Marseilles on a Finnish vessel for Constantinople and finally arrived in Cairo, via Alexandria, early in 1844. He had been travelling for six months.

Wallin was aware of the dangers which he courted by living in close association with Mohammedans whose intolerance toward those of other faiths is proverbial. The only guarantee of success, therefore, lay in moving about in Arab territory as an Arab. To achieve perfection in disguising himself, he spent eighteen months in his »Oriental home» in Cairo, as well as in bazaars, conversing and slurping coffee with sheiks. Eventually he left his home and went to live with his friend, Sheik Ali. He also accompanied Ali on two trips, first to his home in the Delta-region, and later to the Upper Nile. When he was convinced that he had achieved mastery of the language and of Arab manners and customs to a point where he was indistinguishable

from a native (Wallin's features were not exaggeratedly »European«), he decided to leave Cairo of which he had grown tired. In April, 1845 he went to live with the Beduins. It is easily possible that Wallin was the first scientist to undergo such elaborate preparations before departing on a field-trip of this kind.

As soon as he reached the desert his melancholy yielded place to peace of mind; he felt at home among the rustic but gallant Beduins and his diary confirms this by his reference to starry nights, to camp-life under the open sky, and to the noble artlessness of the women. It may perhaps seem surprising that Wallin was completely at ease in a milieu, needless to say, much below his own level. If, however, we remember that ever since childhood he had exhibited all the features which make for a wholesome, unpretentious personality, it becomes a matter of course that Wallin's unshakeable sense of justice and his democratic conviction should assert themselves during his life as a desert nomad. He hated all superficiality and refused to adapt himself to the »straightjacket of convention and to soulless mechanism«. Vivid proofs of this abound at all stages. It is also to be noted that Wallin's linguistic studies were not his principal interest, but rather a manner in which to approach the ultimate object of his researches, namely, an intimate acquaintance with the people's *modus vivendi*. From all appearances he succeeded in his aim, for the Beduins bestowed honour, friendship and love upon him. For his activity among them as a physician, for his straightforwardness and for his honesty, they later honoured him with the title of »upright man« even after it had become common knowledge that he was a Christian.

Wallin's first voyage through the desert was directed across the Sinai peninsula to the East. He then turned North, to the city of Ma'an (the point where the railway now turns Southeast, toward Medina, as it leaves Palestine). The final stage of his journey took him East again, straight through the desert to Djauf, into the heart of Northern Arabia. After having spent four months in this region he continued Southeast to Hajil, whence it was his intention to proceed to the Persian Gulf. His plan had to fail, however, because

of discord among the natives. Instead, Wallin joined a group of pilgrims and in their midst proceeded southward, straight to Medina. But since the possibility of his falling prey to religious fanatics was far from excluded he joined an even larger group of pilgrims, consisting of hundreds of thousands, and proceeded to Mecca. (Before Wallin only four Europeans, Domingo Badiah y Lebiah, Seetzen, Burckhardt and Roches, had set foot on this holy ground.) He performed the religious rites, thus gaining possession of the name of a *haddji*, one who has visited Mecca, a name which was to be of great use to him in his subsequent travels. He crossed the Red Sea on a little vessel, arrived in Suez and finally in Cairo in March 1846 after having endured dangers and privations for eleven months.

At this time Wallin's physical condition began to show alarming signs. Continual dangers, bad food, the irregular life of the desert, financial troubles and uncertainty about the future (he had had no word from Finland for a long time and four important letters of his disappeared, as he later learned), all these factors contributed to an already incipient liver-ailment. For some time his conviction grew that in order to carry out his plans he would need more funds. Fortunately, 1,000 rubles which Geitlin had procured for him reached him. He therefore embarked on a second voyage (December, 1846 — July, 1847), this time to Palestine. But illness and financial cares had reached new heights when he arrived in Cairo again.

Nevertheless, when need is great, help is sometimes at hand. A letter bearing the news that though Wallin had not been accorded a renewal of his scholarship yet the newly instituted Alexander-scholarship awaited his letter of acceptance was waiting for him in Cairo. This circumstance enabled him to depart on his third and longest voyage, in December, 1847. He began his journey in the same direction as his first, then turning toward the shores of the Red Sea which he crossed by boat, landing at the little port of Moila, whence he proceeded to Hajil again, this time by caravan. At this point, Wallin envisaged the following itinerary: a deeper excursion into central Arabia, thence to the coast of the Persian Gulf, then by boat to Southern Arabia thus planning to penetrate it from the

south. But all these plans were irremediably shattered when a young Beduin in Hajil warned him not to enter any territory inhabited by the fanatic central-Arabian tribes, lest they discover that he is an infidel. After weighing the issue, Wallin continued due North, to Bagdad. He was the first European to have crossed Northern Arabia, an achievement which was duly rewarded in 1850, when the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain honoured him with the same prize which it had bestowed upon Livingstone the previous year.

Still, Wallin did not return home. He roamed about in Persia, finally alighting in Basra, where he hoped to find the money which he had sent ahead from Bagdad. But since this money had not arrived, he remained in Basra for an entire month, deprived of all means and living in the most abject need. Finally, through the intervention and help of English friends he returned to Bagdad where he had the opportunity to spend some time among Englishmen — his first sojourn among Europeans in four years. He then crossed the Syrian Desert on camelback (he was robbed once on this occasion) to Damascus and Beirut and arrived in Cairo in July, 1849 after an uninterrupted journey of eighteen months. Even if this last journey fell short of his expectations in that he accomplished only a fraction of what he had set out to do, it is still the most remarkable geographic achievement of the time, a fact which guarantees Wallin's name permanent standing among the explorers of the 19th century.

When Wallin finally set out toward the West he was depressed. His journey had been interrupted, his intentions not fully realized, his state of health was deplorable and, nevertheless, he refused to give up hope of visiting the »gallant sons of the desert» again. But when this hope, too, was shattered, the future seemed gloomier than ever. His homeward journey took him through Italy and Germany to London. He remained in England for some time, partly in order to prepare a report of his last journey for the Royal Geographical Society and partly to complete his researches on Arab ethnology in various libraries. The recognition which was accorded him was undivided. In his homeland, Prof. Geitlin vacated his own chair on the theological faculty for Wallin who was appointed professor of

Oriental Languages on January 1, 1851. (By this time Wallin's dissertation on Ibn alFârdin's mystic lovesong and Arab commentary thereto had already been published).

But the difficulties which Wallin had encountered at almost every step in no way dimmed his desire to return to the East. He began negotiations with the geographical societies of Great Britain and Russia in regard to a six years' trip to Arabia. The University consented to release him from his academic obligations for the entire period as well as to accord him his full salary. Wallin had demanded a rather high annual sum for these six years but all his conditions were accepted, indeed, the British learned body did not even demand a detailed plan of his prospected journey but gave him *carte blanche*. When Wallin left for St. Petersburg to receive more detailed instructions it was realised there, to his deep indignation, that the sum which he had envisaged as intended to cover one year was intended to cover the entire journey. Since the sum in question was considerable (about 10,000 Marks per year for six years, not including equipment) discussions approached a standstill. New depressions set in and he returned to Helsinki a broken man. Perhaps his illness was accentuated by these new aggravations, so that before arrangements for new negotiations could be made, death unsuspectedly put an end to the eventful life of the explorer (October 23, 1852). Heart-failure had gently and painlessly freed him from all spiritual and bodily suffering.

He was sincerely mourned by all Finland, all the more so since his death had been preceded by that of his brave and productive compatriot M. A. Castrén whose life's work is, on many counts, comparable to that of Wallin in spite of the fact that huge areas separated their respective domains. Even if in Finland there was as yet no clear notion of his great contributions, his passing was felt as a heavy blow by all. This could be partly attributed to the mysterious charm of the East which always has exercised great power over the Western mind. To the Finnish people, this mystery of East was now personified by Wallin. But it is more likely that Wallin's own personality which had exerted no small influence on those who had known

him, had left a deep ineradicable impression. He was mourned not only by the academic world which was familiar with the extent of his ability, of his production and of the hopes which could have been set upon his future, but he was mourned by the entire educated class in this country which was proud of the fact that it had been the fate of small Finland to produce such worldfamous men.¹

Are we to appraise Wallin's contribution as an Arabist, we must bear in mind the many unfavorable conditions under which it was his lot to work: material need, bad health, etc. He considered his work only as a preparatory step and his comparatively meagre output must therefore not be regarded as final. He worked thoroughly and slowly, perhaps relying too much on his memory and on the future. Our information about his visit to Mecca, for example, is contained in a brief, dry narrative, in two letters² and in his diary. While it is true that living conditions in the desert are not such as to encourage the taking of elaborate notes, it is nevertheless a fact that Wallin did not exert himself in this direction, even when he was not wandering. By his own confession, he would rather live among Beduins and gather materials than write academic treatises. Wallin was in the first place an explorer and ethnologist, and only secondarily a philologist. We must therefore regret that fate did not allow him to carry out his plans of publishing a complete description of his travels and adventures. It must not be forgotten either that during Wallin's stay in Arabia a heavy swell was still perceptible after the recent powerful political movement of Wahhabism, so that great caution had to be exercised in the recording of the notes. As late as 1904 Hogarth in his book »Penetration of Arabia» seriously

¹ I have in my possession two letters from students, contemporaries of Wallin, in which he is placed by the side of our national heroes Runeberg and Snellman. Both of these documents bear witness to the deep impression which Castrén's and Wallin's death made on the studentbody of his time. — The poet Z. Topelius' reaction to Wallin's passing is forever preserved in his poem *Gå vandrare på lifvets väg* (*Walk, wanderer, the path of life*).

² Translated (in French) and reprinted in my book »Mahomet» (Flammarion 1946).

maintains that Wallin had been a secret political agent of Khedive Abbas, Viceroy of Egypt. This assertion has later on been adequately proved false (cf. e.g. Tallqvist in »Zeitschrift für Assyriologie» vol. 27 p. 103).

Wallin's scientific production has gained undivided recognition among specialists, as witnessed by the publication of his travel report in British journals. His studies in the phonetics of heretofore unknown Beduin dialects, published by his countryman Kellgren in the ZDMG, are basic and still referred to in the latest works on Semitic phonology. This equally applies to his collections of Beduin songs which were the first of their kind to receive academic attention. It is generally agreed that Wallin was a thorough, reliable and trustworthy worker.

The loss of Wallin the man was the loss of Wallin the Orientalist. Had death not intervened, the high hopes set upon him would doubtlessly have been realized.

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(Compiled by Karl-Erik Henriksson.)

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