Scandinavian Studies in the UK

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The establishment of Scandinavian Studies as a discipline in Great Britain is historically linked to the growing attraction to Scandinavia in Victorian Britain. From the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain witnessed a proliferation of travel literature on this region, which emphasised its geographical proximity and cultural affinity while also pointing out significant differences and Britain's overall cultural superiority. It also experienced a growing interest in Old Norse language and literature linked, at least in part, to England's heavily politicised attempt to trace its Teutonic heritage, thus emphasising cultural and ethnic roots "nearer to the people of the home soil and their history" (Wawn 2000: 31–33; cf. Fjågesund/Symes 2003: 114–115; Fjågesund 2014: 212). These trends are reflected in some of the first attempts to map, analyse and present Nordic culture to British readers, such as William and Mary Howitt's *Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852) and Frederick Metcalfe's *The Englishman and the Scandinavian; or, A Comparison of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Literature* (cf. Giles 2018: 56–58).

In addition to the development of Old Norse studies, often within the remit of English Departments, by the 1890s, 'modern' Scandinavian literature—in the form of works by well-known authors such as Ibsen, Brandes and Strindberg—became widely read and imitated throughout Europe, including in Britain, often stimulating, both in the academic and public sphere, debates around gender roles in traditionally patriarchal societies (cf Ewbank 1999: 16–22; Rem 2021: 176).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the advancement of Scandinavian Studies went hand in hand with efforts to disseminate literary criticism and research on both older and more contemporary literature. The Viking Society for Northern Research—founded in London in 1892 and still active today—with its publication the *Saga-Book* was one of the first fora bringing together students and researchers in the field of northern studies (cf. Næss 1962: 54–55). The first Scandinavian Studies Department in the UK was founded at University College London (UCL) in 1918 and offered the study (and research of) the three mainland modern Scandinavian languages and literatures as well as of the language, literature and culture of Medieval Scandinavia.

As the field of Scandinavian Studies grew internationally, UK scholars and institutions played an important role beyond their national borders. The University of Cambridge hosted the first meeting of what was later to become the International Association of Scandinavian Studies in 1956 and was the first editorial home of *Scandinavica*, the first English-language Scandinavian Studies scholarly journal launched in 1962 (cf Garton 2012: 14).

In her article on Scandinavian Studies in 1977, Garton identifies the 1970s as the height of this discipline in the UK "in terms of the spread of Scandinavian Studies across the British university system" (2017: 98). Based on a report published by the Inter-University Committee on Scandinavian Studies, in 1977 seventeen universities were listed as contributing to the subject, eight in England (Cambridge, East Anglia, Hull, London, Newcastle, Sheffield, Surrey and York), four in Scotland (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling), four in Wales (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Lampeter) and one in Northern Ireland (Belfast). While it is true that only four of these institutions had fully fledged departments offering at least three of the modern Scandinavian languages to honours level, the others had one or more 'tenured' lecturer in Scandinavian Studies and offered at least some language provision (cf. Garton 2017: 94).

From the 1980s the constellation of Scandinavian Studies in Britain was affected by a push towards centralisation of the provision of this subject either due to attempts to maximise resources—as it happened for instance in Scotland with the decision to locate the main disciplinary centres in Edinburgh in 1987—or to cuts to higher education under the Thatcher government—where the departments in Newcastle, Cambridge, Hull and East Anglia were closed one after the other (cf

Garton 2017: 98). In 2022 Scandinavian Studies still exists in the form of units in two universities in Britain, at UCL and at the University of Edinburgh. In both cases, despite still preserving some autonomy in relation to curriculum provision, Scandinavian Studies units are part of bigger and more centralised departments, namely the School of European Languages, Culture and Society (SELCS) at UCL and the Department of European Languages and Cultures (DELC) at Edinburgh.

As of today, UCL and Edinburgh still offer degree programmes in Scandinavian Studies and courses in all three mainland Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) at all levels from beginner to advanced, as well as a range of courses in Scandinavian culture, history, literature, and linguistics. Icelandic is offered at all levels at UCL and at foundation level at Edinburgh, and Faroese has also previously been part of the course provision at UCL. Finnish language and culture—which is administratively part of a different department, namely the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (SEESS) —is also offered at UCL alongside the Baltic languages, and was previously offered at Edinburgh.

While UCL and Edinburgh may be the only two institutions still offering a full range of taught and research degree programmes (at both undergraduate and postgraduate level) in Scandinavian Studies, several universities in the UK have centres and research communities that are active in this subject area. Examples of this are: the Centre for Scandinavian Studies at the University of Aberdeen, which specialises in the literature, history, language and culture of Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia (including Iceland and other parts of the Viking world) and which offers courses in Swedish language; the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge, which in addition to medieval studies includes some provision of modern Icelandic language; the research communities and centres that are part of the Department of English at the University of Oxford, which centre around Old Norse and Icelandic literature and language, art and music; the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds, which focuses on Old Norse studies; and the Institute for Northern Studies at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Since the 1970s, academic collaboration within the field has been supported by different nation-wide networks. The meetings of the University Teachers of Scandinavian Studies, which began in 1975, later became known as conferences of The British Association of Scandinavian Studies, which met for the last time in 1997. More recently, the Nordic Research Network (NRN), which was founded in 2010, aimed to create a new platform for discussion among early-career researchers in Scandinavian Studies in the UK regardless of affiliation. The NRN held seven meetings in all from 2010 to 2017 and its work resulted in three edited volumes published by Norvik Press, the first British publisher specialising in Nordic literature and research founded at the University of East Anglia in 1986 but now based at UCL since 2010.

While most institutions continue to use ‘Scandinavian Studies’ in their name, the teaching and, particularly, the research within this field in the UK has a much broader Nordic scope. As institutions commit to more inclusive curricula and new English-language materials and research are developed in this direction—including contributions to Greenlandic language and literature and the Sámi languages—‘Nordic Studies’ may well soon be recognised as a more representative name for this discipline in the UK (cf. Lindskog/Stougaard-Nielsen 2020).

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