Introduction to Nordic Cultures

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Contemporary perspectives on the Nordic countries often frame the region as a destination of immigration, focusing on the various challenges that increased cross-border mobility might pose to the Nordic political landscape, ethnic and cultural composition, or the resilience of the Nordic welfare states. However, it is worth keeping in mind that throughout centuries, the Nordic region has much more commonly been a place that people have wanted to leave – not least during times of economic depression or political turmoil.

Examples of significant emigration from the three Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – reach back at least to the times of Germanic tribes invading the West-Roman Empire in the Migration Period of the fourth to the sixth century CE (see chapter 1 in this volume); and, famously, Scandinavian seafarers becoming a Europe-wide nuisance in the Viking Age from the eighth to the eleventh century, when Scandinavian settlements were established in both Western and Eastern Europe. Even more recently, during the era of industrialisation and political change in the nineteenth century, there was major Scandinavian emigration, especially to the USA. This direction of movement was substantially reversed only after the Second World War, when the Social Democratic states in Scandinavia experienced a period of prolonged economic growth and thus received and even encouraged labour migration from other, less advantaged countries. Their humanitarian refugee policies, first formulated in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of new radical human-rights thinking, and subsequently also applied in Norway and Denmark, soon led to the arrival of increased numbers of asylum seekers (see Brochmann 2017, 230).

The first purpose of this chapter is to consider nineteenth-century emigration from Scandinavia – particularly from Sweden – as a complex
and multifaceted phenomenon, and engage with questions such as why the Scandinavian emigrants wanted to leave, the forms their emigration took, and how well they became integrated into the societies of their destination countries. Secondly, we will consider official and semi-official Swedish responses to the emigration question in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both in terms of trying to understand the causes of emigration and how it might be prevented, as well as attempting to preserve and strengthen the Swedish identity of those already living abroad.

As we will see, attitudes towards emigration in the modern era were closely connected to reactions to broader, often deeply disruptive contemporary processes of nation building, modernisation and societal change. Engagement with ‘the emigration question’ could therefore become a point of departure for a reformist, optimistic vision of modernity, but it could also serve as an outlet for a national-romantic yearning for the supposedly simpler times of the past (see chapters 4 and 11 in this volume). Furthermore, if emigration were to be embraced rather than shunned, it could be accepted either from a liberal point of view as a much-needed safety valve against overpopulation, or from a radical nationalist perspective as a praiseworthy example of daring colonialism.

In the interests of cohesiveness and brevity, the story presented here will primarily focus on Sweden, the most populous of the Scandinavian countries. This is not to say that the Swedish case is particularly unique. Similar studies could be done on other Nordic nations, and other European states, even though they would naturally differ in their specifics. But the intention here is to be representative, rather than comprehensive; and Sweden, in its attempts to take a markedly managerial approach to its ‘emigration problem’, is a good example of tendencies that became expressed with perhaps less clarity elsewhere.

**Emigration in the Nineteenth Century**

Between the years 1800 and 1914, the populations of Denmark, Norway and Sweden tripled in number. The reasons behind this population growth were famously summed up by the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér in 1833 as ‘peace, vaccines and potatoes’ (‘freden, vaccinet och potäterna’) (Jansson 2016, 685). Indeed, with the exception of the two Schleswig-Holstein wars in 1848–51 and 1864, the century after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 was remarkably peaceful for the Scandinavian kingdoms. Perhaps because young men did not die in wars, more children were being born. The early nineteenth century also saw the widespread
adoption of a vaccine against smallpox, which Denmark made legally mandatory in 1810 – one of the first countries in Europe to do so (Orfield 1953, 57). Also important for longer lifespans were better medical education, hospitals, hygiene and an emerging understanding of the causes of certain diseases.

Moreover, while crop failure was still a possibility – as shown by the great Swedish famine of 1867–9 – the increasingly widespread cultivation of potatoes and decreased dependence on grain greatly reduced the threat of hunger. Better agricultural practices were also facilitated by private ownership of land replacing the obsolete open-field system, and, towards the end of the period, the introduction of the first examples of horse-drawn mechanical agricultural machinery. Thanks to improved methods of transport and food preservation, the menu of even lower-class people was becoming more varied and nutritious. Consequently, while nativity rates remained high, the mortality rates – especially of infant mortality – dropped significantly (Gjerde 1995, 86; Gustafsson 1997, 160–1; Ljungmark 2008, 9).

| The population of Scandinavia (in millions of people): |
|-----------------|-------|------|------|------|
|                | 1800  | 1850 | 1900 | 1910 |
| **Denmark**    | 0.93  | 1.42 | 2.43 | 2.74 |
| **Sweden**     | 2.35  | 3.48 | 5.14 | 5.52 |
| **Norway**     | 0.88  | 1.39 | 2.24 | 2.39 |

(Martinsson 2018)

The population growth had significant social and economic consequences, the aggregate effect of which was not unequivocally positive. First, both economic prosperity and social cohesion were threatened by rural destitution as agricultural expansion was limited by the availability of arable land. By mid-century, increasing numbers of people were forced into poverty in the countryside, unable to feed their families from their own fields. Second, an increase in the numbers of surviving children drove up the number of potential heirs, which often led to ancestral farmlands being divided up and individual farms ending up smaller and less efficient in food production. For this reason, Sweden had already in 1827 officially forbidden the further sub-division of farmsteads unless the resulting farms could feed their occupants and pay the requisite taxes. This ban was abolished in 1881, meaning a renewed increase in the numbers of rural poor (Barton 1975, 10; Söderberg 1981, 37).
At the same time, nineteenth-century Scandinavians had more opportunities to migrate and settle elsewhere than ever before since the end of the Viking Age. Movement from the countryside to the towns (urbanisation) was one major facet of it, but significant population movements also took place between rural areas, motivated by overpopulation, unemployment, and a desire for better living conditions. A degree of inter-Nordic migration also occurred: for example, from Finland to Northern Norway, and from Sweden across Öresund to Copenhagen. Emigration overseas was fundamentally yet another aspect of the same mobility, which remained a major feature of life in Scandinavia up until the beginning of the next century when industrialisation as a new source of economic growth began to alleviate unemployment (Gustafsson 1997, 187, 96).

Between about 1825 and 1930 (when American policies started severely restricting further immigration), c.3 million Scandinavians moved abroad, including 300,000 Danes, 850,000 Norwegians and 1.2 million Swedes (Gjerde 1995, 85). Norway had the highest proportion of its population emigrate, while Sweden, where emigration without royal permission was officially decriminalised in 1840, led in absolute numbers. Again, this did not make Scandinavia exceptional. Between the Napoleonic Wars and the Great Depression of the 1930s, more than 50 million Europeans emigrated and settled abroad (Baines 1994, 525), most of them in the USA, but also in Canada, South America, South Africa and Australia. This list of destinations was shared across Europe. In the case of the three Scandinavian kingdoms, well over 95 per cent of emigrants moved to the USA and, to a lesser extent, Canada (Gjerde 1995, 85).

The immediate causes of emigration, sometimes called the ‘push factors’, were often connected to the economic and social problems that had ensued from overpopulation. Many Swedish emigrants came from poor rural areas, such as Småland in the south. However, there could also be other reasons. Indeed, the first émigré groups from Scandinavia had a religious rationale: in 1832, 52 Norwegian Quakers travelled from Stavanger to the state of New York and from there to Illinois where they settled (Nordstrom 2000, 232). In 1846, the Swedish sectarian preacher Erik Jansson and his pietist followers established the Bishop Hill colony in the same state (see Ljungmark 2008, 18–21). Members of these and other religious minority groups (especially the American-inspired ones: Methodists, Baptists, Mormons etc.) left because of the oppressive Lutheran state churches at home, with Swedish laws against religious dissenters remaining in force up until 1860 (Barton 1975, 12–13). Causes of emigration could also be political or semi-political, such as
the rigid social hierarchies and the undemocratic nature of political life in Scandinavia.

The attractive features of the destination country, the so-called ‘pull factors’, included better chances at economic and social mobility – such as lower land prices or better-paid jobs – freedom of religion, more democratic and open societal structures, and, for many émigrés, a badly-needed chance to start afresh lives that for one or another reason had taken a wrong turn. Furthermore, the choice of destination was heavily influenced by the pre-existence of immigrant communities from the same country: at least initially, emigrants tended to travel together with other countrymen, and in many cases also to settle with them after arrival. Among the most important immediate pull factors were probably letters from relatives who had already settled abroad, often tending to downplay the endured hardships and encouraging family members to follow. The 1860s and 70s also saw a dramatic increase in print propaganda in the form of booklets and newspaper articles, often disseminated by agents of steamship companies looking to sell tickets, or even visiting Swedish Americans who were granted rebates if they took countrymen back with them (Barton 1975, 16–17, 109–10).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, whole families had tended to emigrate together and settle in rural areas. By the 1880s, this had changed, and most emigrants were young, unmarried men and women travelling alone. They tended to settle in towns and cities, rather than in the countryside, and seek work in factories (the men) or as maids (the women). Having established themselves, they would often be able to pay the ship fare for their family members and bring them over as well. There was also an increasing amount of return migration, and many emigrants travelled several times back and forth over the Atlantic as their circumstances changed (Barton 1975, 111–12; Nordstrom 2000, 233).

Some emigrants were assimilated rapidly in their new country of residence, but for others, it was a process that could take several generations – especially if they retained a strong connection to the emigrant community. Community leaders, especially pastors, would often play a significant role in preserving the national heritage. Emigrant communities quickly established their own ethnic churches (Scandinavian Lutheran, but also Baptist, Methodist etc.) with services in the heritage language. They would also educate children in the language of their parents, which in some areas, such as in Porter, Indiana, lasted well into the interwar period. In more urban settings, such as in the major Swedish community in Chicago, a significant role was played by secular organisations: sport, music, theatre and temperance societies, ethnic trade unions,
clubs and local history societies. As a rule, however, pre-emigration ethnicity was better preserved in the countryside. Some communities in rural USA were homogenous to the extent of being inhabited by families who had all come together from the same parish or village (Nordstrom 2000, 233–4).

Also important for preserving ethnic identity was access to journalism and literature in the heritage language. Starting with just one newspaper published in New York in 1851–3 – entitled Skandinavien and meant for all Nordic immigrants – hundreds of newspapers in the USA eventually came to be published in Scandinavian languages for immigrants from different parts of Scandinavia, but also with different political and religious views. The majority of these did not switch to English before the 1920s, but many eventually came to find readers also in communities with speakers of other Scandinavian languages, highlighting the extent to which many Swedes, Danes and Norwegians came to adopt a more ‘Scandinavian’ identity in their new country of residence (Barton 1975, 19; Ljungmark 2008, 108–15). There were many reprints of Scandinavian authors and an émigré literature made an appearance, often dealing with the emigration experience (Nordstrom 2000, 235). Examples of the latter include novels by the Swede Ernst Skarstedt (1857–1929), the Norwegian Ole Edvart Rølvaag (1876–1931) and the Dane Sophus Keith Winter (1898–1983).

Nevertheless, over generations, Scandinavian identity tended to fade away. Partially, this tendency was reversed in the post-Second World War decades when many people again discovered and embraced their ethnic roots in the form of hybrid identities such as Danish-American or Swedish-American. Even if they no longer speak the heritage language, the heritage ethnicity has been important to many descendants of emigrants, particularly in the USA. Examples of heritage institutions in the USA include the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis (founded in 1929), the Nordic Museum in Seattle (founded in 1980) and many others. There are also whole communities that are strongly dedicated to their Scandinavian heritage, such as the originally Danish town of Solvang in Santa Barbara County, California, and the old Janssonist settlement Bishop Hill in Henry County, Illinois.

Emigration and Opposition to Emigration

It is probably fair to say that emigration was a largely positive phenomenon for nineteenth-century Scandinavia. If overpopulation had not had
a safety valve of this kind, it might have led to even stronger social and economic tensions in Scandinavia itself. According to one estimate, emigration reduced the growth of the Norwegian population by half, likely making it more sustainable at a time when the country’s economy had not yet industrialised enough to provide for a larger population (Nordstrom 2000, 236). Many emigrants also ended up sending home substantial sums of money and some eventually returned with new ideas and money to invest in their native land. Finally, another arguable benefit of emigration routes was that they could be used to exile troublemakers, such as the Danish socialist Louis Pio (1841–94), founder of the organised workers’ movement in Denmark, and in the realm of fiction, the mischievous Emil i Lönneberga, who had the whole village collect money to send him off to America, as depicted by the Swedish children’s author Astrid Lindgren (Hult 2008, 576).

Contemporary attitudes towards emigration were mixed. There was some early recognition of its value for dealing with overpopulation – in 1840, Swedish liberals even founded a short-lived and controversial Émigré Society (Emigrantföreningen) to publicise opportunities in the New World. However, it was also true that most emigrants were young and potentially productive members of society, not necessarily the poorest and the most desperate. Indeed, it seems that it was often fear of destitution that drove emigration, rather than destitution itself (Barton 1975, 11, 16). Starting in the 1840s, at a time when the Scandinavian economies finally experienced a period of growth, the danger of workers moving abroad prompted the first movement of public opposition to emigration. Critical voices condemned emigrants as criminals and layabouts, content to abandon their native land and look for a better life abroad. Warnings were also issued about the various dangers awaiting on the other side of the ocean, especially during the American Civil War of 1861–5, when many in Europe predicted a total collapse of the young republic (Barton 1990, 13–14).

The recession that began in Scandinavia in the mid-1860s provided a further impetus for emigration, especially since it now coincided with economic growth in post-Civil War USA. The famine caused by three successive crop failures in Sweden in 1867–9, and later the import of cheap American grain towards the end of the 1870s also made the numbers go up as local conditions worsened (Barton 1975, 107–8; Ljungmark 2008, 31).

The importance of religious push factors decreased, but more emigrants now had a political motivation, especially after the 1866 Swedish parliamentary reform was found insufficient by many liberally-minded
people. Liberal Swedish journalists also visited their compatriots living in the USA, encouraging more people to emigrate with their positive depictions of life in the New World. Emigration was further facilitated by regular Trans-Atlantic steamship services becoming available in the 1870s, which made travel both cheaper and faster. A journey from Stockholm to Chicago which in 1846 had taken 93 days, including 74 days at sea, could thanks to railways and steamships now be completed in merely 20 days (Barton 1975, 108; 1990, 14; Ljungmark 2008, 69–72).

In Sweden, not least in academic circles, these developments led to widespread resignation to emigration as a necessary evil. The historian Wilhelm Erik Svedelius argued in 1875 that since some of Sweden’s population could not provide for themselves in their native land, emigration was unavoidable and best thought of as a form of development assistance to the USA. In another approach, the political economist Knut Wicksell suggested in 1882 that the core of the problem was overpopulation and recommended the use of contraceptives, rather than measures against emigration per se (Barton 1990, 14–15).

The émigrés themselves would naturally also defend their choice, sometimes by appealing to a nationalist sentiment. Johan A. Enander, editor of the Chicago newspaper Hemlandet and a leading proponent of ‘Swedish-Americanism’ (Ljungmark 2008, viii) described the modern Swedish emigrants as the spiritual descendants of both the Viking discoverers of Vinland and the small group of seventeenth-century Swedish colonists in Delaware. According to Enander, the latter had embodied American moral values better than the ‘egoistic Anglo-Saxons’. Now, when ships full of Swedes were again landing on American shores, they were to be regarded as once more peacefully conquering ‘Vinland the Good’ which was rightfully theirs. Similar idealisation of emigrants also made inroads into the Swedish debate, for example in the writings of the priest and publicist Carl Sundbeck, who had been awarded grants by the state to study Swedish emigrants in the USA and Canada. Sundbeck went even further than Enander, arguing that the émigrés were the most exemplary Swedes of all, daringly spreading the Swedish language and culture to the wild American prairies in a kind of ‘national imperialism’. It was now the duty of the emigrants to inspire a similar resoluteness for national action back home, so that other Swedes would set to work with the same enthusiasm and sense of purpose, even without having to travel abroad (Barton 1990, 15–17).

In the 1890s, the USA turned less welcoming again. The frontier of settlement evaporated, as most available land resources had been exhausted. At the same time, competition in industry grew fiercer and
working conditions worsened. Scandinavia was now also going through its belated industrialisation: from 1870 to 1914, the rural population in Sweden sank from 72.4 per cent to 48.4 per cent of the total. Travelogues from the USA became more critical and opposition to emigration grew in conservative nationalist circles. As a result, the numbers of emigrants dropped substantially between 1894 and 1900 (Barton 1975, 203–6; Ljungmark 2008, 5, 29).

Around the turn of the century, however, the numbers picked up again, culminating in 1903 with more than 35,000 people leaving Sweden. In response, emigration became yet again an object of intense public debate, not least because Sweden’s worries were also piling up in other ways. The Russification policies enacted in Finland, and Norwegian separatism (the latter ending in secession in 1905), were putting Swedish foreign policy on the defensive, while sharpening class tensions and the emergence of the labour movement undermined the domestic power of traditional political elites. In 1901, the period of compulsory military service was extended from 90 days to either eight or twelve months. This was strongly resented by the poor who had to bear the financial burden of interrupted employment and lost income. From the perspective of the state, emigration therefore became perceived as a security issue, since the outflow of young men reduced the pool of available conscripts (Barton 1975, 204; 1990, 16; Ljungmark 2008, 39–43).

**Emigration and Swedishness Abroad**

The staunchest early opponents of emigration had been large landowners, worried about the lack of farm workers and the rising wages emigration would cause. Instead, they proposed the creation of ‘a new America in Sweden’ through adoption of modern, large-scale agriculture. After 1900, they were also joined in their criticism by the burgeoning Social Democratic movement, adamant to condemn the lack of labour rights in the USA, which they considered ‘the workers’ hell’. Yet other critics had a radical nationalist point of view which regarded emigration as basically unwelcome and unpatriotic—a part of the state of ‘slumber’ of the Swedish nation that had begun with the defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War of 1721, which had ended its Great Power Era (*Stormaktstiden*). A new national awakening was now needed, and ending emigration was to be an important part of it (Barton 1990, 14–16).

Meanwhile, academic and parliamentary circles presented more rationally oriented proposals to investigate the causes and effects of
emigration in detail. In 1907, a state-funded research group headed by Gustav Sundbärg began its work on a full review of the emigration issue feeding into policy proposals, the so-called Emigrationsutredningen. Their work resulted in a thick volume with twenty appendices, published over 1908–13, which attempted to cover all the issues related to emigration – from the social to the psychological – and amounted to nothing less than a broad socioeconomic survey of Sweden as a whole. The authors’ policy suggestions recognised industrial growth and social reforms as the means to reduce emigration, but Sundbärg also allowed himself an appendix on the ‘Swedish national character’ (titled Det svenska folklynnet), where he accused his fellow Swedes of a fondness for fanciful ideas, a weak sense of national identity, envy, a weakness for everything foreign, and lacking psychological sense, all of which he thought were the fundamental causes of emigration beyond the statistics (Barton 1990, 16–18, 21; Scott 1965, 314–16).

In political groups with less faith in officially sanctioned solutions, voluntary organisations sprang up with the purpose of either limiting emigration or preserving the ‘Swedishness’ of those already settled abroad. The year 1907 saw the establishment of Nationalföreningen mot emigrationen (the national union against emigration), dominated by Conservative landowners, businessmen and academics, and headed by the young radical conservative Adrian Molin. Nationalföreningen tried to convince people contemplating emigration to abandon the idea either by providing them with cheap loans to build a family home in a less-populated part of Sweden – what came to be known as Egnahemsrörelsen (the home ownership movement) – or by mediating work placements. They also attempted to convince people who had already emigrated to return to Sweden (Lindkvist 2007, 35–57). H. Arnold Barton argues that this was an opposite approach to the one taken by Emigrationsutredningen: instead of modernisation and industrialisation, the solution was seen to lie in the reinvigoration of the Swedish countryside according to a national romantic vision of rural life. Thanks to its good financial resources, Nationalföreningen was able to organise several large-scale propaganda campaigns which probably had some effect (see Figure 12.1). However, it quickly lost its purpose as emigration streams dried up. In 1917, the organisation had 16,000 members, but in 1925 only 2,500, indicating how substantially the issue had dropped in importance (Barton 1990, 18–19, 21).

In 1908, the year after the establishment of Nationalföreningen, Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet (the State Union for the Preservation of Swedishness Abroad) was founded. It was an
organisation of mainly civil servants and academics headed by Vilhelm Lundström, professor of classics at the University of Gothenburg. The task of *Riksföreningen* was to ‘morally and economically support the preservation of the Swedish language and culture by Swedes abroad, to further the feelings of unity between Swedes abroad and at home, and to generally promote knowledge of the Swedish language and culture abroad’ (Kummel 1994, 77). Modern mass emigration, which Lundström agreed was a tragedy, had in his opinion nevertheless resulted in something of value: the existence of Swedish communities abroad. *Riksföreningen* was keen to make the point that out of the nine million Swedes in the world, a whole third was living outside Sweden itself. Since the state was not doing anything to ensure that these diaspora Swedes would not lose their Swedishness, private organisations had to step in (Barton 1990, 19–20).

Although the intention of *Riksföreningen* had mainly been to work with recent émigrés, most of its activities ended up being concerned with the Swedish minorities in Finland and Estonia (then parts of the Russian Empire), which dated back to the Middle Ages. There, *Riksföreningen* attempted to consolidate Finnish-Swedish and Estonian-Swedish identities as ‘Eastern Swedes’ (*östsvenskar*). Its efforts in Finland were largely unsuccessful, although it did make some substantial contributions, for example by facilitating the reopening of the Swedish-speaking university Åbo Akademi in Turku in 1918. It had more success in Estonia, where the Swedish community was much smaller and poorer, and thus had reason to be more grateful for help and recognition from Sweden (Kummel 1994, 247–51).

*Figure 12.1*  *Res icke till Amerika* (Do not travel to America). Poster from *Nationalföreningen mot Emigrationen* (the National Union Against Emigration). Source: Riksantikvarieämbetet. CC BY.
Riksföreningen’s efforts to promote what Lundström called the pan-Swedish idea (den allsvenska idén) can be considered an example of the so-called pan-movements or a macronationalism aiming to unite members of a particular ethnicity over state borders to ‘another, larger fatherland’ (Barton 1990, 20). In this sense, its role was not limited to the emigration question alone, and, unlike Nationalföreningen, Riksföreningen still exists today, having in 1979 changed its name to Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt.

The Aftermath and Reverberations

By the 1920s, emigration from Scandinavia to the USA had reduced to a trickle, and during the Great Depression of 1929–34 it ended almost entirely. On top of widespread unemployment in the USA that discouraged further emigration, in 1930 the American authorities introduced restrictive immigration laws which, in spite of favouritism shown to immigrants from Northern Europe, made the country a less attractive destination. At the same time, the 1930 census showed 1,562,703 persons born in Sweden or of Swedish-born parents living in the USA, out of a population of almost 123 million (Barton 1975, 3; Ljungmark 2008, 8) – the largest diaspora of ethnic Swedes (or half-Swedes) that has ever existed.

In Sweden itself, memories of emigration persisted, as did many personal and family contacts with relatives who had settled abroad. Fictionalised and romanticised versions of the emigrant experience would now find a fertile ground there, as the importance of emigration as a burning societal problem had ceased. More than anyone else, it was the novelist Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973) who helped to shape a Swedish popular imagination of emigration with his monumental tetralogy: The Emigrants (1949, Utvandrarna), Unto a Good Land (1952, Invandrarna), The Settlers (1952, Nybyggarna) and The Last Letter Home (1959, Sista brevet till Sverige). The series of novels depicts the fate of a family from Småland: Karl-Oskar Nilsson and Kristina Johannesdotter, their three surviving children and a number of relatives and neighbours who decide to emigrate to Minnesota in 1850. Settled in the New World, they gradually adapt to the local conditions and live through a number of formative events in American history, including the California Gold Rush (1849–55) and the American Civil War.

Considered some of the greatest works of modern Swedish literature, Moberg’s novels also became the basis for two major feature film
adaptions by director Jan Troell: *The Emigrants* (1971, *Utvandrarna*) and *The New Land* (1972, *Nybyggarna*), starring Max von Sydow, Liv Ullmann and Eddie Axberg. Both films were nominated for several Academy Awards and *The New Land* won the Golden Globe Award in 1973 for the best foreign language film. In 1995, Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus (of ABBA) further premiered a musical based on the novels, which received instant acclaim and widespread popularity. Dealing with ‘the great questions of our time’, according to the critics, it ran for nearly four years in Sweden, generated guest performances and concert versions abroad, and both the recorded album and a single held considerable positions in the national charts throughout the late 1990s.

**Conclusion: Emigration and the Nation**

Emigration from Sweden – and from the rest of Scandinavia – in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a complex phenomenon with a number of causes and a multifaceted impact on the countries of both its origin and destination. Peaking in the late 1860s, early 1880s and around the turn of the century, emigration changed in volume over time. However, beyond the concrete material and ideational circumstances that encouraged people to emigrate – hopes for employment and social advancement, fear of material destitution or religious and political persecution – the ‘emigration question’ also had a wide societal resonance as a focal point in public debates around which various fears and hopes would congregate, often reaching far beyond the question of emigration per se.

It is somewhat ironic that *Emigrationsutredningen*, the impressive study of the causes and effects of emigration from Sweden, became obsolete almost as soon as it was concluded – the beginning of the First World War and subsequent closure of international borders made it nearly impossible to emigrate. Nevertheless, it remains an important milestone in the history of Swedish statistics and exemplifies more generally its culture of state-commissioned research projects (*statliga utredningar*). The widely felt need to ‘do something’ about emigration in the decade around the turn of the century was an important impetus in the development of the rational and scientific ways of solving perceived societal problems that subsequently became a hallmark of the Swedish Social Democratic welfare state and the ‘Nordic model’ more generally (Hall 2000, 241).

But whether presenting an emotive and nostalgic vision of rural Swedishness, or seeking social science ‘solutions’ to emigration as a societal ‘problem’, arguments in opposition to emigration (and in some cases
in support of it) ultimately tended to be about Sweden’s future as a state and a nation. This became visible in how modernity – the great divisive issue in nation building in the age of industrialisation – was alternatively embraced or rejected in the emigration debate as various commentators attempted to secure the unreachable ideal of a unitary and well-governed, materially prosperous nation state. Perhaps more than anything else, it was this strongly idealistic, but at the same time also pragmatic and hands-on, approach to public policy that came to define Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia in the century that followed.

References


