

**Lone gunman?
You wait all day for one, and then two turn up at the
same time**

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The Man Who Played With Fire:
Stieg Larsson's Lost Files and the Hunt for an Assassin
Jan Stocklassa,
Seattle: Amazon Crossing, 2019, £13.15 (h/b)

The Man in the Brown Suit:
MI5, Edward VIII and an Irish Assassin
James Parris (Harry Harmer)
Cheltenham: The History Press, 2019, £14.00 (h/b)

The Stocklassa book is about the killing of Olof Palme and was published in Sweden in 2018. It had previously been warmly reviewed in Spain, Germany, Denmark and France. More recently, an English language edition – translated by Tara Chace – has reached the UK, where *The Guardian* has sung its praises

The book grates somewhat, being chatty, full of slang and written in 'Americanised' English. It also includes dramatised scenes with imagined dialogue. The Palme assassination is probably the biggest unsolved murder of our time. Or, if one is of the view that the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations remain unsolved, one of a half-dozen or so political 'hits' to which investigators keep coming back to. So reading a narrative done in this style seems out of kilter with the gravity of the material. Prospective readers should also note that for a work that is 488 pages long, there is no index, no footnotes and no bibliography. For such a significant subject this is astonishing.

Stocklassa inherited the extensive files built up on the Palme case by author and graphic designer Stieg Larsson. *The Man Who Played with Fire* very much trades on this connection, and one assumes sales of it may well be healthy as a result, given that to date Larsson's fiction has sold over 80 million copies globally. Larsson, whose own political background was in the far left, became an independent researcher into the extreme right in Sweden in the mid-80s, initially working closely with Gerry Gable

of *Searchlight* magazine. Larsson researched the Palme killing for 18 years until his death in 2004, diversifying into related matters such as the rise, from 1988, of the Sweden Democrats, the successor party to various Swedish Nazi organizations. The opening part of the book is an account of Larsson's Palme enquiry up until 1997 and includes correspondence with Gable on the subject. Reading it in 2020 is like a trip back in time: a world of filing cabinets, faxes, maps, note books, document boxes, paper copies of birth and marriage certificates, hand-drawn diagrams showing the interconnected networks of the far right, hand-written interview notes, Polaroid photographs, address books, leaflets, election literature, posters, pages from telephone directories – the 'full Monty' of analogue, retro-journalism. It is also a big step back to a time peopled by the likes of Brian Crozier and Lyndon la Rouche – the Cold War and all its spookery during its final, critical, pre-Glasnost phase.

In terms of a contemporary, rather than an historical account, things finally get going on page 217 when Stocklassa starts bringing to a conclusion some of the lines of enquiry Larsson had not pursued at the time of his death. The efforts of the official enquiry (still open in 2020) are rejected. The only person to face a court over the killing, local junkie and small-time criminal Carl Gustav Christer Pettersson, was originally convicted and then released following appeal - all within the space of the few months between July and November of 1989. Although that case is mentioned, it is not deemed worthy of reconsideration and neither is the subsequent theorizing about the possible involvement of the PKK.¹ Broadly, he rejects the accepted explanations, and his theory about who perpetrated the killing apportions blame to two distinct groups.

Firstly: those in Sweden with an extreme dislike of Palme, and his party, the Social Democrats. Though we get a fair bit on this, Stocklassa could have done with spelling-out what the motivation is (and was) for such types. Readers in the UK might be surprised that a significant number of Swedes might be *opposed* to a political culture regarded elsewhere as benign, neutral, non-nuclear, with a high spending/high social provision economy and liberal policies on gender, sexuality, childcare, arts funding and human rights etc. After all, in the late 70s, some elements in the UK looked at Sweden and considered that, with a

¹ Pettersson was a drug addict who, it was thought, had killed Palme after mistaking him for his dealer. The police never connected Pettersson to the murder weapon and the case against him was eventually dismissed. The decision to investigate the PKK (a Kurdish group prescribed as a terrorist organization in many countries) was puzzling: the PKK had no apparent motive for executing Palme, and would typically have tried to lobby him, as a leftist leader, seeking commitments from him for a Kurdish homeland.

little adjustment, it might be a template that the UK could follow: self-governing, socialist and neutral, being outside NATO and the then EC. Interest in 'the Scandinavian model' is still prevalent in UK centre and left circles.² But this is to misunderstand how the Social Democrats managed Sweden during their long period in power, the compromises they made to stay in power and the country they inherited.

In the early twentieth century Sweden was a centralised pro-German monarchy, with a prominent aristocracy. Gustav V (reigned 1907-1950) was pro-German during the First World War. His successor, Gustav VI (reigned 1950-1973) had twice married into the UK royal dynasty via Princess Margaret of Connaught (in 1905) and, after her death, Lady Louise Mountbatten (in 1923). His son, Prince Gustav, married Princess Sibylla of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (daughter of Charles Edward, Duke of Coburg) in 1932 in what was seen as a politically adroit move by Germany, drawing together the royal families of the UK, Germany (albeit dethroned) and Sweden. From September 1939 Sweden was neutral, but initially in a way that favoured Germany; and several Swedish go-betweens, notably businessman Birger Dahlerus, acted on behalf of Germany, attempting to broker peace deals with the UK. There was a generally pro-German, anti-Russian stance of many Swedes at that time. This stemmed from the emergence of a Communist state in Russia (from 1917) and the Soviet attack on Finland (in 1939), the latter resulting in a Swedish Volunteer Corps fighting alongside the Finns.³ These sentiments remained prevalent for several years, even though the Social Democrats were in power from 1932 and co-operated with Germany after 1939. The transit of German troops via Sweden to northern Finland was allowed until 1943 and export of iron ore to Germany until 1944.

Tage Erlander was the Social Democratic Swedish Prime Minister immediately post-WWII (holding that post from 1946-1969). He is widely acknowledged as having frequently sought broad cross-party support for his policies. This he achieved, to a degree, by compromising on some issues when he would otherwise have been expected to hold fast. One such example was the prospect of increased taxation on the Swedish

² The cabinet discussion about Benn's Alternative Economic Strategy of 1976 was the closest the UK came to formally debating whether to pursue something like the Swedish model. There is little evidence, though, that Benn looked in detail at Sweden. Certainly, the Swedish preference for nuclear power (they commissioned 11 reactors between 1969 and 1979) is not something he would have supported.

³ The Swedish Volunteer Corps that fought in Finland consisted of two infantry brigades (8000 men) and a squadron of fighter aircraft equipped with British planes.

nation, which he actually kept below average OECD levels. In the 1960s U.S. income taxes were actually higher than in Sweden.

Erlander handed over to Palme, Prime Minister 1969-1976 and 1982-1986. Palme was more obviously of the left. He visited Cuba (the first western leader to do so), criticised the US bombing of Hanoi and supported the PLO and ANC. He introduced a constitution that greatly diminished the power of the monarchy and adopted a single chamber legislature. He significantly increased the power of trade unions, making them virtually a non-parliamentary partner of government. He massively increased welfare spending and oversaw a marked increase in taxation, making the level of personal taxes in Sweden one of the highest in the industrialised west. Palme was active, too, on the international stage into the 1980s, serving at one point as a mediator in the Iran-Iraq war, without success.

External admirers of Sweden are usually unaware that, relative to its population, under both Erlander and Palme the country maintained a very large military, retained national service (until 2010) and secretly co-operated with NATO on defence.⁴ Opposition to Palme and the Social Democrats within Sweden came from a mixture of the old authoritarian right, fascist sympathisers and extreme libertarians. Although he was, in effect, running a country based on what amounted to a socially liberal version of national socialism, Palme was seen as threatening the future of the nation, particularly after the size of the Swedish navy was cut in the early 70s. It was considered that, if he remained in power, Sweden would become a lightly armed, neutral country with very high taxes: effectively a satellite of the Soviet Union. (Rather like Finland, 1944-1991).

Stocklassa (and Larsson) concentrate less on sketching out this general context, and more on tracing the entrails of the ultra-right, but both are relevant in understanding the balance of power within Sweden, and how many – even if they were a minority – saw Palme.

The second factor that led to Palme's killing (unless, that is, one buys the lone gunman theory) relates closely to the US version of geo-politics in the Cold War. At its most succinct: if you're not with us . . . you're against us. The Swedish model of capitalism was not one the US wished to encourage; and 'neutrality' was not helpful in its post-1945 Manichean battle against 'communism'. But how to waft a European state away from

⁴ In pro-rata terms (i.e. their size relative to the population of Sweden), Swedish conventional armed forces were (and still are) significantly bigger than those of the UK. (In 2020, by 40%.) Sweden also re-introduced national service in 2017, after phasing it out as late as 2010. Stieg Larsson himself served in the Swedish army 1974-1975 and spent 1977 in Eritrea, training the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

this? The CIA couldn't deploy the methods that it would use in Africa, Asia or Latin America. So the US spent a lot of time working with people within Sweden who might swing the country away from neutrality and towards a more market-orientated and less state-interventionist economy. Clearly, this would have appeared to have had some success in October 1976 when the Social Democrats lost power in Sweden, Palme giving way as Prime Minister to Thorbjorn Falldinn of the Liberal Party. But Palme came back in October 1982, at the very point some in Europe were kicking back against Reagan's escalation of the Cold War; and he took a markedly anti-South African line at a time when South Africa was a party to the US-Iran arms deal. Which is where Larsson and Stocklassa pick up the thread.

Under this arrangement, the CIA provided arms to Iran to further the wider global interests of the US. Payment for the arms, many of which were manufactured in Sweden by Bofors, was made via banking facilities in the Seychelles.⁵ In exchange for this military assistance, Iran supplied oil to South Africa, thus breaking a UN embargo. In 1985 Swedish customs began raiding the shipping companies engaged in this traffic, and found that the exports were being flown to Iran on CIA-owned Boeing 707s.⁶ The Larsson/Stocklassa theory is that, fearful this operation would be revealed by Palme, the US and South Africa agreed he should be eliminated.⁷ The US subcontracted this to the South Africans who then supervised a group of local Swedish activists (and extremists) in carrying out the task. One of whom had been earmarked in advance for use as a 'patsy' should the authorities manage to conclude who was actually behind the crime.

Palme was shot on 28 February 1986. Between them Larsson and Stocklassa name the locally based killers and/or their accomplices as: Bertil Wedin (aged 80, now living in North Cyprus), Alf Enerström (who died in 2017), Jakob Thedelin (a.k.a. David Fredin, in his 60s and living in Israel) and Victor Gunnarsson (who died 1993 and was a member of the Lyndon La Rouché network via the Swedish-based European Workers

⁵ The murder, in London, of Seychelles opposition leader Gerard Hoarau in November 1985 (still unsolved at the time of writing) is suspected of being a South African commissioned 'hit', designed to stop evidence of these payment arrangements emerging.

⁶ Oliver North used the same aircraft for other work. See 'Mystery, intrigue hang over airline tied to Iran affair', *The Orlando Sentinel*, 4 January 1987 at <<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1987-01-04-0100030125-story.html>>.

⁷ Stocklassa regards William Casey (then Director of the CIA) as, unsurprisingly, the key US individual in orchestrating the complex US-South Africa-Iran arrangements. Casey died in 1987. The 'arms for Iran' scandal finally broke in late 1986, after Palme had been killed.

Party). It is not quite clear, though, which of these they think might have pulled the trigger. In the background they place Captain Craig Williamson (a South African policeman), whose activities in the 80s included bombing the ANC offices in London in March 1982.⁸

As set out in the book, the context and motives that led to Palme being killed make some sense and appear generally credible. Assuming, though, that Stocklassa is presenting an accurate summary of the evidence available, it remains uncertain if one would get a conviction in court against any of the individuals they name. This is an adequate book that provides an interesting overview but whose conclusions don't entirely convince. It also fails to pursue other avenues of enquiry that the 'Swedish connection' opens up, not least the Lockerbie bombing.⁹

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Turning from an assassination that did succeed, to one that didn't, on 16 July 1936, an Irishman, George McMahon (real name Jerome Bannigan), attempted to shoot Edward VIII. This forgotten episode is now the subject of a book by James Parris. Unlike Stocklassa, his book is presented in an exemplary fashion with a bibliography, index and footnotes. It has also been published with far less of a fanfare, and to far less acclaim.

The book's subject, Bannigan, was Irish, and a petty criminal, chancer and alcoholic. He owned a shop selling herbal remedies. (In the 1930s such places were where potions that might cause an abortion could be legally bought.) He took umbrage at Metropolitan Police officers being bribed by small-time businesses and complained about this at some length, being subsequently prosecuted and imprisoned for libel, though eventually winning his case on appeal. During this episode – which involved him writing to the Chief Constable of the Metropolitan Police to

⁸ Other South African actions included a burglary of the Pan African Congress HQ in London in 1982 (for which Bertil Wedin was charged, but acquitted) and the bombing of the ANC offices in Stockholm in late 1986. Six prominent anti-apartheid activists (Griffiths Mxenge, Ruth First, Jeanette Schoon, Victoria Mxenge, Dulcie September and David Webster) were murdered 1981-1989. Excluding Palme and Bernt Carlsson, a further seven deaths between 1984 and 1993 were ruled accidental (or unsolved) but involved individuals with knowledge of the South African-US-Iran arms deals. In 1997 Peter Castleton, a former South African agent, was crushed to death whilst repairing his car shortly before he was expected to testify that Williamson and Wedin were involved in the killing of Palme.

⁹ Bernt Carlsson, a colleague of Palme's and UN Commissioner in Namibia 1987-1988, died in the Lockerbie crash (December 1988). His presence on the aircraft has been cited as a reason for it being bombed. This ignores, though, the 'arms for Iran' issue having broken a couple of years earlier and that a killing of this type (involving immense numbers of collateral civilian deaths) was not a feature of South African actions.

plead his case – he seems to have come to the attention of either MI5 or the Special Branch (or both). The result being that he was picked up and used by them as a low-level operative. As an Irishman with a criminal record, Bannigan had his uses, and was deniable. He began carrying a gun, provided a report on alleged IRA gun-running activities, turned up in 1935 at the office of Violet van der Elst (an anti-capital punishment campaigner). He claimed, at various times, to be involved in the Italian and German espionage efforts in London and provided reports on these to MI5 – though their accuracy and value were disputed.

In 1936 Bannigan gave a garble account to his handlers of a 'plot' to kill Edward VIII, which he had infiltrated, and within which he was – apparently – expected to act as assassin. The aim was to kill the King on Constitution Hill (which runs from Buckingham Palace to Hyde Park Corner) during an inspection of the Guards Brigade. No action was taken after Bannigan had provided this warning. On the day, Bannigan did not fire his gun, but *threw* it instead at the target and was immediately, and very easily, arrested. At his trial, charges of treason and illegal possession of a firearm were quietly dropped and the case limited to 'presenting near the King's person a revolver with intent to break the peace, and with intent to alarm the king'. The proceedings, as detailed in the book, were clearly managed to limit public exposure of his prior dealings with MI5. Bannigan was convicted on the minor charge and got 12 months.

Parris concludes that this peculiar episode should to be seen in the context that from at least the mid-1920s, both King George V and many senior UK politicians and government officials did not want Edward, Prince of Wales, to become King. Initially, this was due to the heir to the throne not having the type of personality required in a system where the monarch behaves in a purely ceremonial fashion, conscientiously signing the day-to-day paperwork of the state and being circumspect at all times. After 1933, it became clear Edward was pro-Hitler, very friendly with figures in the Anglo-German Fellowship, close to Charles Edward, Duke of Coburg (which makes for an interesting co-incidence of sorts with the Palme book) and intended to conduct his own foreign policy.¹⁰ On the latter score, on more than one occasion he offered himself, whilst King and afterwards, as a 'peace emissary' between the UK and Germany. His

¹⁰ For an accurate account of the activities of Charles Edward, Duke of Coburg, see Karina Urbach, *Go-Betweens for Hitler* (Oxford: OUP, 2015).

glib utterances, of which there are many consistent accounts, embarrassed the UK and its allies.¹¹

So, was the 'Bannigan plot' constructed as a win-win by the (many) people who wished to shunt Edward out of the way in favour of his brother, George? If it succeeded, if Bannigan shot and killed Edward, then George would succeed. If it failed – Bannigan misses, runs away, or shoots Edward, but Edward survives – then it could be presented as evidence that Edward was less popular than imagined, which would then in turn be bolstered by other issues about his vanity, personal life etc being selectively leaked into the public domain in the weeks that followed. The end result of which would have been the same – a managed change of monarch.

This reading of the events seems as plausible as the 'official' alternative, which has Bannigan as an unstable 'lone gunman' fantasist with a grudge against those in power. And, the two, of course are not mutually exclusive. James Parris (the pen name of Dr Harry Harmer) has written a fine account, diligently pulled together from archival sources.

¹¹ There are many accounts of verbal (pro-German) indiscretions by Edward VIII, notably in *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's 1932-1943*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).