

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

The Legacy of Peter Forsskål: 250 years of freedom of expression

Kaukonen, Emil

Published in:
Scandinavian Journal of History

DOI:
[10.1080/03468755.2018.1545432](https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2018.1545432)

Published: 01/01/2019

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Document License
CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:
Kaukonen, E. (2019). The Legacy of Peter Forsskål: 250 years of freedom of expression. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 44(1), 139–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2018.1545432>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Review by Emil Kaukonen, FM, Department of History, Åbo Akademi University
ekaukone@abo.fi

The Legacy of Peter Forsskål: 250 Years of Freedom of Expression

Ulla Carlsson & David Goldberg (Eds)

Gothenburg, Nordicom, 2017

149 pp., 200 SEK / 20 €, ISBN 9789187957635

The Peter Forsskål Project, an international research initiative aimed at calling attention to the life and achievements of Swedish enlightenment thinker Peter Forsskål (1732–1763), began its scholarly cooperation in 2009 through the publication of the first English translation of Forsskål’s pamphlet *Thoughts on Civil Liberty* (sw. *Tankar om borgerliga friheten*), first published in 1759 and subsequently banned in 1760. In the years following its founding, the project has overseen the translation of the pamphlet into 19 additional languages and dialects, all available on the project’s website.ⁱ The anthology *The Legacy of Peter Forsskål: 250 Years of Freedom of Expression* is a literary culmination of the research done within the Peter Forsskål Project, with articles discussing Forsskål’s work, his legacy, and the continued importance of discussions regarding freedom of information and expression. The original uncensored text of Forsskål’s pamphlet is included as an appendix along with the English translation published by the Project in 2009. Project Forsskål founder and director David Goldberg gives this particular translation a special weight of global importance, as it is a translation of the original and uncensored Swedish version of the pamphlet. In reference to the influence of Forsskål’s work on the *Freedom of Writing and of the Press Ordinance* of 1766, he notes: ‘Finally then, the non-Swedish speaking world can now grasp the intellectual background to Sweden’s 1766 gift to the modern world: access to information, fostering an “enlightened general public”’ⁱⁱ.

After an introductory chapter consisting of a biographical article on Forsskål by Goldberg and the English translation of *Thoughts on Civil Liberty*, the remaining seven articles are divided into three

additional chapters. The first of these is focused on the history of the freedom of information since 1766 in Finland and Sweden, the second details the global aspects of Forsskål's legacy, and a third outlines Nordic public access and freedom of speech legislation in an international comparison. Out of the three articles that make up the historical overview, only the first one – on the topic of the Ordinance of 1766 in the context of the history of political thought by historian Ere Nokkala – is truly analytical. The latter two articles, detailing the history of the freedoms of expression and information in Sweden and Finland, respectively, are mainly general historical narratives. The contributions included in the third and fourth chapters of the anthology are essays and summaries of information rather than scientific texts, and relate mainly to the contemporary status of the legal and factual freedom of information in the Nordic countries. The articles have not been subjected to peer review, which allows a certain amount of freedom from the boundaries of academic stringency. Though this may be a favorable choice for an anthology that is so clearly intended to foster a debate about the current political climate, it also comes with significant drawbacks.

As stated above, Nokkanen's contribution on personal agency and political culture in relation to the Ordinance of 1766 is well researched and analytical: indeed, it could be published in a journal on political history or the history of ideas with very few adjustments. The subsequent article detailing the history of the freedom of information in Sweden since 1766 – written by Doctor of Laws Johan Hirschfeldt – presents more of a nonprofessional's understanding of history, but the author is nonetheless successful in raising the relevant historical developments and milestones to the forefront when discussing 250 years of legislative reforms in Sweden. However, the text by Professor Emeritus of Journalism and Mass Communication Kaarle Nordenstreng leaves much to be desired from the point of view of academic history. The text mainly describes the changes in the *de jure* and *de facto* developments of political freedoms and the freedom of the press in Finland

since 1766 and follows an ostensibly ‘natural’ (p. 72) division into three chronological parts. These are the era of integration with Sweden, 1766–1809, the period of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, 1809–1917, and the time since the Finnish independence of 1917. The division is symptomatic of the view of history that Nordenstreng presents, which is closely tied to nationalistic historiography that emphasizes political history and the Finnish struggle for independence and autonomy. This message is further strengthened by statements that run entirely contrary to modern historical consensusⁱⁱⁱ, such as the bizarre claim that Finland, including Turku, was ‘a provincial backwater’ in the context of the Kingdom of Sweden in the 18th century (p. 74). The lack of historical works cited – beyond two general overviews of Finnish history – points to that these shortcomings are a matter of ignorance rather than intentional attempts to make a historiographical point.

The content of the final chapters varies greatly, as they are mainly reflections on the current situation in the Nordic countries and the historical meaning of Forsskål’s pamphlet of 1759 and the Ordinance of 1766. The final text, written by Senior Adviser of Media Law Oluf Jørgensen, is a kind of overview of different aspects of Nordic public access legislation with suggestions for improvements. These last contributions appear to tackle the themes the editors wish to emphasize: the importance of public access to information for a healthy democracy and the unique status of the Ordinance of 1766 as the first legislation to establish the assumption that official documents are publicly accessible rather than secret. The anthology is functional as a way for Project Forsskål to raise interest in and awareness of the life and legacy of Peter Forsskål, but it is of limited value to professional historians. Despite the editors’ apparent ambition to engage in a current debate, the book would greatly benefit from a greater degree of historical expertise to lend greater weight to the contemplations regarding the modern day.

ⁱ Peter Forsskål: *Thoughts on Civil Liberty - The Text*, www.peterforsskal.com/thetext.html, 19.12.2017.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Max Engman, *Ett långt farväl: Finland mellan Sverige och Ryssland efter 1809* (Atlantis: 2009), p. 23–24; Nils Erik Villstrand, *Sveriges historia 1600–1721* (Norstedts: 2011), p. 40–42.