



HEDIN, SVEN

HEDIN, SVEN, Swedish explorer of, and prolific writer on, Central Asia and Persia (b. Stockholm, 1865; d. 1952; [Figure 1](#)). He was the eldest son of the city architect Ludvig Hedin and his wife Anna. His paternal family is known from the 17th century, when it took its name from the rural parish of Hidingsta in Central Sweden. His great-grandfather was a pupil of the famous naturalist Carl von Linnæus and served in the late 18th century as the personal physician of the King Gustav IV Adolf, thereby starting the family's social ascent. On his mother's side the line runs back to a German Jewish rabbi who immigrated to Sweden in 1770.

Sven Hedin grew up in a large, warm, tightly knit, and politically conservative family, where royalism, patriotism, and allegiance to the state church constituted cardinal values. He had one brother and five sisters. Only one sister married, and Sven himself also remained single. The siblings and their parents lived together for the rest of their lives. It was a well-connected family that took keen part in the social and cultural life of Stockholm. It soon came to be centered on Sven in a mutually supporting situation, with him as the main provider and the others as his secretariat. His income was mainly earned from the royalties on the many books he wrote and the fees for numerous lectures he delivered all over the world. He never held any official or academic position, though he was offered professorships, and chose to remain an independent scholar. His achievements were exemplary. He spent almost 20 years on Asian soil, carrying out or leading expeditions and research into the most forbidding areas of the continent, and wrote some 65 books and



voluminous scientific reports as well as thousands of scholarly and political papers. His expeditions were supported by private sponsors (including the royal family) and by the Swedish government, but he hardly could have pursued such an incredibly active and productive life without practical assistance from his family. Less favorable for his posthumous reputation were the long years he spent in propagating conservative political values and ideas, especially his emphatic defense of Germany's cause during the two World Wars, even to the extent of glorifying its wartime leaders.

As a child Sven Hedin developed a deep interest in geographic explorations, where heroism coincided with scientific achievements. He was aware that in the late 19th century those who crossed deserts and frozen seas, conquered mountains, reached the sources of rivers, and penetrated jungles, and with their observations filled blank spots on maps, often became national heroes. Swedish scientific expeditions of those days were primarily dispatched to the arctic areas, and the foremost explorer of the country was doubtless Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, the first to complete the Northeast passage and to circumnavigate Asia. On 24 April 1880, Sven Hedin, then 15, joined his family and most Stockholmites to welcome the triumphant return of Nordenskiöld. As he writes, this was a determining moment for him, and he resolved that he too would return to Stockholm from many a successful expedition and receive the same patriotic welcome. He started to train himself, reading books and journals on geographical explorations and exercising the art of drawing maps.

Hedin's explorations were not in the arctic areas, however. When he passed his matriculation in 1885, one year late and with mediocre marks, a teacher of his arranged for him to go to Baku and serve as the tutor of the son of an engineer employed by the Swedish Alfred Nobel family to explore the rich oil fields there. Hedin accepted the offer and thus entered Asia, which henceforth was to command his attention and constant fascination. While in Baku, he tirelessly prepared himself for what was to come, not only polishing his knowledge of Western European languages but also leaning Russian, Persian, and "Tartarian." Later he was to become an accomplished speaker of Uighur. His capacity to master languages was to be one of his great assets in the field as well as in the reception halls. He roamed the villages around Baku learning how to ride a horse, gathering material for his first scientific article (on the peninsula where Baku is situated), drawing portraits of the local inhabitants. Hedin was to become an accomplished artist, using his skill both for illustrations and for scientific purposes (drawing amazingly exact panoramas



of landscapes and geological formations).

After finishing his assignment in Baku in April 1886, Hedin embarked on a long journey through Persia (Iran) that took him to places like Tehran, Isfahan, Persepolis, and Shiraz. He learned how to organize traveling in unknown areas and how to endure both physical and economic hardships. It also sharpened his ability to travel and work with people of all walks of life, a talent that was to serve him well in the years to come. Upon his return to Sweden he quickly wrote a book on his time in Baku and his experiences in Persia, in which the account of his adventures is richly interspersed with information from the best available sources on the natural and cultural landscape and the history of the visited sites. This book set the tone for the string of travelogues that were to make him into one of the most widely read explorers of his days.

Even by the mid-1880s Hedin had not received formal training for his future expeditions. Therefore, on his return to Sweden, he embarked on academic studies in geography, geology, and paleontology. By 1890 he had become known in Sweden as an authority on Persia; and so, when in that year an official Swedish Mission was sent to the Shah of Persia, its leader requested the support of Hedin. The journey once more enabled him to get to know and understand Persia and, in particular, to study Mount Damāvand at close hand. He also made a reconnaissance expedition from Tehran to Kashgar via West Turkestan. In the early 1890s he continued studying geosciences in Berlin with Ferdinand von Richthofen, the foremost expert on geography of China of his time. The teacher implored him to continue his studies before leaving for Asia, but Hedin chose Mount Damāvand, which he had climbed, as the subject of his dissertation, so that he could speedily finish the assignment and be free for a first expedition.

Hedin's first real expedition lasted from 1893 to 1897 and took him via Russia to the Tarim basin. He mapped in the Pamirs before turning to the basin itself with its extensive desert. In addition to geographical and geological work, he looked for archeological sites, not so much for archeological reasons but for the fact that their discovery would add substance to his studies of the changing landscape of the basin. In February 1895 this took him to Tumshuq/Maralbashi, and in January 1896 he explored the archeological sites around Khotan. He then discovered the important sites of Dandan Uiliq (q.v.) and Kara Dung deep into the Taklamakan Desert before turning to explore the lower reaches of the Tarim River. He finished the expedition by mapping the



northern part of the Tibetan plateau.

Hedin's second expedition, lasting from 1899 to 1902, was again devoted to the Tarim basin. The Tarim River itself was mapped in minute detail, and great efforts were put into unraveling its lower flows and the position of the enigmatic Lop Nor Lake. In March 1900, in this conjunction, his expedition made its most important archeological discovery, that of Lou Lan. One year later this site was explored, and important objects and documents were collected which testified to its great importance for our understanding of the complex history of this section of the Silk Road. The rest of the second expedition was devoted to an aborted attempt to reach Lhasa and a final east-west crossing and mapping of the Tibetan high plateau.

Hedin's third expedition (1905-08) was entirely devoted to geographical and topographical work in Persia and Tibet, devoid of any archeological contents. In Persia he carefully explored and mapped the great basins of its eastern areas, with their salt lakes and deserts (the *Kavir*), offering an explanation of the formation of these intriguing landscapes within a framework of recent postglacial climatic changes. In Tibet he explored the mountain range north of Yarlung Tsangpo/Upper Brahmaputra, naming it Transhimalaya. He also studied the lakes of the Tibetan Plateau and pinpointed the sources of the Brahmaputra and Indus rivers.

Hedin then spent nearly twenty years writing a series of books, venturing into politics, going as a reporter to the battlefronts of the Great War, and traveling in Palestine and Iraq in the Middle East. He also wrote on the results of his great Persian and Tibetan expedition. Eventually in the mid 1920s he could turn to yet another expedition, which was to be his last one.

Hedin's fourth expedition was carried out from 1927 to 1935 and consisted of a series of campaigns, at times conducted in more than one field, with different sponsors, participants, and programs. It covered Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and northern Tibet, apart from small ventures into Gansu and Yunnan. This time Hedin was heading various groups of young scholars from a number of countries, primarily Sweden, China, and Germany. The aims of the expedition were first and foremost within the fields of geosciences, but Hedin also brought ethnographers and an archeologist with him. Important archeological work was also carried out in northern Iran (at Shah Tape), by the Swede T. J. Arne, as a part of a project to connect Neolithic cultures in West Turkestan and Iran with seemingly related ones in China. The results were considerable in all



fields, and their publication as well as the final handling of the Chinese collections brought together, was regulated by an agreement with the Chinese government.

Hedin spent almost the last twenty years of his life overseeing the publication of the results of the fourth expedition. He also again ventured into politics, something that cast a shadow over his memory, nationally and internationally. He remained active to the last days of his life. For several decades he had undoubtedly been internationally the best known and most admired Swede, certainly the most decorated and honored one. With him had ended an era of classical exploration of our earth.

His scientific and financial estate was bequeathed to the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in the name of the Sven Hedin Foundation. It is administered by the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, which, together with the Museum of Natural History there, also houses most of his ethnographic, archeological, and natural science collections.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Essential biographies of him are: Lasse Berg and Stig Holmqvist, *I Sven Hedins Fotspår*, Helsingborg, 1992.

Dietlef Brennecke, *Sven Hedin*, Hamburg, 1986.

Georg Kish, *To the Heart of Asia: The Life of Sven Hedin*, Ann Arbor, 1984. Sten Selander, *Sven Hedin En Äventyrsberättelse*, Stockholm, 1957.

Eric Wennerholm, *Sven Hedin: En Biografi*, Stockholm, 1980.

The works of Sven Hedin are catalogued by Willy Hess, *Die Werke Sven Hedins*, Stockholm, 1962 and *Die Werke Sven Hedins. Ein Nachtrag*, Stockholm, 1980.

Hedin's scientific work in Iran is described and evaluated by Alfons Gabriel,



“Sven Hedin in Persien,” *Die Entforschung Persiens. Die Entwicklung abendländischer Kenntnis der Geographie Persiens*, Vienna, 1952, pp. 243–56.

Publications by Sven Hedin. “Om Baku och Apscher-onska halfön” (“On Baku and the Apscheron peninsula”), *Ymer (Journal of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography)*, 1886, pp. 337-59.

Genom Persien, Mesopotamien och Kaukasus. Reseminnen (Memories of a Journey Through Persia, Mesopotamia and Caucasus), Stockholm, 1887.

Konung Oscars beskickning till Schahen af Persien år 1890 (King Oscar’s Mission to the Shah of Persia 1890), Stockholm, 1891.

“Der Demavend nach eigener Beobachtung,” *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 19, 1892, pp. 304-32.

Genom Khorasan och Turkestan. Minnen från en resa i Centralasien 1890 och 1891 (Through Khorasan and Turkestan. Memories of a Journey in Central Asia 1890 and 1891) I-II, Stockholm, 1892-93.

En Färd Genom Asien 1893-97 I-II, Stockholm, 1898; tr. as *Through Asia* I-II, London, 1898.

Die geographisch-wissenschaftlichen Ergebnisse meiner Reisen in Zentralasien 1894-1897 (Petermanns Mitteilungen Ergänzungsheft 131), Gotha, 1900.

Asien Tusen mil på okända vägar I-II, Stockholm, 1903; tr. as *Central Asia and Tibet* I-II, London, etc., 1903.

Scientific Results of a Journey in Central Asia 1899-1902 I-IV (text), V-VI (maps), Stockholm, 1904-07.

Öfver Land till Indien genom Persien, Seistan och Belutjistan I-II, Stockholm, 1910; tr. as *Overland to India* I-II, London, 1910.

Eine Routenaufnahme durch Ostpersien I-II (text) and III (maps), Stockholm, 1918-27.

Transhimalaya. Upptäckter och äfventyr i Tibet, 3 vols, Stockholm, 1909-12; tr. as *Trans-Himalaya. Discoveries and adventures in Tibet* I-III, London, 1909-13.

Southern Tibet. Discoveries in former times compared to my own researches in



1906-08, I-IX (text) and 3 vols. maps and panoramas, Stockholm and Leipzig, 1916-22.

Åter till Asien. Min expedition 1927-1928 med svenskar, tyskar och kineser genom öknen Gobi, Stockholm, 1928; tr. as *Across the Gobi desert*, London, 1931.

Gobiöknens gåtor, Stockholm, 1930; tr. as *Riddles of the Gobi desert*, London, 1933.

Stora Hästens Flykt, Stockholm, 1935; tr. as *Big Horse's flight. The trail of war in Central Asia*, London, 1936.

Sidenvägen. En bilfärd genom Centralasien, Stockholm, 1936, tr. as *The Silk Road*, London, 1938.

Den vandrande sjön, Stockholm, 1937, tr. as *The Wandering Lake*, London, 1940.

In collaboration with Folke Bergman. *History of an expedition in Asia 1927-1935 in four parts*: Part I, 1927-1928 (Reports from the scientific expedition to the north-western provinces of China under the leadership of Dr. Sven Hedin [hereafter given as Reports], Vol. 23), Stockholm, 1943; Part II, 1928-33 (Reports, Vol. 24), Stockholm, 1943; Part III, 1933-35 (Reports, Vol. 25), Stockholm, 1944; Part IV, General Reports of Travels and Fieldwork (Reports, Vol. 26), Stockholm, 1945. Erick Norin and American Army Map Service, *Central Asia Atlas* [20 sheets of maps] (Reports, Vol. 47), Stockholm, 1967.

Reports related to Iran. Carl M Fürst and J. Wolfgang Amschler, *The Skeletal Material collected during the Excavations of Dr. T.J. Arne in Shah Tepé at Astrabad-Gorgan in Iran and Tierreste der Ausgrabungen von dem 'Grossen Königshügel' Shah Tepé, in Nord-Iran* (Reports, vol. 9), Stockholm, 1939.

Ture J. Arne, *Excavations at Shah Tepé, Iran* (Reports, Vol. 27), Stockholm, 1945.