About Egil Johansson

KENNETH LOCKRIDGE
University of Montana

Egil used to tell a story. When he and Ruth were young and had just gotten their first parish, they invited the whole village to coffee at the parsonage. How excited they were! Ruth made her wonderful smaorgaastoarta, the windows were washed and bright, the coffee brewing as up the hill came the villagers in their best clothes. All of them were coming, young and old. They walked up to Egil’s gate … and they walked right on by, heading for the Baptist chapel up the road. Egil and Ruth knew then that the job would not be easy. Years later, successful in their parish, they would laugh about that day.

In 1970, when Birgitta Oden told me about a Swedish priest who had found records of reading in the storage room of his church in the far north, I should have known from something in her choice of words that the path I would take in responding to Egil’s first scholarly invitations would be as little used as the path to his first parsonage once was. By the time I got to Umea, in 1972, there had been footsteps ahead of me. Helena Hoas and Yvonne Andersson were his students, Birgitta Oden was advertising his work, and Umea University had made a place for him at Peddan. So the gate was open for me and for the others who came simultaneously. But it still wasn’t exactly rush hour. More than a few people were still walking past Egil’s scholarly gate, missing Ruth’s stunning smaorgaastoarta in the process and missing Egil’s historical points. They thought he was only a priest, you see. I suppose they went on to worship at the Temple of Secularism. Years of politically useful scorn heaped on the Swedish church by the ruling party had rendered them temporarily unable to hear or see that past that Egil was pointing us toward. When I got there, Egil still felt some pain from this early difficulty in being heard. He responded with great warmth when he discovered that in my country religion was considered a part of the past one must study if one were to understand history. We spoke the same language, and so did Ian Winchester, Roger Schofield, Jacques Ozouf, Jan Sundin, Sune Akerman – the language that said that in understanding the past no holds are barred, and every awareness is needed. What fun we had together! Within a few years Egil’s scholarly parsonage was filled with younger Swedish scholars, too, and … well … here we all are today, the whole village, honoring Egil.
Once, when he was speaking fluently to hundreds of listeners at an international conference in Umea, sitting above us tier on tier up to the ceiling, Egil turned to me with fear in his face and said, “Am I speaking English?” Yes, Egil, it was English, and in all languages you spoke to us fluently and we have understood you.

Many of you are here to add pieces to Egil’s scholarly smoargoastoarta – I love these extended metaphors, so let me be a little silly here – you have come to add here a plump tomato and there a tart olive of wisdom on literacy, on religion, on gender, to this magnificent feast. And Egil has just reminded us how rich the feast is. But at this opening moment, I would like to recall to us all, the things about Egil’s many achievements that stand out most in my mind. Not the details but the big picture. Forgive me if they sound obvious or sentimental or unscientific, but in some way I nonetheless hope to speak for us all. Four very brief observations capture the essence of his achievement.

• If you wish you can see Egil as a brilliant social scientist. And he is. But I would suggest that as a social scientist, he is really a humanist. To name one particular, he is a poet of the statistical past, who can draw from its numbers alone profound and revealing pictures of the great forces behind the rise of literacy, portray the contexts in which those literacies resided, and show the persistence of human faith and solidarity into our own time. He has taught us that social science is not a dry, dispassionate pursuit. For this alone, I would honor him.

• Second, Egil has done what he set out to do. He has recalled from the Swedish past and set into being once again – there, in Tuna! – a lost world, one in which literacy was an avenue to commonality, commonality balanced hardship, faith operating in the world could balance brutality, and hope was not yet gone. This reconstruction is not an act of religion, it is a great and valid work of the informed historical imagination. Eventually that world fell into disrepair and needed to be replaced, but can we now say, as people did in Sweden in 1974 that it was a worse world than our own? Now, at least, and thanks to Egil, that past world is there for us to examine, in all its features.

• Third, Egil’s current research suggests the persistence if not of faith then at least of the human commonalities still framed by the Church in the act of baptism. For an amazing proportion of infants in Sweden are still baptized in the Swedish Church. Egil seems to suggest that we could call this behavior solidarity, and he seems to