

The folk-life artist
Carl Gustaf Bernhardson



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Anders Gustavsson

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Carl Gustaf Bernhardson

Portrayer of coastal life and coastal women
in workday and feast day



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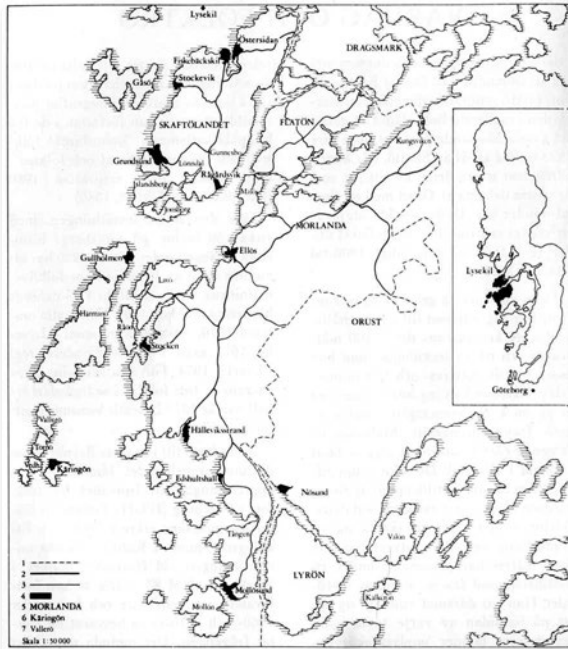
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*The book is dedicated to my wife Kristina Gustavsson
and our son Johan Gustavsson*

Life history / Biography

Carl Gustaf Bernhardson was born on 22 September 1915 in the fishing village of Grundsund on Skaftö, an island in the province of Bohuslän in western Sweden. His father Martin Bernhardson (1879-1961) was a fisherman, as his paternal grandfather Bernhard Johansson (1845-1895) had been before him. His mother Lydia (1886-1961) was born at Lönndal farm just outside Grundsund where her father Johannes Jonsson (1860-1944) and mother Kristina (1860-1943) owned a small holding. Other nearby farms and holdings were even smaller, only just managing to keep a cow, a pig and a few chickens (GMA 9740). Such coastal smallholders were forced to supplement their farm incomes by working as fishermen and seamen during parts of the year.



Map of the western part of the island of Orust. 1. Parish border. 2. Main road. 3. Secondary road. 4. Densely populated area. 5. Large island. 6. Fishing village. 7. Small island. The map was drawn by Hanna Nerman, Lund.



Carl Gustaf Bernhardson on the white horse at Lönndal farm in 1930. To the right, holding the black horse, is his maternal uncle Oskar. His maternal grandmother and aunt stand in the background, with the three cousins who lived on the farm in the foreground. Privately owned photograph.

Even as a small child Carl Gustaf enjoyed close contact with his maternal grandparents, and moved to live with them when he was seven years old. He told me that “I was so happy there and never wanted to leave”. It should be mentioned here that his mother Lydia, in Grundsund, was unwell. Carl Gustaf did, however, maintain a close relationship with his parents. He thus came to grow up in the borderland between a small-holding farm district and a fishing village. In 1932, aged seventeen, he took part in deep-sea fishing off Iceland and other regions. Parts of the year he worked as a seaman on a cargo ship. In 1939 he went ashore and began studying at Billström’s folk high school on Tjörn island and later at the Dingle agricultural school in Bohuslän and Svalöf’s agricultural institute in Skåne in south-western Sweden. Between 1949 and 1952 he attended Hultberg’s school of art in Gothenburg. During the 1950s he spent some time in Vallda and Släp in northern Halland province. He painted in the winter and otherwise earned a living doing short-term work during the summer on farms and market gardens. In 1965 he returned to Skaftö for good and moved into the newly built house where he lived for the rest of his life. This house, which he had mostly built himself, lay in an isolated upland area belonging to Gunnesbo farm a few kilometres from his grandparents’ farm at Lönndal.



Karl Gustaf standing in front of his self-built house. Photo: Eric Jonsson, Uddevalla, 1973.

My first opportunity of visiting the artist's home occurred in 1975. In 1982 he built another building on the property that was to function as an exhibition room. He continued to paint and was able to experience this creative joy until his death in 1998 at 83 years of age. Bernhardson's possessions were inherited by his brother Berndt, born in 1920, who in his turn immediately transferred the inheritance by deed of gift to his son, the fisherman Claes Berndtsson from Grundsund, who with his wife Solveig had lived near Bernhardsson for many years. The buildings were sold to a private person in the fall of 2005. The furnishings of both houses, that had stood untouched since the artist's death, were entrusted to the Bohuslän Museum in Uddevalla as a 20-year deposit. The museum established a Bernhardsson Room to replicate his home surroundings on Skaftö.

Bernhardson had begun to interest himself in the traditional culture of his home district at an early age. As a young man he had listened to old people's tales and begun to collect objects from a bygone age. At the same time he wrote records of folk life for the archives in Gothenburg and Stockholm. This provided some income. The archive material also includes numerous drawings that the artist made of various objects and work processes found in coastal life.

Bernhardson became known to the general public through the exhibition entitled "Skärgårdsvardag" ("Daily life in the archipelago") that

was shown at the Historical Museum of Gothenburg (now Göteborg City Museum) in 1980-1981. The exhibition was opened on 22 September 1980, Bernhardson's sixty-fifth birthday.



The opening of the Bernhardson exhibition on 22 September 1980 at the Göteborg City Museum. Standing, left to right: Carl Gustaf Bernhardson, the museum's director Allan T. Nilson, professor Anders Gustavsson and Ellen Jarnedal, Bernhardson's cousin from Lönndal. Photographed by Eran, Fiskebäckskil.

As a result of the great and appreciative interest generated by the exhibition, several municipalities cooperated with the Provincial Council for western Sweden in the granting of substantial sums of money as a basis for the fund established in 1981 under the name "Carl Gustaf Bernhardson's Fund for Ethnology and Folklore". The artist was allotted the yield of the fund for the rest of his life. 526 of his folk-life paintings, then comprising the greater part of his production, were transferred at this time from Skaftö to Bohuslän's Museum. In 2005 all were published on the Internet at www.bohusmus.se/samlingar. This is in complete accord with the artist's intentions. He wished both to preserve his paintings as a single unit and to ensure their accessibility as documentation for posterity. He sold a very limited number of paintings to private persons, and then only to finance new works. In the early 1990s Bernhardson donated a large collection of paintings he called "Skagerrak legends" to the municipality of Uddevalla. The paintings, whose subjects are entirely folkloristic,

have been hung in the Bohus Conference Centre in Uddevalla. The 233 paintings that remained in Bernhardson's home at the time of his death were purchased by Aina Barnevik in 2008 and have been made available at exhibitions and, to some extent, on the Internet at www.cgbernhardson.se. Some twenty paintings at the Göteborg City Museum have also been published on the Internet at www.stadsmuseum.goteborg.se/carlotta. Bernhardson's paintings were brought to foreign attention in a major exhibition at Sæby Museum in Denmark in 1997.

Bernhardson wrote a short description on the reverse of each painting telling what it depicted, using dialectical expressions (see below, for example, the reverse side of the painting "Grandma at her morning prayers"). He utilized, in other words, depictions in the form of paintings and also the written word to present information about a past age.

Coastal women's way of life and living conditions

One obvious trait in the paintings is the detailed description of women's way of life. Bernhardson emphasizes their poverty and the gruelling drudgery inherent in their efforts to acquire a source of livelihood. While the able-bodied men were at sea in the spring and summer months, the women on smallholdings had to assume sole and complete responsibility for care of the home and the farm. They were forced to manage the family's economy, the children's upbringing and the completion of all outdoor tasks. Bernhardson has illustrated how they rowed to the outer islands to milk cattle, or to gather hay and bring crops in on their boats.

Fishermen's wives devoted much time to cleaning, drying and salting the catches brought home by their husbands. They also were responsible for collecting bait for fishing equipment. In addition, women from fishing villages had regular routes to nearby farming districts in order to sell fish or barter them for agricultural products. Every week the women went to fetch milk from a neighbouring farm. Each fishing household had its specific farm from which milk was fetched.

Women from both fishing villages and from smallholdings also had to collect branches, heather or driftwood for fuel from the uplands and the near-lying islands. This they brought home in sacks carried on their backs or rowed in their loaded boats. The women had to carry water, often for long distances, both to their households and their herds. Bernhardson's intention with these illustrations was to show that heavy work was a commonplace to these women. Several paintings show the women's hard labour with washing clothes. Because there was little fresh water near the houses, they had to carry the wash to springs and bogs in the uplands or row out to the islands to rinse the clothes. This was especially strenuous in wintertime. Bernhardson declared to me: "Lord! To have to stand there and rinse or wash carpets the way they did, so that bits of ice just whirled about. I've seen that so many times. They were wet to the bone, through both their aprons, jackets and shifts. Their hands and arms froze almost solid. The cold of that icy water could be felt all the way to their armpits".



Bernhardson's grandma pouring milk in the cans belonging to fishermen's wives from Grundsund. No. 494 Bohuslän Museum (BM).

The artist has concentrated in his paintings on recording every detail of the incidents in everyday life. He has never considered any action as being too insignificant or too improper to depict. This is shown, for example, when he illustrates how women defrosted frozen latrine buckets on their kitchen stoves so that a farmer could collect the excrements and carry them off in his wagon. Bernhardson's textual comment on the back of the painting reads: "What a smell – But it was done!"



Washing clothes at Grandma's spring, 1929. Aina Barnevik's Collection.

Many coastal women became widows early in their married lives. They then experienced increased difficulties in providing for themselves and their children. The artist has illustrated how they worked on the larger farms with baking, washing and cleaning. They fished in offshore waters and assisted other families with baiting fishing equipment. The only economic assistance they could expect from their neighbours consisted of the fish caught by the boats on specified hooks reserved for widows and fatherless children (see Hasslöf 1949: 88).

These paintings that illustrate women's desperate straits in past times indicate the artist's deep sympathy with them. This is expressed, *inter alia*, in such titles as "Poverty", "Pauper's Christmas", "Toil" or "Wretched women". At the same time, he admired them for their phys-



*Women defrost latrine buckets
in one of the kitchens.
No. 473 BM.*

ical and psychological strength, and wished to honour their industriousness with his paintings. He summed up his opinion of these women for me by saying: “It was that awful struggle. I lived alongside these women and saw how they strived and worked and all the privation they endured. And if they were widows ... you can’t even imagine it. They just had to sacrifice themselves in every way and even then they had absolutely nothing to live on”. Such conditions meant that saving every possible existing resource that could be used as fuel was vital. In some cases they even gathered manure for fuel (IFGH 6154: 41). And yet these coastal women still appeared to be content. “You never heard them complain. They were tough”, the artist said. “She was not meek!” as he wrote on the reverse of the painting showing a woman drinking coffee beside the fire after having served the men sitting and talking around the table.



Woman drinking coffee alongside the fire. "She was not meek!" No. 471 BM.

There are some paintings that illustrate the women's social life in between their demanding periods of work. They gathered in each other's homes to drink coffee and chat. The women have also gone together up into the hills or rowed out in smaller boats to wave farewell to their husbands as the latter sailed out to fish on the high seas. They also walked together up into the nearby hills at about the time the fishing boats were expected to return. They sat there with their

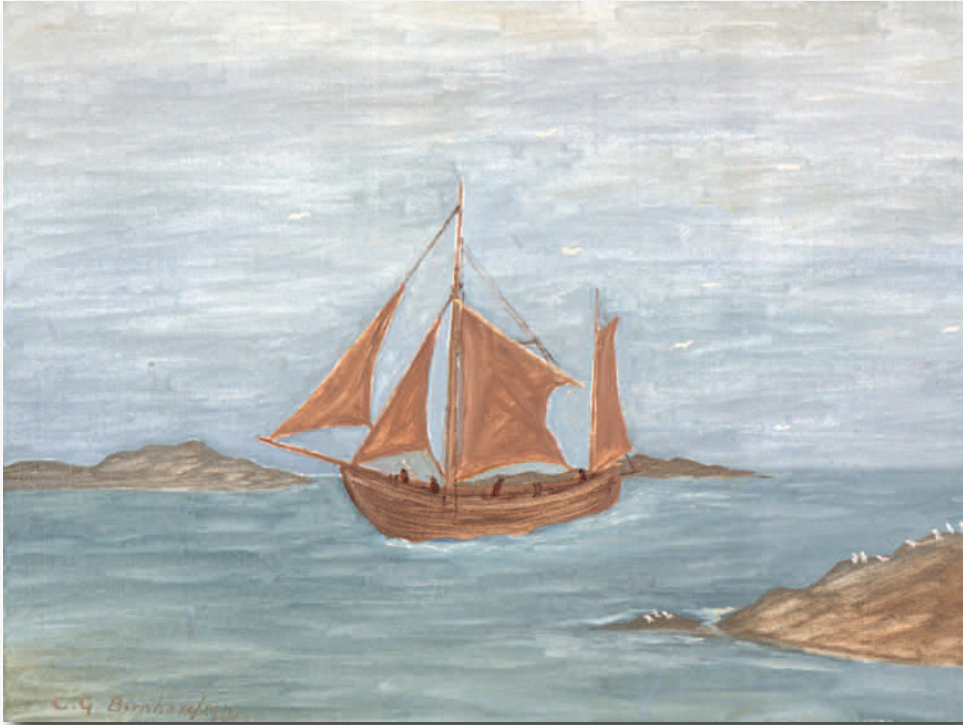


*Women sitting on a hilltop
with their knitting, watching
for the return of the fishing
boats from the Shetlands.
No. 005 BM.*

knitting and needlework, peering out over the horizon, all raising a cheer when they saw a mast in the far distance.

If, however, they saw a boat sailing in to its home port with the top of its sail lowered, this gave them an adverse message telling that one or even several of the crew had perished.

This form of collective expectancy illustrates a characteristic feature of coastal villages. One or more men from every home was at sea for



A fishing boat sailing in to home port with the top of its sail lowered as a sign telling of a fatal accident. No. 270 BM.

long periods of the year. The women left at home thus shared a common interest, both in their concern for and anxiety about the men's lives and the weather. Their shared circumstances provided an excuse for the women to meet regularly. Before telephones had become common, letters sent home from foreign ports by fishermen and seamen constituted the only form of information to their home districts. Such letters were therefore eagerly awaited. This has been illustrated in one of Bernhardson's paintings showing the distribution of the post. One sees several women, some children and an elderly man with a cane gathered at the post office. The women are so eager for news that they begin reading their letters immediately, right outside the post office.

Illustrations of men's lives are mostly focussed on the periods they spent in their home districts and portray the various forms of work that they did during autumn and winter. They



Grundsund women at the post office in the 1920s, impatiently waiting for letters from their men at sea. No. 008 BM.

fished on the ice, hunted seabirds or mended fishing equipment and sails. One gets the impression that the men have a more withdrawn position in their home districts than the women.

Children are shown on some paintings. These sometimes show them at work both indoors and outdoors, and sometimes at their various moments of play with homemade toys. Children were taught to help the women at an early age. Bernhardson remembers from his own childhood and youth that “as soon as children were big enough, they had to start helping out by fetching wood and water and gathering heather”.

The perils of the sea

The sea was, naturally enough, a perilous place of work for the men taking part in deep-sea fishing and shipping. Danger also lurked in the waters just off the coast. This was especially true of the winter months when sea water froze to ice. In itself ice eased transportation. Utmost care had to be shown, however, when walking over the ice or driving a horse and sleigh. The salinity of the water and the unpredictable currents in the sounds meant that the strength of the ice could never be depended upon. The numerous deaths by drowning showed the islanders that they could never display enough caution. Bernhardson has depicted the ways in which coastal dwellers attempted to safeguard themselves against such danger. One striking picture shows a man testing the strength of the ice with an ice-club fitted onto an over two-metre-long wooden pole. He pauses at every other step and strikes hard on the ice in front of him. He had learned to judge by the resulting sound if the ice was safe enough for him to continue. Ice-clubs of this type were in use until the early 1920s.

The islanders had learned to take strong poles with them when driving a horse over the ice. These poles could be used to rescue the horse in case of accident. An accident of this kind painted by Bernhardson shows only that the head of the horse reaches over the edge of the ice. The animal is harnessed to a fully loaded sleigh.



Drawing of a man from the tiny island of Jonsborg who had to cross over the ice to Skaftö to buy food. He is using an ice-club to test the strength of the uncertain ice. 1920s. (IFGH 6156: 4). The painting based on this drawing is found in the Göteborg City Museum.



The horse has gone through the ice and is being lifted up with poles. No. 277 BM.

In another painting the artist illustrated how a woman who was washing clothes out on the ice was taken unawares by being set adrift. The ice floe on which she stood had loosened, and she was being borne out to sea along with her sledge and her tubs. A boat hurrying out to the rescue saved her from this dangerous situation.

Social realism

Bernhardson never really provides an idyllic perception of the past. His art is never nostalgically retrospective. In this respect the artist differs noticeably from the so-called Düsseldorf-paintings of the late 1800s. In these folk-life depictions the picturesque is emphasized, as when, for example, Edward Bergh (1828-1880) spoke of “Grundsund’s picturesque hovels” in 1868 (Hedvall 1957: 71).

One can ask oneself if Bernhardson’s detailed societal depictions are intentionally critical of society. In the repeated conversations I had with the artist he denied most decidedly, however, that he had intended any form of criticism with his paintings. As he emphasized on one occasion, conditions in the past “cannot be changed or criticised in our time. That’s how they were”. The artist’s deliberate intention has instead been to document, for the present and the future, the conditions under which these people lived. He stated: “I have wanted to save all this from being forgotten and show how it really was, how wretched their lives were”. Social realism is thus the goal.

In this respect Bernhardson reminds one of the Scanian folk-life artist Frans Lindberg (1857-1944) (Lindberg 1978: 12) and the music teacher Josabeth Sjöberg (1812-1882). In her detailed watercolours, the latter artist depicted folk life in some lower middle-class surroundings in Stockholm in the 1800s. As Gustaf Näsström points out, “she has penetrated into the very heart of reality as it lay there before her eyes in all its poverty” (Näsström 1954: 25).

Bernhardson attempted to communicate the meaning of his paintings to others by means of a successive publication of several motifs in the newspaper *Bobusläningen* in the 1970s. He used dialectical expressions in the accompanying commentaries on the paintings. These now comprise a part of the documentation of a past age. The objective of reaching a broader public is also the reason for Bernhardson’s own publication of six reproductions starting in 1978 (Bernhardson 1978, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1995). The paintings were reproduced in black-and-white, with the text under each picture. His aim with this publication was that “if I publish a book, my paintings will reach many people”.

Bernhardson can be said to have had special qualifications for portraying the conditions of these marginal surroundings, in that this is

where he grew up. An insider perspective is obvious, based on his personal experience of the coastal culture that he portrayed. In this way he differs from artists who painted coastal subjects, but who came from other regions and whose perspective was that of the culture of summer guests. One can say that theirs was an outsider perspective that is in contrast to Bernhardson's insider perspective. He has been able to clarify the living conditions of a past age with special sensitivity by never distancing himself from them or by regarding them with contempt. He has instead appreciated the people of that time.

In his own style of living the artist sought to continue to use many features of an older culture. He stated on one occasion that "I want to live the way I was brought up and how I used to live. I really live in a different century. Whatever takes place now doesn't interest me". In the food he ate and the crops he grew he strove to continue the use of plants that had been common during his youth. He was not interested in technological innovations. Electricity was not installed in Bernhardson's house until 1979. He got a telephone in the 1980s. He had a secret telephone number for the whole of his life in order to control his contacts with the outside world. When he telephoned me, the conversation always opened with the words: "Skaftö calling". He did not consider himself an ordinary private person, but rather as a representative for the coastal culture of Skaftö.

The conceptual world of the archipelago inhabitants

Religion played an important role in the surroundings of Bernhardson's childhood and youth. He was very familiar with the intra-church revivalist movement known as schartauanism (Lewis 1997). Regular attendance at church, prayer meetings and a refusal to work on Sundays were fixed components of the lives of people in the movement. After returning home from church services, Carl Gustaf and every other young person in the area had to answer the old people's questions about the biblical text on which the parson had based his sermon. When the adults read from their devotional books every morning and evening, the children were made to sit and listen. Bernhardson has portrayed his grandmother as she read the morning prayer. This picture illustrates how a religious upbringing was fixed in the minds of the younger generation, and that women from the older generation took an active part in this upbringing.

The parson held an important position and was an active participant in the important events of the islanders' lives. Bernhardson has depicted, for example, how he saw the parson bid farewell in 1938 to the fishermen from the village of Gullholmen just before they set sail for fishing on the high seas.

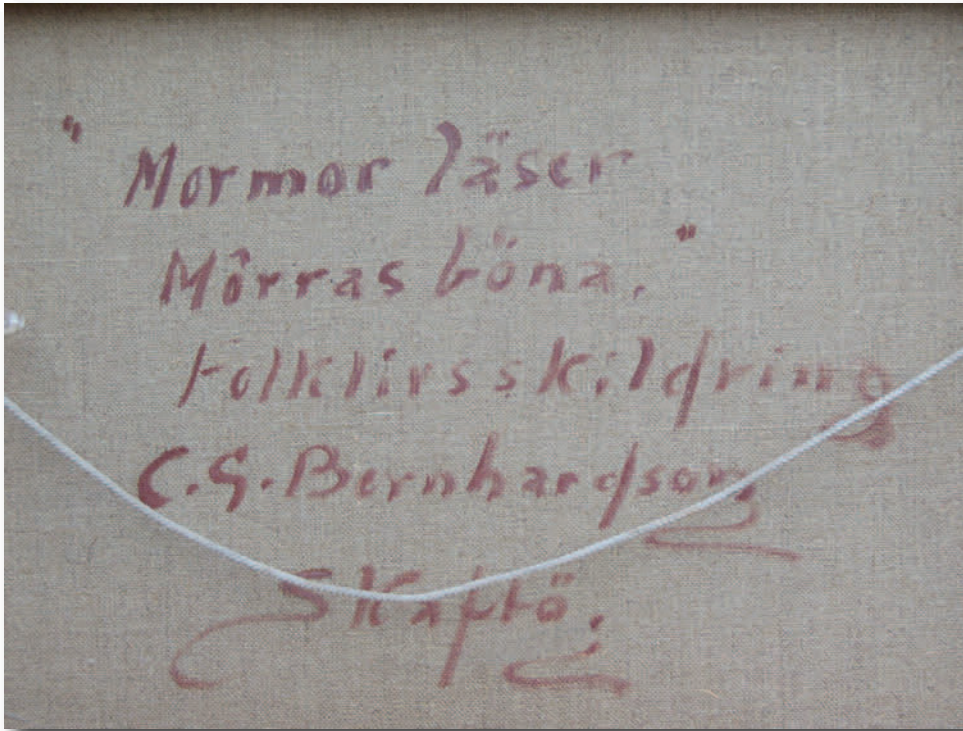
Based on their religious convictions, these people generally assumed an other-worldly perspective. Their interest in a life after death is shown in statements made by older informants. In one of Bernhardson's folk-life records, a man born in 1860 relates how he once dreamt that he had seen another man whom he knew had been dead for several years. "He was just like he used to be. ... So I thought I'd ask him if he was happy up there. He said: 'You just can't imagine how good it is. And no-one has to do very much either. Me, I just go outside every day and gather spruce cones. That's all I do, so everything is always just fine'" (IFGH 6194: 2). Life after death is perceived, in other words, as being restful, in direct contrast to the hard drudgery of life on earth.

In addition to the ecclesiastical religion, there were conceptions of belief about the presence of supernatural beings in humans' immediate surroundings. These were ghosts, spectres, goblins and the underwater merpeople. Such conceptions, which are often depicted in Bernhardson's



Grandma reading her morning prayers while the children listen. Privately owned.

paintings, were never considered by the islanders to be incompatible with their ardent religiosity. It was a matter of having both, not an either/or in these levels of belief. Supernatural beings were for the most part considered as being dangerous for humans. They contributed to accidents or they foretold such events. It was only to a very limited degree that they could bring benefits to their surroundings, such as when goblins carried sheaves of grain into smallholders' barns. In the same way as other folkloristic beings, goblins could also threaten their surroundings, such as when they were suspected of lighting fires in the tops of boat-masts or attempting to lure children into rock cairns. The islanders therefore held these beings in great respect. This has been illustrated by the artist in a painting entitled "Courtesy" in which a man meeting several goblins raises his hat to them and is answered in like manner.



*Text on reverse side:
"Grandma reading her
morning prayers". Folk-life
illustration by C.G. Bern-
hardson. Skaftö.*

The underwater merpeople could reveal themselves to men out fishing. If one of the merpeople were caught on a hook, it was of vital importance that it be freed immediately and put back into the water. Disaster would otherwise strike men and boats. The merpeople breathed through gills, had fish eyes and lifeless hair. They lived lives comparable to humans with, for example, herds of animals on the bottom of the sea.

The exact opposite of the dwarfish beings were "the big people", gigantic creatures who appeared at night, especially in the narrow passes between two high cliffs. They were more than twice the size of human beings and could be either dark or gleaming with light. The dark beings had negative effects on human interests, such as when they milked the cows at night. This was not the case with the gleaming beings that, according to Bernhardson, were thought to have a religious basis.



A man meeting some goblins down on the shore raises his hat politely and the goblins return his greeting. No. 075 BM.

The forewarnings that people believed they had experienced foretold of danger. These conceptions were closely related to the fact that they lived in a maritime environment. In winter it was the ice that represented an ever-present danger. The artist has illustrated how people believed themselves to have seen humanlike beings that tried to tempt people crossing the ice over to some dangerous current. There were also, however, benign beings who warned of weak ice



*The merpeople living at the bottom of the sea are a threat to the men out fishing and to the women rowing home from the islands who are shown at the top of the picture.
No. 009 BM.*

or approaching storms at sea. The artist had himself seen, sometime in the 1940s, an indistinct being ahead of him on the ice. It tugged at the arm of the man walking with Bernhardtson to get them to walk in a direction different from the one they had planned on originally. The next day they heard that a man had fallen through the ice somewhere near the route they had thought of taking.



A large dark being moving through a narrow pass, watched by a normal person. The Aina Barnevik Collection.

Deathly beings were made up of various kinds of spectres that had not been buried in sanctified ground. This must be seen in the light of the constant dangers experienced on the sea by coastal dwellers. Death was very near whenever nets or hooks were being put out or the catch was being hauled in while fishing. During the night coastal dwellers still at home could imagine that they observed and/or heard entire crews of fishing boats pass by in the vicinity of



Bernhardson, shown to the right in the painting, crossing the ice in the 1940s. Alongside his comrade in the centre of the picture, there is a dim being pulling the man in a different direction than the way he had planned to go. No 032 BM.

the boathouses. A sight such as the artist has portrayed was thought to foretell that a boat would soon sink or had already gone down with its crew.

Prior to unexpected deaths one could see black dogs with flaming eyes and fire-breathing mouths rush by in the night. A woman who sees such dogs holds her hands in front of her face in terror. This brings to mind the commonly held conceptions about black, fire-breathing dogs



The crew of a boat that had sunk shows itself soon afterwards at night near the fishing village. The men can be recognized because they are bare-headed and by the sound of their waterlogged sea-boots. No. 168 BM.

who represent the devil (af Klintberg 1977: 74, 165).

Spectres were called *gastar*, or ghosts, and could be heard screeching in the night. This was thought to forecast bad weather or disasters at sea. These beings were considered to be especially dangerous for those searching for wreckage from sunken ships. Ghosts that had lost their clothing felt the cold of bad weather. A ghost is



Black dogs with fiery eyes and tongues racing through the night past a terrified woman and signalling sudden death. No. 191 BM.

depicted by Bernhardson in the form of a naked skeleton walking about and crying: “I want my coat back. The north wind is blowing and I’m freezing”.

Various magical rituals were carried out in order to protect oneself against these supernatural beings. Commonly used preventive measures could consist of the use of steel, the sign of the cross or magical incantations, all having a basis in older folk beliefs. Fishing people waved a knife back and forth in the air over the stem of a boat before the start of a voyage. The sign of the cross was made in the water before nets were put out in order to protect the fishing grounds and the equipment.

The close relationship between religion and magic was apparent on nights with bad weather when the fisherman held the anchor chain and



A ghost off the little island of Gåsö cries that he is freezing and wants his clothes back.
No. 225 BM.

said: “God give you strength tonight, dear friend”, before throwing it into the sea. This action, as portrayed by Bernhardson, was one he had himself experienced while on a fishing expedition in the 1930s.



Fishermen making the sign of the cross in the water to protect the fishing grounds and the nets. No. 367 BM.

Aspects of source criticism and evaluation

A very great number of the paintings showing life styles and living conditions are based on the artist's own experiences and memories of childhood and youth in the 1920s and 1930s. Other motifs depict even older periods of time and are based on what he has heard from others. In this context it should be remembered that the narratives were very detailed and that Bernhardson was obviously a very good listener even as a child. The little boy sitting and listening to his maternal grandfather or other older people relate stories is actually Bernhardson himself. He has not had old photographs on which to base his paintings.

The fact that the paintings are characterized by a richness of detail has been explained by Bernhardson as "I have a photographic memory and remember details when I see something. I see everything before me when I paint, both events and their surroundings". He has never painted a contemporary subject, but has always relied on his memory. It is only in exceptional cases that he has used a detailed drawing as a model. Most of these drawings were made at the time he started painting in the late 1940s and early 1950s. At various times after this he has made simple little sketches with a blue pencil when he has remembered an event or a narrative. In many cases several years can have passed between drawing the sketch and painting the picture. The artist destroyed his sketch after the painting was completed, so that only a few such sketches remain. Bernhardson's documentary efforts have led to several series of paintings based on the same motifs. This has been done to illustrate the various steps in a work process, such as when the islanders process honey or the peat used as fuel.

The artist was interested in being considered a realistic painter and portrayer of times past. He objected when his paintings were spoken of as examples of naïve art in certain newspaper articles (see Dahlström 2010). According to Bernhardson, a realistic artist "paints the way things are", while a naïve artist "paints from the heart". He could paint anything that he considered to be real. This included the supernatural beings of folk belief. On the other hand, his personal emotions were not to be reflected in the painting. This would be far too subjective. He wanted to communicate objective knowledge of the past. He also opposed most decidedly any of the opinions sometimes voiced that he might have had

literary models or have attempted to copy some other artist. "That would have failed completely, have been something terribly uncomfortable for me if the basis was something I had read about. That would have made it [the painting] uninteresting". Here we find an obvious resemblance to the artist Josabeth Sjöberg from Stockholm in the 1800s. The art historian Gunnar Hellman has declared that "it was enough for her to be herself, to communicate objects and people in a matter-of-factly, unemotional way that lacked all secondary motives" (Bihalji-Merin 1964: 132). Richness of detail is a conspicuous feature in her paintings (Lagercrantz 1968).

In order to make a better assessment of Bernhardson's reliability when he portrays human ways of life, I have compared the content of his paintings and records with other older records from Skaftö found in folk-life archives (cf. Bergstrand 1962). I have also been able to relate his work to the interview material that I collected in connection with a research programme entitled "Cultural contacts in the coastal districts of Bohuslän". The information I have gained from this comparative material corresponds highly with Bernhardson's portrayals. I have, for example, been able to verify that in numerous households cow dung was gathered for use as fuel. The artist's depictions of outdoor privies and the handling of latrine buckets is consistent with the reports of the district medical officer on the coastal districts of Bohuslän (*Förste provinsialläkarens årsberättelse* 1890 ff).

The artist may be said to have made a unique contribution to folklore with his portrayals of the conceptions held by people in past times relating to the appearance of supernatural beings and the tangible influence these beings had on their lives. Which preconditions have been present in the artist with regard to his ability to transform immaterial conceptions of belief to a visual dimension on canvas? Numerous informants from Skaftö have verified the important role played by Bernhardson's maternal grandfather as a communicator of the ancient folk beliefs in his surroundings. He paid regular evening visits to various homes, often accompanied by Carl Gustaf. He believed in the beings about which he told and could attest to having seen them. He had, in other words, second sight, which is to say that he had visions of a different world than that which can be seen with the ordinary eye. He described the beings' appearances: goblins were undersized, wore wooden shoes, grey clothing and woollen caps on their heads. The artist continued these conceptual beliefs, declaring that "I have second sight just like the whole rest of my family". Just as had his grandfather, he said he had met dead people and recognized them. On a bicycle tour in 1979, and in broad daylight, he met a woman who had been dead for several years, but "when I looked up again, she had disappeared". He was later able to paint these inner visionary experiences. He is, in other words, very well-informed since he experienced this belief

from within. His experiences have obviously consisted of visions, even if this can never be verified with cultural-scientific methods. The scholar must consider the narrator's own statements about his experiences without attempting to decide on their degree of veracity. In this respect one can recall the words of Norwegian folklorist Bente Gullveig Alver in her study entitled "The third eye" [*Det tredje øye*] about a clairvoyant woman in Norway: "It would be far less scientific to deny clairvoyance than to remain receptive to the idea that it can exist" (Alver 1982: 35).

Bernhardson's world of conception

I have been a guide at exhibitions of Bernhardson's paintings, at which times I have often been asked about what sort of person the artist was. This has not been an easy question to answer. His paintings show his outer self. His world of ideas and his values have, on the other hand, remained relatively unknown even to me, despite my many interviews with him and numerous visits to him. He kept his inner self to himself as long as he lived. He spoke of his paintings, but not about what he believed and felt. The ethnologist Katarina Lewis, who visited Bernhardson several times in connection with her thesis work on schartauian women (Lewis 1997), has had an experience similar to mine. As she wrote in her eulogy over the artist in 1998: "Bernhardson was a deeply secretive person. He would never discuss his fundamental values" (Lewis 1998).

A study of Bernhardson's inner self has become possible only after his death. He left numerous and valuable personal records which, according to his own memorandums, were to be made known only after his death. In certain instances he wrote "Top Secret" on his records. Some of these were not to be made public until 2010. What actually happened was that this material was first discovered when his home on Skaftö was sold in 2005, and the house was emptied of all his belongings. This particular material is the basis for my illuminating of Bernhardson as a person. What did he think, what did he believe, what were his thoughts on the society of yesterday and today, and what sort of self-image did he have?

The most important source in this connection is a thick notebook which he called "Bernhardson's black book". It was begun in 1969 and contains personal reflections and a few poems. Another notebook bears the title "Karl Gustaf Bernhardson's Collected Poems, 1938 – ". There are, however, far fewer reflections in this book than in the first one. In addition to the notebooks, there are also a large number of letters, especially letters that the young Bernhardson wrote to his brother Mårten, who was born in 1917 and who remained unmarried. After this brother's death in 1975 Bernhardson regained the letters, many of them very personal. In addition there were the many letters that his mother Lydia wrote to her sons Carl Gustaf and Mårten when they were out on lengthy fishing expeditions in the 1930s.

Women

Bernhardson is most well-known for his portrayals of women. The fact that he remained a bachelor for his entire life has sometimes led to questions and speculations from an art-interested public as to whether he had ever had a relationship with any woman. The journalist Britt Nordberg from the newspaper *Bohusläningen* relates that she received a “resounding ‘no’ to the question of whether he had at least fallen in love at any time. ‘No, why should I have done that’, was the rejecting answer” (Nordberg 1997).

Seen against this background, some of the artist’s youthful letters assume great interest. What did he write in them about women? It soon emerges that he does write about women fairly often in these letters. He shows an interest in young women. At the same time he is reserved and uneasy if he notices that women become too intrusive or interested. He seems to have had a need both of showing his interest in women and in keeping his distance from them. This can have been a reason for his never having enjoyed a real and lasting relationship with any woman.

In November 1937 when Bernhardson was serving on the naval vessel *Örnen* in Karlskrona, he wrote to his brother Mårten: “I think I’ll spend some time with some womenfolk. Yesterday I went and visited Ella for a while, but things are not the same now, the little that has been is probably over, so it is time to look for someone else.” In 1940 he had met a new woman. His mother Lydia wrote to Mårten on 11 February 1941: “Carl Gustaf has had a girlfriend here one Sunday, because I saw him together with a woman.” This was then such an obvious relationship to a woman that his mother noticed it and even called her “his girlfriend”. Bernhardson was then just over 25 years of age and attending the Dingle agricultural school.

In the following year something went wrong in a relationship with a woman. On 1 August 1942, while working at a farm in northern Halland, Bernhardson wrote the following in his handwritten book of poems: “Oh, Woman, lovely as a rose, you always changed in bloom and charm, you are also quick to rage. You think that life is but a dance, you dream only of your newest hat, you have made of me a fool, so I could creep into my grave”. It is a very disillusioned man who writes these words. He gives the impression of planning to be far more reserved and careful in his future relationships with women.

These letters and poems are contemporaneous sources. But what impression of his youth does Bernhardson give in the notes he wrote later in life? In his “black book” he tells of a dance held on a bridge in southern Norway during the 1930s while he took part in deep-sea fishing. “I was 16 years old. ... I didn’t dance – but about 10 at night the prettiest little



The lovely girl from southern Norway. The Aina Barnevik Collection.

Norwegian girl I ever saw came up and took my arm. You just have to follow me home. – I don't dare go alone. – I live quite a way outside town. My God, she was sweet – so pretty and I was so shy. I was really just passive. Defending myself.” Bernhardson both admired this pretty woman and was reserved, passive and a bit frightened. An ambivalence in relation to women is obvious.

In his notes the artist often remembers how interested he has been in women since his youth and up to a mature age. When writing of his school days at Svalöf's agricultural institute in the 1940s, he observes: “I have never ‘hunted’ women – the opposite was more normal”. He has, however, noticed beautiful women, even if he kept a certain distance. “One met pretty women students and ditto teachers at the

schools,” he writes. When he started painting in 1948 he gave his first painting to “a wonderful little beauty”. Bernhardson must then have shown an interest and not simply retreated from her. He did not continue his contacts with this particular woman and wondered, as he noted in 1984: “Whatever became of her?”

Later on in life his ambivalence with regard to women seems to have continued. Bernhardson could admire pretty women who often were much younger than himself. He could express himself poetically about this. In 1982 he wrote: “I love women, they are the light of the world, blessed and divine. A woman’s well-shaped leg is like marzipan, two are paradise”. He was then over sixty years old, and the women who attracted him were sometimes only in their twenties. However, he could insist that he was no older than thirty, biologically speaking, even if he was over sixty in reality. This attitude can explain why he interested himself in and admired younger women. In 1977 he writes: “It is wonderful to find that at 62 years of age I can be loved by an 18-year-old girl. She has eyes like forest pools and blushes wonderfully when our eyes look deeply into each other’s eyes”. This appears to have been an imaginary mental speculation. On the other hand, it undoubtedly reflects what his thoughts were centred on.

Deep in his heart, Bernhardson longed to have had children of his own. In his “black book” he writes about “that girl with the wonderful face who probably wanted to have a child with me”. He wrote testamentary memorandums directed “to my unborn child.” On Christmas Day 1982 he wrote that “my whole soul is shattered. Our presumptive child is dead, unborn and buried in cowardice”. He denounces himself for his previously inhibited life with regard to women.

In contrast to his attitude towards young and attractive women, Bernhardson wanted to protect himself against the more mature women who admired him, according to his notes. He therefore set a solid padlock on the gate to his garden and ran barbed wire along the top of the metre-high fence of steel netting around his entire house site. This would make it impossible for such women to visit him without his permission. In 1982 he wrote that “the past few years have been annoying. I have been chased by crazy women, lived in isolation with drawn curtains and locked doors = just because I always flatter women. I simply cannot stop”.

The women who were interested in Bernhardson as a person were from the upper classes, according to his notes. They were among those people who had long spent their summer holidays on Skaftö, especially in the former shipping village of Fiskebäckskil. Bernhardson wrote in his “black book” on Easter Sunday 1984 that he wanted to be rescued “from all the crazy women – I am tormented by these celebrities from the worlds of finance, general culture and medicine, and philosophy of learning”.

My experience is that many summer guests have shown great interest in Bernhardson's art. It is very hard to determine whether or not the upper class women whom I have met in his home have also been in love with him. I do know that several admired his art. They have also given him gifts and driven him to various events in their motors. Bernhardson had neither a motorcar nor a driving license. In 1982 he relates that he is going to attend a heathland exhibition in Herning, Denmark, declaring: "I would prefer a woman to drive me – but that always leads to complications".

Bernhardson's great admiration for women is also shown in his testamentary annotations on 19 April 1982, where he stipulates that a single woman is to live in his home after his death. She is to have "an outstanding character and morals". The women among whom possible choices might be made would be artists, textile artists, authors or folklorists. At the same time he stresses that "no man can ever live in these dwellings". His testamentary annotations had, however, no legal consequence after his death.

Philosophy of life

As mentioned above, Skaftö was one of the places in Bohuslän that was strongly characterized by the schartauanian intra-church revival movement in the latter part of the 1800s and early years of the 1900s (Gustavsson 1986: 199 ff, Lewis 1997). This influence was especially noticeable in the fishing village of Grundsund and somewhat less in the agricultural district of the island's inland.

How has Bernhardson been influenced by his surroundings with regard to religion? In this respect one can examine what he has written about his home in Grundsund and his maternal grandparents' farm at Lönndal. His father Martin Bernhardson and his paternal grandmother were extremely influenced by the schartauanian movement. In his submitted folk-life records Bernhardson reacts against his father's rigidity and against the legalistic side of schartauanism in Grundsund. In a record dated to 1966 he writes: "This strict tradition left no room for compromise. Everything had to be observed exactly" (IFGH 6190: 3). In addition, followers of this religious movement were not interested in emphasizing the Gospel, and this was something that Bernhardson longed for.

In contrast to the rigidity in Grundsund and his father's strictness, Bernhardson stresses his mother's and maternal grandparents' milder and more liberal religious attitudes. Bernhardson writes about his mother's child-raising in very positive terms: "Mother was the one who raised us. She was a dreamer, kind, wrote poetry etc. And with her everything was alright – what a glorious life and how we enjoyed it. We went to bed

when we were sleepy and ate when it suited us. ... It was a wonderful upbringing". This free upbringing has contributed to Bernhardson's becoming, in his own words, "allergic to all force and pressure – no matter where it comes from!" (NM KU 6292). One of the mottoes hanging on his kitchen door reads: "All freedom comes from life itself!" The longing for freedom appears to have been one of his most characteristic traits. No outsider was ever to rule over or determine his life. He was going to decide everything for himself. "Mamma and Grandpa were not exactly schar-tauanians," he declared.

His attitude towards religion appears almost pragmatic. It was to be utilized only when necessary. In a note in his almanac in 1984 Bernhardson writes: "My mother's opinion about religion was quite simply marvellous. On one occasion she spoke of faith. One can always recite a psalm if necessary – in case of = a sort of guarantee against shocks. An admirable attitude!" It could be a comfort to have somewhere to turn if one was uncertain or in distress. An attitude of this kind can explain why Bernhardson often writes the words "God help me" or something similar when he is worried, for example when he feels himself harassed by women whom he believes are pursuing him as a man.

Bernhardson's philosophy of life seems to have wavered between a belief in God and a belief in fate. As he even writes in his almanac in 1984: "I am an atheist!" or on another occasion: "I am not a believer." Once he notes down: "God if you exist". He has imagined that there could be life on other planets. "We shall just have to wait." He believed that UFOs could reveal themselves. He thought he had experienced one himself in 1996 while walking from his house to the road. He was convinced that what he had seen was real. Other people's doubts had little interest for him. In one note in his almanac for 1984 he wrote: "People are ridiculous. They don't believe in UFOs. Poor creatures".

Bernhardson's belief in fate is expressed in several ways. "To be tickled by fate is to be alive!" reads one of the mottoes fastened to his kitchen door. On Christmas Day 1993 he noted: "The star of my fate shines like a beacon on the path of destiny". Fate controls the development of the world. On 2 October 1984 he wrote in his "black book" to a young girl he called Ann-Ette: "Fate may sometime let us meet. How can I know?"

He himself had been chosen by Fate to "interpret my coastal district's history". In a note in his almanac for 1981 he likened God to Fate when he wrote: "Lord = Fate". He could also accuse himself of not having lived as Fate had decided. On Christmas Day 1982 he wrote in his "black book": "I have betrayed myself – my forefathers and that which I find most holy, namely fate. I have denied fate, I have forged it. That is sinful". It is thus not a question of a blind fate that controls everything, because then one could not break with it. Belief in fate could obviously be com-



A painting entitled "Ann-Ette walking on the road". She carries a basket of eggs. The woman in white to the right represents the woman's dead mother holding the ship on which she drowned in her hands. Bernhardson's folkloristic paintings often shift between reality and fiction. The Aina Barnevik Collection.

bined by Bernhardson with that individual freedom which he defended so strenuously in every circumstance (see above).

Bernhardson held no conceptions concerning a life after death in a heavenly existence, in contrast to beliefs he encountered in his nearby surroundings on Skaftö (see above). Instead, he asserts a form for fatalism or belief in fate. Death cannot be conquered. It must simply be accepted when it occurs. This attitude



*Bernhardson's text: "Oh, homini! – see thy self-annihilation. The squirrel to the West – the lemming to the East!"
The Aina Barnevik Collection.*

is already obvious in a letter dated 20 December 1943 that Bernhardson wrote from Dingle agricultural school to his brother Mårten. There he said that "I thought Grandpa had become weak. He said his trouble in breathing made it hard for him to lie down, oh yes, life is but a birth and a death". This was the maternal grandfather who had meant so much to him (see above). In notes written on 8 July 1985 the artist says that "the non-egoistic being's departure from life resembles the fall of a leaf to the earth. Submissively it bows to reality of the world". He also notes that human "wandering is like that of the lemming and the squirrel, towards the great annihilation". There appears to be no question here of an existence after death.

Environmental interests

On a tangible level, Bernhardson was keenly interested in environmental questions. He supported non-toxic cultivation and felt a strong aversion against pollution of the environment of the community in which he lived. The experiences of his childhood formed a complete contrast to the environmental destruction of later years. In a notebook the artist writes of his childhood memories: "Oh, my! Pure air – pure food – pure water in springs and ocean. God! I am not religious!" In his "black book" he sees the modern age as a complete contrast to this: "One must feel sorry for man. Now there is new folly underway. Oil, pesticides, food colouring, quicksilver". Bernhardson could express himself with great hatred concerning the modern age and its lack of wisdom. In a note written on 7 July 1984 he objects strongly to

toxins [poisonous materials formed by bacteria, algae, fungi, plants or animals. www.ne.se Toxin] of every kind + cleaning fluids – cosmetics and other devilment. I laugh out loud over all those toxin devils, they have no souls – dead souls. Ha-ha, you fools who neglect your biological heritage, you who lack stability, you politicians, you anti-geniuses who rule the world, you anti-intellec[t]s and expense account hunters in shiny black shoes. You anti-fertilizers of the world who should never have been born. You super-fools who let intellectuals and geniuses take over ruling the world and its foolish inhabitants. But you understand nothing – nothing. Dead souls.

These are words and not mere figures of speech aimed especially at politicians and also at bureaucrats who by their inability and lack of judgment destroy the world both globally and on a local level. Politicians and bureaucrats could not appreciate the value of Bernhardson's art. Nor would they set up the funding and museum collections that he wanted to have established for his paintings. He therefore expressed himself contemptuously about "ridiculous bureaucratic paragraphs; stupid political thoughts and the whole country's distorted distribution of cultural resources".

Seen in the light of his intense interest in the environment, it is not difficult to understand the reason why Bernhardson cultivated vegetables at his home on Skaftö. The journalist Eric Jonsson from the newspaper *Bohusläningen* published a little booklet about Bernhardson and his art in 1973 in which he writes about a visit to the artist's home:

He built his cottage entirely by himself on one of the smooth rock slopes. In a nearby little valley he has transformed an old meadow into a garden-plot,

where he raises cabbages, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, parsley and other plants to keep body and soul together. This is biodynamic cultivation, no poisons are allowed in his unspoiled nature (Jonsson 1973: 10).

During an interview with Bernhardson in 1980 I asked him about the reason for his biodynamic cultivation and received the following answer:

It probably comes of having lived in a community where legumes and beans and peas were grown. You took part in the groundwork and saw how right that was. They ploughed the beans under. I think about how much nitrogen that put into the earth along with ordinary natural fertilizer. They had such huge harvests ... That's why I've kept on growing beans. Now I've saved an old variety of potato and a type of peas. And am looking for that bean [an old type of bean that is no longer grown, author's note]. They grew a lot of legumes at my grandpa's. We had huge fields of grey peas.

What Bernhardson wants to preserve is, in other words, the old and healthful method of cultivating the earth as it was done on his grandfather's farm in the 1930s. Such external material matters are things he can speak about openly without feeling any need for the secrecy he otherwise maintains with regard to his own inner philosophy of life and his relations to the female sex.



Carl Gustaf Bernhardson hoeing his vegetable garden in the 1980s. Photo: Anders Gustavsson.

The tradition of using old-fashioned and environmentally friendly cultivation should never be forgotten, in Bernhardson's opinion. A definite effort was necessary on his part both to preserve and revive it. In matters concerning the vital preservation of the environment, definite actions were more necessary than mere verbal declarations or the painting of pictures. Bernhardson's biodynamic cultivation had the specific ideological aim both of saving the world and of preserving old and beneficial agricultural traditions. In his "black book" Bernhardson writes on 7 July 1984 that some farmers had begun to renounce old cultivation methods with the use of beans as early as the 1930s, and even begun to purchase artificial fertilizer. "Yes – I had started to object already then – to have a natural aversion towards – just everything artificial." The artist's environmental commitment had been firmly grounded, in other words, over a long period of time.

Self-concept

Bernhardson had a high opinion of himself. Indeed, in his note for 26 June 1984, he even calls himself "superhuman" and a genius. In his "black book" he noted: "Most of my ideas arise much faster than those of the great intellectuals – because I am a genius". One of the many mottoes written on small pieces of paper fastened to his kitchen door reads: "The creativity of many a genius has been stopped by the second-rate!" Here he is undoubtedly thinking of the politicians who had not understood the cultural values found in his paintings. On 19 November 1982 he noted: "It may be just as well that there are so few geniuses in the world". It is very obvious that he considers himself to be occupying a special position even in a worldwide context. He was never reticent about this in conversations with others, as the well-known author Sara Lidman clearly understood when she visited Bernhardson on Skaftö.

As mentioned above, Bernhardson had been chosen by fate to interpret the history of the coastal districts. Although he attended Hultberg's school of art in Gothenburg for a few winters around 1950 he felt no need to learn more. "I mostly watched how the others painted. Just scribbled a bit and didn't draw anything". He considered his talent to have come of and by himself, and not from outer impulses. In his "black book" he noted on 23 February 1982: "One should create whatever one can, not learn anything – that then becomes mechanical and not created in the heart. ... That is the original source. I was the most unbearable of all the students. But despite all that, I will go down in history. The others – none of them succeeded – just look".

A self-opinion of this kind also has a psychological backside. In a copy of a letter sent on 8 January 1969 Bernhardson revealed a secret to the

archivist Julius Ejdestam at the Folklore Archives in Gothenburg where he usually sent his descriptions of folk life on Skaftö. He wrote "I might just as well tell you that for the past five years I have suffered from a very serious nervous disorder. And that I will be treated by a psychiatrist next week. And hope to be much better in 8 days. You see, one falls into a pit of depression and does things that one later is ashamed of and that lie heavy on one. And the fact that I write these lines to you tonight helps me work it off so that I can sleep for a few hours. And that I have never told anyone that I have weak nerves". This letter was written before Bernhardson became more well-known as an artist and some few years after he had abandoned his itinerant life style and built the cottage on Skaftö in 1965. These depressions might be understood in the light of his experiencing a difficult readjustment until he became used to his new more stationary life on Skaftö. In interviews and conversations Bernhardson often spoke of sleeping for only short periods of time at night and getting up early in order to have time to paint. It is also probable that he had difficulty in falling asleep, even if he never mentioned this. His nervous problems can also have been reduced after he started painting and his work became more and more appreciated in connection with exhibitions, especially the exhibition at Göteborg City Museum in 1980-1981. I saw very clearly that he felt this to have been a triumph.

A psychological factor can also be the basis for Bernhardson's self-chosen isolation. He did not want to mix with ordinary people. In a type-written draft for a letter for mass distribution, he wrote: "All previous conduct as to sending presents or letters, or visits is to be discontinued. The undersigned hereby takes up an isolated private life". The note indicates Bernhardson's intentions and explains why the public will not be admitted to his home after his death (see above). He did not even want to be buried among the other dead in the local cemetery, but desired that his funerary urn would be buried on his property. Legal grounds, however, forbade this.

In complete contrast to his attitude towards the public, especially the local population on Skaftö whom he believed had no understanding of his art, Bernhardson was very open to contacts with scholars and museums. They could appreciate his art and make it known both nationally and internationally through exhibitions, articles and publications. Bernhardson remarks in a late note dated to 1998 that scholars from Denmark, Norway, Scotland and the Atlantic Islands, and also Bohuslän province, were to be allowed to use his home as "a research centre for one week's temporary research by doctoral candidates, who can live in the annexe". The artist noted on some of his records that they "should only be read by experts! Top secret!"

Concluding remarks

In conclusion I wish to say that the aim of this publication has been to present the most important features of Bernhardson's paintings to an international public and to place the paintings in their social and cultural context. The life style and world of ideas among Bohuslän's coastal inhabitants of past ages have been visualized for posterity in these many paintings by an artist who knew this culture intimately. His own world of ideas, largely unknown during his lifetime, has now become accessible due to the many notebooks and poems that he left at his death. Women, environmental commitments, a longing for freedom, a belief in fate and a lofty self-image have shown themselves to be essential features of his inner world.

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