Nilson, Tomas (University of Halmstad), *The Hard Toil of the Sea: Descriptions in Swedish Fiction of Maritime Labour in the Interwar Period.*

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, a number of authors who in their writing described their own experiences of working at sea, were published. The most famous of those was Harry Martinsson, future Nobel laureate in literature, but with long experience of work below deck as a stoker. The majority of these “proletarian” writers of the sea are today quite unknown. But their writings are in my opinion a very informed and reliable source of knowledge on conditions for seamen in the interwar period. The interwar period is in terms of life on board and ashore a period in need of further research, especially this applies to working and living conditions for the crew. The period has dramatic economic ups and downs, where the effects of the big recession can be clearly seen in the unemployment statistics for seamen. The period was also a challenging time for the union movement trying to organise seamen, with traditional hostility from ship owners and officers onboard, but also faced with conflicts between radical and reform minded groupings within the union(s). The period is thus exciting, eventful and uncharted.

In my paper I propose to examine the following themes: (i) how *working (and living) conditions aboard* the ship is depicted in fiction – Martinson's descriptions of work in the stokehole is excellent illustrations of almost inhuman toils, that have an existential character but also gives an insight into the skills required. This "tacit knowledge", which is not recorded, and can only be transmitted through example, is incredibly elusive based on traditional sources and is hard to capture in ordinary scientific prose, (ii) *work as gendered* – specifically the importance and meaning of masculinity attached to work aboard. This part is framed by a critical reading of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, I will also discuss the stereotypical image of sailors only interested in "whoring, boozing and fighting" – is it possible through fiction to find alternative depictions of experiences made in the port tavern world; in the forecastle and during the daily work?

My working hypothesis is that, paradoxically, literary depictions gives a truer picture of reality because the author does not need to disclose their own person, as in sailor biographies, but can hide behind a fictitious figure.