

In Memoriam: William Arens

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Prof William Arens of Stony Brook University, an internationally renowned anthropologist and scholar, was a close friend and a much-appreciated colleague of several anthropologists in Sweden. He was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Gothenburg in 1989. In 2000-2001, having gained a prestigious Fulbright Foreign Scholarship, he worked as a lecturer and research scholar for a long period of time at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg. Several years before that, he had completed extended fieldwork in Tanzania which in 1979 resulted in his first monograph, “On the Frontier of Change, Mto Wa Mbu, Tanzania”. In the same year his second book, which explored reports on cannibalism as a cultural phenomenon, “The Man-eating Myth”, was published. It stirred up heated but refreshing, perhaps even necessary, academic discussions; and so did his third book, “The Original Sin: Incest and its Meaning”, published in 1986. In the wake of the second book, he was invited to Sweden as a guest speaker, an invitation which resulted in several subsequent visits, long lasting ties, as well as the above-mentioned honorary degree at the University of Gothenburg. Meanwhile, he read and analysed much literature with Sweden as its subject. The present article – his analysis of travel literature available in English on Sweden and Scandinavia from the 18th to the 20th centuries, was finalised but not published before his demise at the age of 78 in August 2019; in it he skillfully explores the perceived image of the countries up north, particularly Sweden, presented to other nations of the Western world.

