

Cowper in Sweden

A successful struggle without result

One day, a couple of years after retirement from my job as a librarian at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, I was looking through some bookshelves in our library. My husband and I have a combination of books consisting of our individual collections from different times of our lives, and sometimes I find books I didn't know that we had. This time I came upon a small book that I hadn't seen before. It was a book about William Cowper, with a selection of his poetry and a short account of his life.

When I read through it I became more and more fascinated. I enjoyed the beauty of his poems, and his difficult and heroic life touched me deeply. I decided to learn more about him, and since I had the contents of the whole university library at my disposal I was able to borrow many interesting books about him - how he lived, where he lived, the tragedy of his life, his acquaintances. The best sources of them all were the volumes of Thomas Dale, with all of Cowper's poems, and the five volumes of James King and Charles Ryskamp, which comprise his letters and other prose.

While reading his letters I became his friend and companion, accompanying him on his walks through the beautiful English landscape, listening to the birds and the ringing of the church bells, enjoying the flowers of his garden, crying with him in his despair and sitting by his side in front of the fire, sipping a cup of tea, 'that cheers but not inebriates'. And his poems, with their gentle rhythm and rich expressions, full of profound meaning, enchanted me.

The idea came to me: Perhaps I could translate his poems into Swedish? There was very little known about him in my country, and only a few poems had appeared in Swedish over the years, now forgotten. Two of his hymns were, however, included in our Swedish hymn book, one of them beginning with the words 'God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform', which is sometimes quoted even in Sweden by people who do not know who said it first.

So I started. After a few unsuccessful experiments with some of his rhymed poems I decided to concentrate on his great work, *The Task*, which is, to my great relief, written in blank verse.

I must admit it was a challenge. The Swedish language consists chiefly of rather long words, with many syllables. This is just the opposite of the English words. Then came the endeavour to find the right expression that conveyed Cowper's intention. His words are exact, expressive, profound. Most of the Swedish words do not have so many synonyms as the English words, which offer a wealth of synonyms with many dimensions.

Sometimes I would sit by my table, quite at a loss. 'I don't find the word, it's hopeless.' And finally I rose to get some tea for myself, shaking my head. Then, suddenly, it came to me: the word, just the right one, without my knowing how I got it. This is a wonder that I can't explain. It was as if someone else had given it to me.

I had embarked upon a struggle, but one that kept me quite enthralled. It was a wonderful adventure.

My appetite had been whetted, and when I had translated a selection from *The Task*, I began with his letters. In order to show his development in life I chose some from different periods; most of them were from his happier years from 1785 and onwards, when he renewed his acquaintance with his beloved cousin, Lady Hesketh. Some of his letters are masterpieces, and it is no wonder that he is considered one of the most prominent letter writers of his time. His language is astonishingly easy to translate and, as I see it, not so different from contemporary English, with the exception of some single words which are now obsolete or have another meaning. Here I had much help from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and also from footnotes in the volumes of King and Ryskamp, who are excellent guides to 18th century life and expressions.

But an introduction to the poet and the person William Cowper was not, I thought, complete without his own touching description of his crisis and his conversion to religion, his *Memoir*.

So this was my final contribution. It was not quite written in the same easy style as his letters, but it had the pregnancy and the profundity characteristic of his other writings and was after all not so difficult to express in Swedish words.

In 2002, I got a wonderful birthday present from my family: a journey to England, including a visit to Olney and its Cowper and Newton Museum. It was my son Thomas's idea; he knew how much it would mean to me. Thomas is a journalist and author, and he came with me on my journey, which was of great help to me. We visited the museum, and it was a strange feeling to me to walk in the rooms where Cowper had lived together with Mary Unwin, where he had enjoyed the company of his friends, his three hares and his dogs, and to see his garden and his summer house where he used to write. We went into the parish church with the stained glass windows picturing Cowper and Newton, and we saw the grand tombstone of John Newton and his wife. We visited Weston Underwood and the magnificent alcove, from where you had a panoramic view of the landscape.

I had bed and breakfast at the home of June and George Davies, where I was received with the utmost kindness like a member of the family. Every time I came home after my excursions I was invited into their cosy drawing-room for a cup of tea and a nice conversation. I got much information from George; I have a good memory of him as a very friendly and learned man. June and I became friends and we have been corresponding ever since. I was very sad to learn of her great bereavement. It was a shock to me that George would fall so ill and die.

I cherish the memory of this journey, which made Cowper and Olney and the nice little village Emberton with its lovely park and the beautiful river Ouse familiar to me.

Finally, after a short introduction written by myself, I began looking for a publisher who might be interested.

But alas, nobody was to be found! I tried many different publishers. Most of them had never heard of Cowper. Of course, it would be a precarious enterprise to try to sell a book by an author from the 18th century whom nobody knew. It was too risky. Two publishers were actually interested; one of them applied for an allowance from our Cultural Council in order to be able to publish it, but unfortunately, they were not successful. The other publisher had the idea of publishing a small selection of his poems in a series of lyrics (a little book of 48 pages) but had to abandon the idea. Yet I am glad to say that some of my translations from *The Task* have been included in a large anthology of 'world literature' used by university students. A few of his poems, in my translation, have appeared in a lyrical magazine and another magazine will take some of the translations in their next issue for 2010. As a matter of fact, this seems to be the only means of making Cowper known in Sweden nowadays.

But even if the result of my work is rather meagre, I am very grateful for these years together with William Cowper. He is my friend and his company has been of great value to me. The intriguing enterprise of entering deeply into the noble art of translation has enriched my life. And I have gained a deeper insight into the life of the 18th century. William Cowper has made this epoch alive to me.

And last, but not least: I have made a most dear friend in June, and can follow the events of the museum and the life of Olney and Emberton as if I were there myself! I am very grateful to the *Bulletin* of the Museum that makes this possible to me

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