

THE SWEDENBORG SOCIETY: A VERY SHORT HISTORY by Richard Lines

The [Swedenborg Society](#), or the ‘London Society for Printing and Publishing the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg’, as it was originally called, has been in continuous existence for two hundred years, and its essential purpose remains as it was when it was founded, to translate, publish, print, distribute and sell the religious writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the Swedish scientist, philosopher, theologian and seer.

The Society was founded on 26 February 1810 at the house of a lawyer, George Prichard, in Essex Street off the Strand. It was not the first body to undertake the translation of Swedenborg’s Latin texts into English and publish them. A Manchester Printing Society had been established in 1782 and the Theosophical Society with a similar purpose had been founded in London in 1784, but the new society soon became the main and then the sole publisher of Swedenborg’s works in the United Kingdom. The outstanding translator of the Society’s early years was a Manchester Anglican clergyman, the Revd John Clowes (1743–1831), Rector of St John’s Church, Deansgate in that city. He had already translated *The True Christian Religion*, the immense *Arcana Cælestia* (‘Secrets of Heaven’) which runs to twelve volumes in English, and the controversial work on sex and marriage, *Conjugal Love*. He was to translate Swedenborg’s most famous work, *Heaven and Hell*, for the Society and also some shorter works.

Among the founder members was the sculptor and artist John Flaxman (1755–1826), then at the height of his fame, being appointed Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy in 1810. He was later to serve on the Society’s Committee. Flaxman is noted for his funerary sculptures and the iconography of these is strongly suggestive of his Swedenborgian beliefs. Flaxman had been an original member of the Theosophical Society, as had his friend the wealthy John Augustus Tulk (1756–1845), the Society’s first Chairman. Tulk’s eldest son, Charles Augustus Tulk (1786–1849), was also a committee member from the start. He was to be Chairman for the first time in 1814 and thereafter for most years until the mid 1820s. After an absence of some years Tulk returned to the committee in 1837 and was Chairman for the last time in 1843.

The younger Tulk is an important and interesting figure in the Society’s early history. A close friend of John Clowes, who was a mentor to him in the Society’s early days, he formed another close friendship in 1817 with the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A number of Coleridge’s letters to Tulk have been published in his collected correspondence. Deeply read in philosophy and theology, Tulk’s increasingly ‘Idealist’ interpretation of Swedenborg’s teachings did not always meet the approval of his colleagues in the Society. Tulk was one of the first proprietors of the University of London (later University College London) when it opened in Gower Street in 1828, by virtue of buying a share. His fourth son Marmaduke H. Tulk seems to have been a pupil at the London University School (later University College School) from its opening in 1831 until 1833. Tulk was Member of Parliament for Sudbury from 1820 to 1826 and for Poole from 1835 to 1837. In his first term he spoke in support of measures to shorten the

hours of workers in the cotton factories and in his second he spoke eloquently on behalf of the Dorchester labourers, or 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', who had been transported to Australia for organising a trade union meeting. After pressure from public opinion they were pardoned and brought back to the United Kingdom. In his later years Tulk was a reforming magistrate in Middlesex and, in his capacity as Chairman of the Hanwell Pauper Lunatic Asylum, did much to support the reforms carried out there in the 1840s. His interests also included the then fashionable practices of phrenology and mesmerism, the latter a forerunner of hypnotherapy.

Tulk had been introduced by Flaxman to the poet and artist William Blake and he became a steady patron, acquiring some of his rare plates. He was to introduce Coleridge to Blake's work and on one occasion took Coleridge to visit Blake. After Blake's death he wrote (for the *London University Magazine*) one of the very first critical appreciations of Blake's work. This edition of the *London University Magazine* is now lost, but the article (which is anonymous) was reprinted in Margaret Bottrall ed, *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 1970. In the 1830s Tulk became acquainted with the young poet Elizabeth Barrett, who made several references to him in her letters, and later in Florence with her husband Robert Browning, his youngest daughter and her husband being close friends of the Brownings in that city.

Tulk was succeeded as Chairman of the Society by John Spurgin (1796–1866), physician to the Foundling Hospital. As a student at Guy's Hospital, Spurgin had befriended John Keats and corresponded with him in an attempt to interest the poet in Swedenborg's writings. Spurgin was to be the Society's longest-serving Chairman, holding that office nearly every year from the later 1820s until the early 1860s.

Two remarkable brothers began to take an important part in the Society's affairs from the early 1840s. James John Garth Wilkinson (1812–1899) was another physician, being noted for his later devotion to homœopathy. He translated a number of Swedenborg's scientific works and wrote many books of his own on medical, social and theological topics and a 'biographical sketch' of Swedenborg, first published in 1849. He is best known for his close friendship with Henry James senior, also a devotee of Swedenborg and father of William James the philosopher and Henry James the novelist. But he was acquainted with many other writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Browning, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Coventry Patmore, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and George MacDonald. One of his early books (1839) was the first letter-press edition of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. He had borrowed one of the original plates of this work from Charles Augustus Tulk. Garth Wilkinson became the best-known Swedenborgian in Victorian London, although he was to be Chairman of the Society for only one year, from 1882 to 1883.

Garth Wilkinson's younger brother William Martin Wilkinson (1814–1897) was a solicitor practising, like Dickens's sinister Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House* (1852–1853), from an address in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He threw himself into the Society's affairs with enthusiasm and efficiency and held the office of Secretary from 1842 to 1860. Also prominent in the Society's affairs from about 1840 was the Revd Augustus Clissold

(1797–1882), an Anglican clergyman who had served as Curate of St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square and at St Mary's, Stoke Newington. While at Stoke Newington, Clissold had met Eliza Crawshay, heiress to a large estate there. They married after her father's death and the estate in Stoke Newington became known as Clissold Park. It is still known by that name and has been a public park since 1889. Clissold and the Wilkinson brothers formed a separate Swedenborg Association in 1844 for translating and publishing the scientific works. This society was later subsumed within the Swedenborg Society, although today the publishing of the scientific and philosophical books is carried out largely by the Swedenborg Scientific Association of Bryn Athyn in Pennsylvania, founded in 1898.

In 1852 William Wilkinson became the first Secretary of the Society to make an official visit to Sweden, where he visited Swedenborg's house in the Hornsgatan in Stockholm and saw the famous summerhouse (now preserved in the Skansen Open Air Museum). He also saw Swedenborg's manuscripts, some of which had been recently sent from England, in the library of the Royal Academy of Sciences. In 1855 the Society acquired premises of its own for the first time, thanks to the generosity of Clissold who provided funds for the purchase of a 72-year lease of no. 36 (later no. 1) Bloomsbury Street. Here was a bookshop, meeting hall and library. William White, a Glasgow bookseller, had been appointed as the Society's manager and agent. The Society seemed set fair for a prosperous future.

Towards the end of 1860 the Society faced the most serious crisis in its history. The Committee discovered that William White was selling in the Society's bookshop, alongside the works of Swedenborg, spiritualist literature and, in particular, books by Thomas Lake Harris (1823–1906), a student of Swedenborg in the United States who had founded his own religious group called the Brotherhood of the New Life, noted for its *avant-garde* views on sexuality. Harris was clearly a charismatic character and he attracted White and the Wilkinson brothers (he stayed with Garth Wilkinson and his family while in London). The majority of the Committee were appalled and took steps to dismiss White, and also William Wilkinson and the Treasurer, William Fryer, who had supported him. Thereafter, White defied the Committee by barricading himself in the Society's premises and hiring a gang of pugilists and toughs to attack the bailiffs installed by the Committee. The Committee obtained an injunction in the Court of Chancery to evict White and the parties involved agreed to submit to Clissold's arbitration, thus avoiding further litigation. William Wilkinson played no further part in the Society's affairs, although he remained a Life Member, but he enjoyed a successful career as a solicitor, as editor of a spiritualist magazine and as a founder of the Charity Organization Society, a body that aimed to put charitable relief of poverty on a rational and scientific basis. Garth Wilkinson kept away from the Society for nearly twenty years, and White published a biography of Swedenborg in 1867 which, while critical of Swedenborg's religious followers, is a work not without value even today.

The Society continued with its work of translating, publishing and selling Swedenborg's works. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a great expansion in the number of works published in other modern languages. In the 1870s three volumes of *Documents*

Concerning Swedenborg, edited by the Revd Dr R. L. Tafel, were published. These remain essential source documents for a biographer even today. In the early twentieth century the Society published a comprehensive *Concordance* to Swedenborg's religious works, a *Bibliography* and, for the first time, an 'official' life of Swedenborg written by George Trobridge. In a slightly amended form, this work is still in print, as is the *Concordance*.

In 1910 the Society celebrated its centenary. The chief event commemorating this was an International Swedenborg Congress held in the King's Hall, Holborn in July that year under the patronage of King Gustav V of Sweden. Learned papers on Swedenborg's achievements as a scientist, philosopher and theologian were delivered to an audience of four hundred over four days by leading scholars from different fields. An impressive list of forty-six Vice-Presidents included the names of Henry James, long resident in England but not yet a British citizen, his fellow American novelist William Dean Howells, and the Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, who had begun to translate some of Swedenborg's works into Japanese. A wealthy member of the Society, David Wynter (1855–1931), entertained over nine hundred guests at a garden party at his home in Highgate, where the band of the Grenadier Guards played during the afternoon.

In 1925 the lease of the premises at no. 1 Bloomsbury Street expired. Prompt action had been taken by the Society's Council (as its Committee was now called) and, with generous financial assistance from David Wynter, freehold premises at nos 20 and 21 Hart Street (now known as Bloomsbury Way) were acquired. The building, originally a dwelling house built in about 1760, was adapted for the Society's uses and a handsome neo-classical lecture hall was added at the rear of the building.

The Society flourished in its new home. During the 1930s a number of interesting events were held, the most important being a great festival meeting held in the Queen's Hall, Langham Place in the West End on 29 January 1938 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Swedenborg's birth. The years of the Second World War were difficult ones for the Society, but it emerged with its building unscathed by bombing and ready, despite very severe financial and other constraints, to continue its work in the post-war world. The late twentieth century was a most fruitful period for the publication of new translations. The twelve-volume work, *Arcana Caelestia*, in a new English translation by the Revd John Elliott, was published between 1983 and 1999. The eminent Cambridge classical scholar, the late Dr John Chadwick FBA (1920–1998), translated *The True Christian Religion* (1988), *Conjugial Love* (1996) and several smaller works. Chadwick also compiled a *Lexicon* of Swedenborg's theological Latin and this was published in hardback form in 2008. A major new biography, *Swedenborg's Secret* by Lars Bergquist, a revised version in English of his *Swedenborgs Hemlighet* (published in Stockholm in 1999), appeared in 2005. A completely new translation of *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg's best-known book, will be published in 2010, and a new four-volume *Bibliography*, replacing that by James Hyde which was published in 1906, will appear in 2011.

The Society's Library continues to expand and it is visited by scholars and researchers on a regular basis. The Society's bookshop is open five days a week and books are also sold worldwide through the website. A programme of new Latin editions and new translations into English is under constant review. Its worldwide membership is kept in touch by both hard copy and electronic newsletters. As it prepares to enter its third century, the Swedenborg Society continues to flourish.

(A History of the Swedenborg Society 1810–2010 by Richard Lines will be published by the Society during 2010.)