

Book Reviews

Swedenborg's Secret. Lars Bergquist. London: Swedenborg Society, 2005. 516 pp. Illustr., plates, index. Cloth (ISBN 0-85448-143-5).

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Swedenborg's Secret is an important new biography of Swedenborg that was well received by the Swedish press when originally published there in 1999. Written by the Swedish diplomat Lars Bergquist, it has been translated into English and published by the Swedenborg Society in 2005. The author relates in the acknowledgements that some of the material has been adapted for an international audience, but upon examination the changes appear to be minor. This is the second book that Bergquist has written about Swedenborg. In 1989 he published *Swedenborg's Dream Diary* in Sweden. It was translated by Anders Hallengren and published by the Swedenborg Foundation in 2001.

Bergquist states in his introduction that he has been interested in Swedenborg since he was a young man. He reports an initial difficulty in understanding Swedenborg's works, stating that his interest was in the doctrines rather than in his extraordinary spiritual experiences. Seeing Swedenborg within the framework of the radical Pietism of the eighteenth century created a connection that opened Swedenborg's teachings for Bergquist. He sees Swedenborg elaborating upon his father Jesper Swedberg's pietistical Lutheranism learned from men such as Johann Arndt, Christopher Scriver, Gottfried Arnold, and Johann Conrad Dippel.

Once connected, Bergquist remains intrigued. Like the French author Paul Valéry, he sees his encounter with Swedenborg like "time spent in [an] enchanted forest" (xxii) seeking the mystery of Swedenborg. His book recounts his wanderings in that forest. While the book covers the whole of Swedenborg's life and makes fascinating excursions into the context of his times, as well as lengthy discussions of his philosophy and doctrine, it is a very personal encounter with Swedenborg. It is important to note that Bergquist is open to the spiritual dimension of Swedenborg's writings, and he places him within the context of Christian mysticism. He makes it

clear at the outset that it is “not an academic work” (xviii). This is both a strength and a weakness of the biography. This disclaimer allows new material and new hypotheses to be examined and explored, but the lack of rigor also allows unproven assertions to stand as facts

Bergquist uses his pietistical insight to frame Swedenborg’s life. As he says himself “perhaps my book can stimulate a deeper research into some of the seldom discussed problems on which I touch, above all, the relations to radical Pietism in Germany and England” (xix). His book can and should. While I do know that Jesper Swedberg was influenced by Pietism during his trip abroad in 1684–85, and that he preached the importance of works as well as faith, Bergquist asserts Swedberg’s use of Arndt rather than demonstrates it. After two long quotes from Arndt, Bergquist writes in probable reference to Swedberg’s autobiography: “The bishop voiced this thought, chapter after chapter” (197). I would like to see the connection.

While Swedberg’s Pietism is well known, Swedenborg’s is more problematic. His interest in Moravianism in 1744 is well documented, but any indication of earlier or later interest is not. Because Bergquist believes that “Swedenborg’s religious system reflects the thought of restoration that often recurs in pietistic contexts” (195), he sees interest and influence that I find problematic. Dippel lived in Sweden 1726–1728. In his chapter on Pietism, Bergquist discusses both his sojourn in Stockholm and some of his teachings. In the very next section with the heading “Swedenborg and Dippel,” he writes, “Swedenborg was well-informed about Dippel and his teachings. The German reformer and his personality are discussed in detail in *The Spiritual Diary*” (201). While it is true that Swedenborg mentions Dippel in two *Diary* numbers, those numbers were written in 1748 and discuss an encounter Swedenborg had with Dippel in the spiritual world, twenty years after Dippel was deported from Sweden and fourteen years after his death. The proximity of the material in the book suggests Swedenborg’s intimate awareness of and perhaps interest in Dippel’s stay in Stockholm. Swedenborg does mention in the *Diary* that he knew followers of Dippel, but could gain no clear understanding of his teachings from them. Regarding the Moravian Brethren, Bergquist writes: “Swedenborg was certainly aware of the main lines of their message, all the more so since Moravians had won several followers in his own Board of Mines”

(204). This, too, suggests rather than demonstrates an earlier awareness and interest in the Moravians.

If connections like these were documented they could illuminate Swedenborg's life. While reading Bergquist, I was quickly drawn to examine several Swedish texts I own. I reviewed Henry W. Tottie's *Jesper Svedbergs Lifoch Verksamhet*, (Jesper Swedenborg's Life and Career) 1885, and Harry Lenhammar's *Sveriges Kyrkohistoria: Individualismens och Upplysningens tid* (Swedish Church History: the Age of Individualism and the Enlightenment) 2000. Reviewing these texts stimulated my awareness of the need for a good English biography of Jesper Swedenborg and an understanding of the import and politics of Pietism in Sweden. Not necessarily because Swedenborg was drawn to Pietism, but because Sweden played such a vital role in the salvation drama of the Last Judgment, revealed by Swedenborg, A Swede. Bergquist's biography stimulated this interest, and there are countless other new bits of information and facts in his book that are treasures and open new doors.

I enjoyed reading a series of descriptions of his home on Hornsgatan found in the chapter on "Swedenborg's Daily Life," although I found it hard to believe he had a portrait of Carl XII hanging in his drawing room in 1769, as reported by my ancestor Jonas Odhner. I also enjoyed the Chapter on "Politics—the Art of the Possible" and the discussion of Swedenborg support for the Swedish Constitution and the parliamentary system. So, even though I am well versed in many details of Swedenborg's life, I found new material in the biography for reflection and use.

I found Bergquist's philosophical and doctrinal summaries and excursions less satisfactory. He clearly emphasizes the idea of the universal church, and the indwelling Christ. Accordingly, he finds that Swedenborg follows the tradition of the Gospels, Paul, and Bishop Swedenborg. "Everything with Christ! Die with Christ, be buried with Christ, be resurrected with Christ, and be made living with Christ," the bishop preached. Emanuel Swedenborg would have been able to take the words as a summary of his own message" (418). Somehow, I am less sure of this than Bergquist is, just as I am not sure that "Swedenborg's secret is that eternity is now" (417). Nonetheless, both ideas are worth reflecting on.

I can accept Bergquist's concept of the secret as a different perspective on Swedenborg's teachings than what I am familiar with, and I can honor

it; I can also grant his emphasis on the centrality of the Apocalypse to the shaping of Swedenborg's call and mission, even though I do not find Swedenborg engaged in "close reading of the Book of Revelation" in the early 1740s (230); however, I find his acceptance of Swedenborg's mental breakdown in 1744 insufficiently grounded in fact, as well as his assertion that Swedenborg was in the pay of King Louis XV of France as part of the "French system" used to buy the support of Swedish politicians. He accepts the testimony found in the *Arminian Journal*, published by Swedenborg's antagonist John Wesley, to support the idea of Swedenborg's mental collapse in July of 1744. He also accepts the thesis of Frans G. Lindh's review of Swedenborg's economy in the *Nya Kyrkan Tidning* (New Church Journal) published in 1927–30. Lindh's explanation hinges on the crossed out word "currency" which was replaced by the word "account." Lindh is certain that the only currency Swedenborg would want to hide would have been French. Bergquist has also found another document that could have bearing on the matter but it, too, is inconclusive, as was his search of the archive in the Quai d'Orsay (the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Swedenborg's name does not appear on the lists, but because some grants were given to people designated with the letter 'A,' for Anomymous, from Bergquist's perspective the case remains open; from my perspective no evidence closes the case.

Despite including material that from my perspective should have been left out because clear documentation of the pertinent facts was missing, I find that Bergquist's biography *Swedenborg's Secret* has a wealth of rich material that can enhance our understanding of the man called to be the Lord's servant in bringing forth the crown of revelations. □