

Memorial Address - Beryl Gwendoline Briscoe

1989- 1895

Around the year 1887 an Englishman in Liverpool discovered for himself the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. His name was Joseph Briscoe. In Liverpool he sought the company of others who read these Writings and became acquainted with the Acton family, in particular with Miss Charlotta Acton. Within a few years he moved from Liverpool to London and so did Charlotta Acton. They were married there by the Rev. E. C. Bostock. Joseph Briscoe was not a baptized member of the New Church, but when children were born to this couple they were baptized into the New Church. In June of 1895 the Briscoes were looking forward to the baptism of their third child, a baby daughter. To the surprise and pleasure of Charlotta, Joseph asked to be baptized in the same service as this baby—Beryl Gwendoline. (The Rev. R.J. Tilson officiated.)

Mr. Briscoe went on to become a profound student of the Writings and a loyal member until his death in 1931. Beryl grew up in Enfield northeast of London and in her childhood attended Michael Church. Like the rest in her family she was educated at home by her mother. As she grew older she went to business school and eventually was employed by Scotland Yard, apparently one of the first five women to be employed by that institution. Beryl had the ambition to perfect her knowledge of the French language, and she took up work in the south-east of France for the Michelin company. It was while she was pursuing this work that news came that she was invited to America to assist her uncle in studious enterprises. That work which she then went to serve is particularly deserving of our attention today, and we will speak of it presently. It was the work of joining with Dr. Alfred Acton in his scholarly undertakings. One tribute to Dr. Acton contains the following sentence:

As a scholar, translator and editor, Bishop Acton was of inestimable service not only to the General Church, the Academy, and the Swedenborg Scientific Association, but also to the New Church wherever it has been established (NCL, 1956, p. 395).

That work Bishop Acton did not accomplish alone, nor, as he often stated, could he have.

It is said that life in this world is a preparation for our real life in the world to come and that it is comparatively brief. To quote: "Man is in this world in order to be initiated by his activities there into the things which are of heaven, and his life in this world is hardly a moment in comparison with his life after death, for this is eternal" (AC 5006:4). Even a life of 94 years is hardly a moment in comparison to eternity.

We are born into this life not only for ourselves and our own preparation but also for others. As it is said in True Christian Religion: "Man is not born for the sake of himself, but for the sake of others; that is, that he should not live for himself alone, but for others" (406).

It is a great pleasure to know when something we do is helpful to others. Sometimes we doubt that we make much difference or that we are of significant use. Parents sometimes come into doubt that they have had sufficient good influence on their children, and many people doubt that their efforts are of value.

There are some people who are impelled towards uses which but few people of their own time appreciate. The philosopher Seneca had a word of advice for people engaged in certain uses. His advice was to think not only of the present generation but of generations to come. Emanuel Swedenborg was so taken with this advice that he made it the motto for his *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*: It reads:

He is born to serve but few, who thinks only of the people of his own age. Many thousands of years, many generations of men are yet to come: look to these, though from some cause silence has been imposed on all of your own day.

In his scientific and philosophical works Swedenborg was sometimes aware that extremely few of his own generation could even understand what he was writing, and yet he had a sense of service to mankind. Then, of course, when he came to write the Writings he realized that what he was doing had implications for countless generations yet to come.

And this brings us to the achievements of Dr. Alfred Acton of our own era. In some areas he was keenly aware of work that needed to be

done while few others fully appreciated it. He saw enormous tasks ahead and in the determination to undertake those tasks he realized he would need an extraordinary helper. He thought of his niece Beryl Briscoe, a bright, competent and diligent girl in her twenties. She was asked to come to America and to enter into this work. She arrived in Bryn Athyn on a snowy day in December, 1919, and there she entered into a truly remarkable work with her illustrious uncle.

In the preface to one of Dr. Acton's scholarly works he wrote:

These indices have been prepared by my niece and secretary Miss Beryl Briscoe. I am also indebted to her for the laborious and tedious clerical work which has been entailed in the preparation of the Manuscript for the press. Indeed, without her efficient and sympathetic cooperation, I fear the work could never have been brought to completion (1925 Introd to Heb).

In the preface of every work that he did Dr. Acton mentioned the work of Beryl Briscoe. We note his saying more than once that she made "many useful suggestions" (e.g. in 1927).

Dr. Acton realized that many things had to be accomplished for which few people if any had the aptitude, and he worked day and night to accomplish what he could. A tribute to Dr. Acton in *New Church Life* in 1956 included the following:

Excluding pamphlets and reprints, Bishop Acton's literary labors on behalf of the General Church, the Academy, and the Swedenborg Scientific Association amount to an impressive total; for he translated twenty-five volumes, wrote five books, and edited four works—in addition to writing many studies, articles and reviews. And in order to appreciate the magnitude of his labors it is necessary to bring together in thought the various fields of use...As a scholar, translator, and editor, Bishop Acton was of inestimable service not only to the General Church, the Academy, and the Swedenborg Scientific Association, but also to the New Church wherever it has been established (p 395).

The work that Beryl Briscoe did to help bring this about recalls to mind the well known phrase in the Writings, "sincerely, faithfully, and

justly." And we would accent the word "faithfully," fideliter. Was the work glamorous? To her it was a great delight, but it was work that very few people would have the character to do faithfully.

Let us just consider the work of preparing for publication the only translation of Swedenborg's University Dissertation. Just consider what she wrote in the preface to this work which she brought out long after Dr. Acton died. She wrote:

So far as I know this is the first complete translation of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Selectae Sententiae*. The original typewritten manuscript of this revised copy was found among Dr. Acton's papers after his death, and since he himself typed the first eleven pages, the indications are that it was begun before 1920 when I took over the rest of the typing.

She admitted frankly that completing this work "has called for a great deal of research on my part..." In conclusion she wrote:

Finally I should like to add that my amazement at the diligence and industry of the work done by Dr. Acton on this work by Swedenborg (then Swedberg) did much to encourage me not to leave a stone unturned until I had also confirmed the correctness of the many references I had to handle (April 1966 in *The New Philosophy* pp. 305-306.)

We would mention three works edited by Miss Briscoe after Dr. Acton's death. There is *Codex 37* which she completed in 1966, consisting of 267 pages which she typed in Latin. And in 1956 *Codex 88*, two volumes of Latin coming to 700 pages.

Finally there is the massive life of Swedenborg, a study of the documentary sources of his biography. When she prepared Dr. Acton's work it came to over 830 pages. In the preface Dr. Hugo Odhner thanked the late Dr. Acton and added that Beryl Briscoe "has made such editorial adjustments as were necessary, verified questionable references, made up the references into a bibliography, supplied a table of contents."

When Beryl Briscoe retired from the work she did so well something of her life reminds us of a saying in the Writings about the delights

that progress through the stages of human life. There are different delights and "finally the delight of intelligence and wisdom in old age" (AC 4063:4).

If asked in recent months what she was enjoying in life she would refer to the study of the work on the Four Gospels by Bishop de Charms. Here one could read the whole of the Gospel story with all the references from the Writings relating to it. Miss Briscoe went through this book with manifest delight. It is interesting also that she was one who read with great interest and appreciation the new volumes of the *Arcana Caelestia* translated by John Elliott.

When the Writings speak of the important function of the New Church, even though it be with few, they mention the need for a church where the Word is and where the Lord is known thereby (SS 104). We have read in our lessons this afternoon of the great use that is performed when the Lord's Word is read with affection, a use even to the heavens. That vital use of the New Church is served by such people as Beryl Briscoe, and now she will awaken to new use, a new home, and to new delights granted by the Lord.