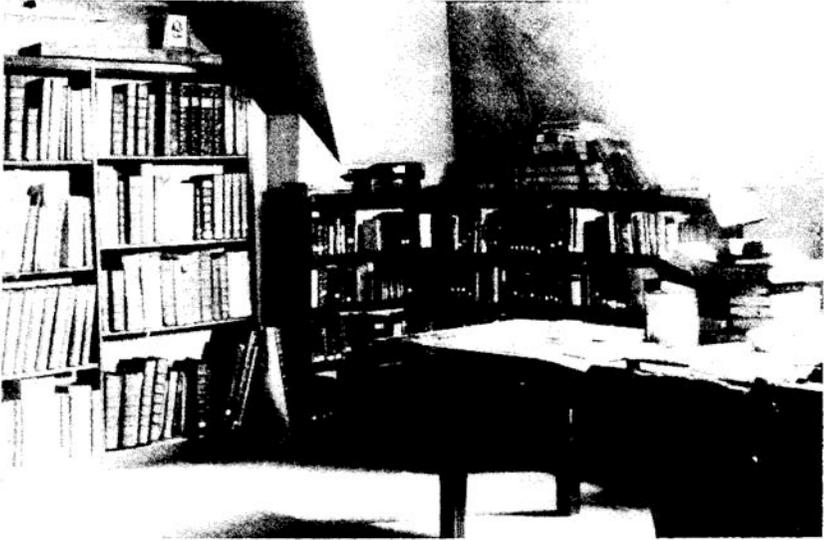


## REFLECTIONS ON BERYL BRISCOE, DR. ACTON, AND ROOM 17

---

Edward F. Allen



The objective, as I understand the editor's invitation to me to write something in remembrance of Beryl Briscoe, was to appeal to my memory in that regard. Since Beryl resigned her place as treasurer of the Swedenborg Scientific Association about thirty years ago, and the author of these remarks is over eighty, remembrance can be fraught with problems. Anyway, Beryl was part of a triad consisting of two persons and a library. The other person of course was Dr. Acton, and "Room 17" was the way Swedenborgiana was referred to, Room 17 being the room in the Academy library that contained Swedenborgiana. The most important part of that collection of books (that with great care had been obtained over the years from booksellers in Europe) was the copies of books of the same edition, where possible, that had been in Swedenborg's own collection.

Not only did Room 17 of the Academy Library house Swedenborgiana, but it was a work room for the activities of Alfred Acton and

Beryl Briscoe, in translating and referencing, and work associated therewith. For example, if any college student of 1926-1928 happens to read this, he or she will recall assisting with the English edition of *Adversaria* (called *The Word of the Old Testament Explained*), as one of those who devoted time to climbing three flights of stairs to where, in Room 17, he or she would read back to Dr. Acton from his English translation as he followed it from the Latin.

Beryl Briscoe was treasurer of the SSA from April 1943 to July 1961. As secretary to Dr. Alfred Acton, she was involved in an important way, not only with the editorial concerns of *The New Philosophy*, but also with a variety of other publications—translations of Swedenborg's manuscripts and works by Acton himself. In her time, publication by the SSA was at the Lancaster Press, so communication was more involved than now. Since Miss Briscoe was treasurer, I had only brief meetings with her. Also, since we are now entering 1990, thirty years later, that is time enough perhaps to have forgotten even important things.

I believe she was working with Acton as far back as the translation of *Psychologica*, published in 1923. If not, it was at least by the fall of 1924 when I was in the course Divine Love and Wisdom in the college. We students in the course made regular reports to Beryl on our reading. In the preparation of *A Philosopher's Note Book*, printed in 1931, and a little later *Letters and Memorials of Emanuel Swedenborg*, I was asked by Dr. Acton to do some reference checking in Room 17.

At that time I had occasional meetings with Beryl and in consequence came in contact with her serious and dedicated working with Acton during one of the busiest and most fruitful periods of work on behalf of the study of the man Swedenborg, his manuscripts and the memorabilia associated with his life. By recalling these things I only imply a few things about Beryl from the fact that she was part of a team of two that promoted important activity for the New Church. Before Beryl joined with Dr. Acton, he had translated *Generation* (1912), *Fibre* (1918), and *Psychologica* (1923). Besides teaching classes in the Academy schools, and doing some pastoral work, he translated for the Academy *The Word of the Old Testament Explained* (8 vols.) and *Conjugal Love*. He wrote two important books while Beryl was with him: *The Crown of Revelation* and *Introduction to the Word Explained*. The former is a serious study with doctrinal conclusions on the meaning of the

senses, literal, interior and inmost, whether in the Scriptures themselves or in the wording of the Writings.

The reason for its preparation then was that it was produced at a time when there was unrest among scholars of Swedenborg and members of the New Church over the nature of the depth of spiritual learning within the very expressed words of the Writings. From outside, one might suppose *The Crown* to be a dated work. But on the advice of others I have it that the work remains today as a testimony of what is included as sources of the faith of the New Church. The second work, *Introduction to the Word Explained*, is principally devoted to the period of Swedenborg's life when from philosopher he was becoming theologian. *Introduction to the Word Explained* is not really an introduction to the volumes Acton translated from the Latin. Those volumes are not revelation, but a kind of personal diary of interpretations resulting from Swedenborg's dedication to that rule of life "to read often and meditate on the Word of God." There is also much on philosophy that reflects on Swedenborg's own progress in that human endeavor to understanding truth, goodness, love, the human will etc. (See Acton's additions of headings in the context itself and in the table of contents.) Not only are these things that reflect to the past in Swedenborg's active thought, but also there are evidences of things to come. For example, see "these things were told me by those who are in the heaven of the Messiah Himself." There are those more competent than I who can describe the intermediate state of Swedenborg while writing *Adversaria*. I mention these things here only to inform ourselves about the spirit that dominated the office to which Beryl returned each day. For at least a quarter of a century, she daily returned to her typewriter, shorthand note books, and letter writing, to work on behalf of activities in that office.

I have seen Acton gather together some papers, arrange them so all the eleven inch sides were parallel, stack them together and hand them to Beryl saying, "Here, take care of that." It is impossible to write a biographical report on specifics in such a case, but hopefully the above will convey some idea of the use to which Beryl was dedicated.

This might be a good place to bring these remarks to a close, but since there are so few living today who were old enough to appreciate the circumstances referred to, I believe it would add something if a few other things about the environment in which Beryl worked were

known. For example, there is Swedenborgiana itself. To complete that collection was a running part of Acton's interests. Swedenborgiana included much more than copies of Swedenborg's manuscripts. Early in this century Alfred H. Stroh came upon an auctioneer's list of books sold by Swedenborg's heirs. Among them were a number of anatomical works Swedenborg had referred to. That list became a reason to duplicate a library of those books, the same editions if possible. That was the incentive behind the formation of the library then called "Room 17" which included much more from the seventeenth and eighteenth century than the books actually used by Swedenborg himself. There is the challenging thought that scholars of Swedenborg, by examining these works, might learn the nature of the language and thought of those to whom Swedenborg addressed both the thought of his philosophy, and the ideas of revelation in the Writings.

Translators ought not be too hasty in updating his writing. They should be aware that in efforts to make that writing easier for the mind of their own day, they may substitute an interpretation of their own which itself can be dated.

A little-known use of Swedenborgiana is in what are called the "Green Books." I do not remember how many there were—perhaps three. They were called "Green Books" because the covers were like those used in bookkeeping—solid board covered with green cloth, without a spine to allow for additional leaves. Whenever Acton heard of a piece of paper or something about Swedenborg in his lifetime ("laundry slips" as known to biographers), a sheet would be inserted in the Green Books dedicated to that slip if and when a copy of the original could be found and obtained.

Let me close with a few words written by Dr. Acton himself, which he no doubt repeated on other occasions, if not to others, at least to himself.

I would add a word of gratitude to my niece and secretary, Miss Beryl G. Briscoe, for her careful and laborious work in the preparation of the MS. and the seeing of it through the press.

These are the closing words of Introduction by the Editor of *Rational Psychology, A Posthumous Work by Emanuel Swedenborg* (SSA, 1950).