

## Swedenborg Man beyond Measure

In 1987 the Swedenborg Foundation of New York published the book *Window to Eternity* by **Bruce Henderson**. The second chapter has been called the best brief presentation on Swedenborg's life yet in print. In this year in which Swedenborg's 300th birthday is being commemorated this chapter is here published separately.

*To my mind, the only light that has been cast on the other life is found in Swedenborg's philosophy.  
It explains much that was incomprehensible. —Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

Who is Emanuel Swedenborg?

The Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* considers him "in many respects, the most remarkable man of his own or any age."<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson called him "a colossal soul who lies vast abroad on his times. He is not to be measured by whole colleges of ordinary scholars."<sup>2</sup>

Edwin Markham, the American poet known for his "*Man with the Hoe*" and "*Lincoln, the Man of the People*," said, "There is no doubt that Swedenborg was one of the greatest intellects that has appeared upon the planet." He considered Swedenborg "the wisest man in millions. He was the eyeball on the front of the 18th Century."<sup>3</sup>

Helen Keller, a remarkable woman in her own right, whose book *My Religion* is a song of praise to the writings of Swedenborg, called him a "Titan Genius."<sup>4</sup> To her he was "an eye among the blind and ear among the deaf."<sup>5</sup> And he emerged, in her special sight, as "one of the noblest champions Christianity has ever known."<sup>6</sup>

Who is this man so revered by other intellects? Who is this man considered to have one of the highest IQs in history? Who is this man with more expertise in more fields than any scientist before or since? Who is this man who left the largest collection of theological writings known in the world?

During his lifetime, Swedenborg's contributions to science, philosophy and theology were well known in European intellectual circles. Among those acquainted with him or his published works were Immanuel Kant, Carolus Linnaeus, John Wesley, King Charles XII of Sweden, Goethe, Rousseau and Voltaire. This was an age of remarkable enlightenment and genius, including such other contemporaries as George Washington, Frederick the Great and Johann Sebastian Bach. Some reacted favorably to Swedenborg's theology, others argued with it; but just about every leading thinker of this age took note of it.

Swedenborg was a hard man to ignore. He was not only a leading scientist and philosopher but an esteemed member of the Swedish House of Nobles, a respected economist, an inventor and a scholar. And all of this came before the most remarkable period of his life as revelator and "servant of the Lord"—a calling to which he took with humble commitment.

That was the time in his life that separated him from other renowned men, because of his unique spiritual experience. Between 1720 and 1745 Swedenborg had already written some twenty large volumes on civil, scientific and philosophic subjects. Then beginning at age fifty-seven and continuing for the last twenty-seven years of his life, he wrote thirty volumes of painstakingly thorough theology, plus a five-volume Spiritual Diary.

Swedenborg's fame did not die with him, nor was it confined to the European intellectual community. Many leading thinkers in the nineteenth century continued to recognize him as a man of exceptional insight. Among those acknowledging that their thinking was affected by his theology were Abraham Lincoln, William Blake, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edward Everett Hale, William Dean Howells, Jean Oberlin and John Greenleaf Whittier.

Now the twentieth century, an age of technological marvel and materialistic focus, seems hardly aware of Swedenborg's science, philosophy or theology. Most of his writing was done in Latin, which translates into stilted English and does not make for easy reading. But those thirty volumes of theology are closely reasoned and strikingly relevant. Swedenborg deserves to be known better.

Emanuel Swedenborg began his life in Stockholm, Sweden, on January 29, 1688, as the son—the third of nine children— of Jesper and Sara Swedberg. His was an intensely religious family. Most of the children were given scriptural names to remind them of their duty to God and the church. Emanuel means "God with us."

Jesper Swedberg was professor of theology at the University of Uppsala and dean of the cathedral there. He later became bishop of Skara, which made him a nobleman and caused the family name to be changed from Swedberg to Swedenborg. He served as chaplain to the royal family of Sweden, which led him into the highest social and political circles in the land. His wife's family was also prominent in Sweden's important mining industry.

The Swedenborg home was genteel and reverent. Even though Emanuel's mother died when he was just eight years old, her soft nature was to have an effect on him throughout his life. He grew up listening to discussions of religious questions and classical subjects, and eagerly joined in. Exchanging ideas about life and faith with a variety of clergymen helped him to develop his own philosophy. Near the end of his life he confided in a letter to a friend that during his formative years, "I was constantly engaged in thought upon God, salvation, and the spiritual diseases of men."

When he was just eleven years old, Emanuel entered Uppsala University, which was not unusual for a boy of high intellectual promise of that time. The university offered four major fields of study: theology, law, medicine, and philosophy. His inquiring mind was not content to settle on just one. He majored in philosophy, which included science and mathematics, but also took courses in law, and later proved himself learned in theology and medicine.

Most of his instruction was carried on in Latin. He learned it so well that he wrote poetry in Latin for relaxation. He added Greek and Hebrew, and when he began to travel, also learned English, Dutch, French and Italian. He studied music on the side and filled in for the church organist. As a student, he was as versatile and curious as he was thorough and practical.

He completed his formal studies at age twenty-one, but his quest for broad learning hardly had begun. In a time when few men became really learned, he spent the first thirty-five years of his life in a massive program of formal and self-directed education. Within a year of leaving the university he was traveling in England, studying physics, astronomy and most of the other known natural sciences.

Emanuel was also inclined to practical mechanics, a field often foreign to the intellectual. He became skilled in watchmaking, bookbinding, cabinet work, engraving and the construction of brass instruments. Later, in Holland, he studied lens grinding—then an infant science. Further studies included cosmology, mathematics, anatomy, physiology, politics, economics, metallurgy, mineralogy, geology, mining engineering and chemistry.

Swedenborg was not just a professional student. He was always trying to put his learning to work. And he never stopped thinking beyond what he learned. He was the first scientist to propound a nebular hypothesis—a theory of the formation of the stars and planets from a rotating nebular mass. He also founded the science of geology in Sweden and carried on exhaustive work in metallurgy.

This was just the beginning. His discoveries founded the science of crystallography. He followed the pioneer work of Sir Isaac Newton to discover more about the nature of magnets. And he anticipated Einstein's theory of energy by postulating an elaborate theory of his own about the source of energy, with similar conclusions.

Swedenborg made a feasible model of a glider-type airplane, almost two hundred years before the Wright brothers, and a model of a submarine long before anyone else saw the possibility. He made the first mercurial air pump, invented a stove that became widely used, improved the ear trumpets then in use (winning the praise of the deaf), anticipated the phonograph by creating a musical machine, designed a machine gun and marketed a fire extinguisher.

He plunged into anatomy with the same curiosity and initiative. This was still a primitive science in Swedenborg's day. Neither the complete circulation of the blood nor the existence of oxygen were known. Even the functions of the heart and lungs were not clearly understood. Swedenborg not only came closer to perceiving these functions than anyone to that date, but was ahead of his time in many other areas of anatomical research.

He had devoted two years to anatomical research in Paris in the middle 1730s and produced one of his most famous philosophical books, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*. He made important discoveries about the

brain, including functions of the motor areas, the ductless glands and the circulation and uses of the cerebrospinal fluid. His studies of the nervous system and the brain are credited as the first accurate understanding of the cerebral cortex and the respiratory movement of the brain tissues. Modern scholars concede that Swedenborg's findings pointed the way to most of the fundamentals of nerve and sensory physiology.

Throughout this intense period of study and accomplishment, Swedenborg never forgot the advice of his father: "I beg you most earnestly that you will fear and love God above all else, for without this fear of God all other training, all study, all learning is of no account."

His life was not spent indulging personal and intellectual whim, however. He was also devoted to public service, to the Swedish government and its industry. As an already acclaimed scientist at age twenty-eight, he was appointed by King Charles XII as extraordinary assessor in the Royal Board of Mines. That sounds like a title with more pomp than obligation, but it made him responsible for the supervision and development of mining, then one of Sweden's most important industries. He took the job seriously, serving for thirty-one years.

He spent most of seven summers traveling on horseback and in carriages around the country, inspecting mines for safety and preparing detailed reports on the quality and amount of ore being mined. He was also involved in personnel and administrative decisions, arbitrated labor disputes, made suggestions for mining improvements, and collected national taxes levied on mining. And conscientious as this service was, he still managed leaves of absence for travel and study to further broaden himself and prepare for greater work to come.

His public career also included some fifty years of service in the House of Nobles, one of the four estates of the Swedish Riksdag (legislature). He was deeply devoted to the welfare of his country and carefully planned his travels for periods of legislative adjournment. He frequently wrote pamphlets and resolutions on pressing issues, from the economy and tax structure to foreign policy and development of Sweden's natural resources. He never shied from critical debate but was always a man of moderation, willing to work toward practical solutions.

Among his contributions was a system for amortizing mortgages along with interest payments, which only became common practice in this country in the past few decades. He also made significant contributions by putting his mechanical genius to work for his country. King Charles was so impressed by his leadership as editor of the first scientific journal published in Sweden that he asked him to serve as engineering advisor. Swedenborg supervised construction of several major public works projects, including designing a dry dock, a canal and a system for moving large warships over land.

In spite of his success in so many fields and the temptation he must have felt to devote himself to metallurgy or biology, he resisted extensive research because he didn't feel particularly gifted or suited to it. He became more interested in generalizing from the findings of others than conducting extensive experiments on his own. To him, what could be done with these findings was more important than his own fame.

Swedenborg had two main philosophic interests: cosmology, which is the study of the origin and order of the universe, and the nature of the human soul. For twenty-five years, between 1720 and 1745, while engaged in a host of other interests, he immersed himself in wide spread study and writing on these subjects.

A six hundred page manuscript detailing his philosophy about the creation of the universe and what keeps it going was published posthumously. It stated his primary conclusion about matter, based on a "first natural point." This point, he theorized, was caused by Divine impulse and consists of pure motion, expanding by degrees throughout creation. His view of cosmology was teeming with energy. And modern research, particularly in atomic energy, has confirmed many of his theories. Svante Arrhenius, Nobel Prize winning chemist and founder of the twentieth century science of physical chemistry, concluded that such "pioneers" as Buffon, Kant, Laplace, Wright and Lambert all propounded theories of creation already suggested by Swedenborg.<sup>7</sup>

All of Swedenborg's work rested on the assumption that Divine force underlies all matters. He was not satisfied with purely material explanations of the universe. This led him to study both the relationship between the finite and the infinite, and the assumption that the human soul is the link between God and man.

He developed his search for the soul in a lengthy two volume treatise, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, which was praised by contemporary scholars. He pursued his search for rational explanations in anatomical research, which produced several additional books, some published, some left simply as manuscripts. Through it all he developed an amazing insight into the existence of the soul.

At age fifty seven, with a seemingly full career behind him, he had gone as far as he could in attempting to explain the mysteries of human existence. He felt dissatisfied that his research had not provided a definitive answer. But he was about to begin that unique phase of his life that would take him deeper into understanding these mysteries than he ever could have imagined.

It began during 1744 and 1745 with a series of dreams and visions that profoundly affected him, leaving him sometimes fearful, sometimes exhilarated. Ever the scientist, he kept in a Journal of Dreams, a careful record of what he experienced and how he felt about it. But this was a disquieting period, which he did not yet understand, so he kept the dreams to himself.

Swedenborg came to believe that he had been called by God to transmit a new revelation to the world, and he devoted himself to that service for the remaining twenty seven years of his life. He began with a two year study of the Bible, writing some 3,000 pages of personal notes and a complete Bible index, which he used extensively in writing his later theological works. He also perfected his Hebrew and Greek so that he could study the Bible in original texts.

From the time he began this spiritual mission, he claimed to have talked almost daily with spirits in their world, while he lived an apparently normal life among friends on earth. After a few years of this he wrote in *Arcana Coelestia* (Heavenly Secrets), "By the Divine mercy of the Lord it has been granted me now for some years to be constantly and continuously in the company of angels and spirits, hearing them speak and speaking with them in turn. In this way it has been given me to hear and see wonderful things which are in the other life, which have never come to the knowledge of any man."<sup>8</sup>

Swedenborg insisted that what he saw and heard in the spiritual world came to him not in dreams but "in the highest state of wakefulness."<sup>9</sup>

He was able to reflect on his experiences and write about them with real understanding. And he insisted that at all times he was taught by the Lord alone—through angels but not by angels.

In modern encyclopedias he often is identified as "scientist, philosopher and mystic." But he cannot be so simply classified, because his experience was unique. It has nothing in common with the visions of self styled seers, and in no way does he encourage a mystical way of life. For instance, he does not claim to have attained communion with God through contemplation, as many mystics do. He prayed to God but never consciously set out to commune with Him or spirits. First as scientist and then as philosopher, he sought an understanding of the soul as a link to God, not a beatific vision of God.

The revelation given through him contains nothing to help or encourage anyone to communicate with the spiritual world. Mysticism has no rational basis; the thirty volumes of Swedenborg's writings are an intricate presentation of thoroughly organized doctrine, free of rambling and contradiction. Some of his most pointed statements in fact, are directed against those who try to communicate with spirits. In his stern warnings against blind faith, his theology openly discourages any inclination toward mysticism.

Also, unlike some self-professed revelators, Swedenborg did not rush into print the moment he felt called, nor did he try to attract attention to himself. In addition to the long preparatory work he did on earth, he waited until he had three years of experience visiting the spiritual world before he began to write.

In 1748 he launched his most exhaustive theological study, *Arcana Coelestia*. This twelve-volume work presents an analysis of the internal, spiritual meaning of the books of Genesis and Exodus, verse by verse and almost word by word.

Other books, some published posthumously, included *Divine Love and Wisdom*; *Divine Providence*; *The Four Doctrines* (The Lord, the Holy Scriptures, Life, and Faith), *Heaven and Hell*; *Conjugal Love* (a study of ideal marriage love), eight volumes explaining the Book of Revelation (two are *Apocalypse Explained* and *Apocalypse Revealed*), and *The True Christian Religion*.

In the beginning, he published his books anonymously, seeking no credit for them, even among friends. He invested a considerable amount of his own money. Distribution was quite modest at first, mostly anonymous gifts to clergymen, universities and libraries.

He lived a normal life, if sometimes secluded, during the early part of this experience. He never married, which left him free to spend a lot of time with his books and studies. Friends and acquaintances noticed nothing unusual about his life.

Later experiences reversed this anonymous, secluded pattern. He became well known for something more than science and government service, and his books were widely read and discussed among learned men. Still he remained humbly committed to the conviction that he had been commissioned by God to bring this new revelation to the world. He never sought any personal acclaim.

It is interesting to note what he was not commissioned to do. He had no command to establish a church or found a religious movement, although he assumed that this revelation was to be the basis for a new church. This sets him apart from the Apostles, who were commanded to preach the Gospel. And it sets him apart from those who claim to have special insights and do all they can to attract a following.

Swedenborg was able to maintain his theological anonymity until 1759, when some amazing experiences occurred, bringing him considerable notoriety as word of them spread through Swedish society. This eventually led some readers to connect him with his unsigned books, particularly *Heaven and Hell*.

In July of 1759 he was attending a party with fifteen people at the home of a wealthy friend in Gothenburg, some 300 miles from Stockholm. Suddenly he became quite pale and disturbed and withdrew into the garden. He returned to tell his friends that a terrible fire had broken out in Stockholm, not far from his home. He was worried because the fire was spreading rapidly and he feared that some of his manuscripts would be destroyed. He was greatly agitated for several hours, but at last cried out, "Thank God! The fire is extinguished the third door from my house."<sup>10</sup>

That same evening, one of the guests present told the story to the provincial governor, who in turn asked for a full account from Swedenborg. The next day Swedenborg was able to describe the fire in some detail, including how it was put out, and this "news" quickly became the talk of Gothenburg. It was the following day—two days after the fire—that a messenger arrived from Stockholm with details that verified Swedenborg's account.

The interest aroused made him a public figure, and it wasn't long before it was known that he was the author of *Heaven and Hell* and *Arcana Coelestia*. Prominent people, anxious to meet a man who claimed to see into the spiritual world, began to write about him. Some who had not met him jumped to the conclusion that he must be insane, but those who did meet him were convinced of his mental stability because he was always calm, cordial and rational.

While such a sensational experience attracted much more attention than the communication with spirits described in his books, it did arouse interest in the revelation he was transcribing and gave him a certain credibility.

A similar incident occurred the following spring. The widow of the Dutch ambassador in Stockholm became interested in Swedenborg's apparent ability to converse with spirits and she approached him for help. A silversmith had presented a large bill for a silver service her husband had bought before his death. She was certain he had paid the bill but couldn't find the receipt.

A few days later Swedenborg reported that he had seen her husband in the spiritual world and had been told by him that he would send a message to his wife. Eight days later the lady dreamed that her husband told her to look behind a particular drawer in a desk. She did, and found not only the receipt but a diamond pin that also had been missing.

The next morning Swedenborg called on her, and before she could tell him what had happened, he told her that he had been talking to her husband the previous night and that her husband had left the conversation to convey a message to her.

Then in the fall of 1761, Swedenborg was invited to visit Queen Louisa Ulrika, who had become interested in his acclaimed abilities. The queen asked if he would communicate with her late brother Augustus William, who had

died two years previously. A few days later Swedenborg returned and presented the queen with copies of his books. And in a private conversation he told her something that caused her to gasp in amazement, exclaiming that no one but her brother would have known what he had told her. This incident became widely known and discussed in Swedish social circles.

Swedenborg's fame quickly grew. One whose curiosity was aroused was the great German philosopher and rationalist Immanuel Kant. He never met Swedenborg but corresponded with him. And while he tended to discount anything spiritual, the persistent and authoritative reports about Swedenborg's experiences gave him pause. Sometimes Kant wrote favorably about Swedenborg, sometimes he was quite critical, but even his most searing criticism was pitted with doubts. Kant, like other intellectuals of his day, could not explain away Emanuel Swedenborg.

Friends and acquaintances who wrote of their impressions of Swedenborg, and even those who could not bring themselves to accept his claims would not say anything critical about him personally. He was described consistently as a gentle, humorous man with a relaxed, benign air.

When he was eighty, in excellent health and working on his last theological volume, *The True Christian Religion*, a friend wrote, "Someone might think that Swedenborg was eccentric and whimsical, but the very reverse was the case. He was very easy and pleasant in company, talked on every subject that came up, accommodating himself to the ideas of the company, and never speaking of his own views unless he was asked about them."<sup>11</sup>

A year later, in 1769, he was forced to answer charges of heresy leveled against him by some prelates of the Lutheran state church in Sweden. Friends had warned him that his theological writings had stirred considerable controversy in the Lutheran Consistory in Gothenburg. Clergymen and laymen were speaking out in favor of his theology, but others were strongly critical.

Earlier, in September of 1768, a country parson had brought debate in the Consistory to a head by introducing a resolution to stop the circulation of books not in line with official Lutheran dogma. The parson objected particularly to Swedenborg's theology.

While some members of the Consistory insisted that no decision should be made until all members had studied the books, the ranking prelate announced that he had found Swedenborg's doctrines to be "corrupting, heretical, injurious and in the highest degree objectionable."<sup>12</sup> He confessed that he had not read any of the books closely, except *Apocalypse Revealed*. But still he charged Swedenborg with Socinianism—refusal to accept the divinity of Christ.

Swedenborg, whose theology emphatically teaches the divinity of Christ, wrote vigorously in his own defense. He said that he looked on the charge "as a downright insult and diabolical mockery."<sup>13</sup> The dispute raged on for several years, and the Royal Council finally imposed a ban on his books.

Swedenborg protested the decision and petitioned the king himself. The council referred the matter to the courts, which asked several universities (including Swedenborg's alma mater, Uppsala) to make a thorough study of his theology.

The universities asked to be excused because their theological faculties found nothing to condemn. But they were also reluctant to put bishops and consistories on trial for false accusation, which was the only way the issue could be reversed. The debate quieted down then, as the Consistory pursued no further action and some clergymen continued to preach Swedenborg's theology. Swedenborg himself continued to speak and write as he pleased.

He became engrossed in his last and crowning work, *The True Christian Religion*. At age eighty-two he undertook his eleventh and final foreign journey to complete its publication. He must have felt he would not return, because he made farewell calls on friends and associates, arranged a pension for his faithful housekeeper, and settled his estate. He told a longtime friend and neighbor, "Whether I shall return again, I do not know, but this I can assure you, for the Lord has promised it to me. I shall not die until I have received from the press this work, now ready to be printed."<sup>14</sup>

Another somewhat skeptical friend visited him in Amsterdam during the printing and found him working on proofs "in an astonishing and superhuman way"<sup>15</sup> Swedenborg was convinced to the end that he rendered himself, as the title page of this final book stated, "The Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ."

He had predicted six months before his death that he would enter permanently the spiritual world on March 29, 1772—which turned out to be correct. He wakened from a long sleep that day after a period of poor health to ask his landlady and a maid for the time. When they told him it was five o'clock, he said, "I thank you. God bless you."<sup>16</sup> Then he gently sighed and died.

In the last month of his life several friends had urged that he make a final statement about the truth of the new revelation that had consumed his last twenty-seven years. But he answered pointedly, "I have written nothing but the truth, as you will have more and more confirmed to you all the days of your life, provided you keep close to the Lord and faithfully serve Him alone by shunning evils of all kinds as sins against Him and diligently searching His Word, which from beginning to end bears incontestable witness to the truth of the doctrines I have delivered to the world."<sup>17</sup>

To another friend shortly before he died he said, "As truly as you see me before your eyes, so true is everything that I have written; and I could have said more had it been permitted. When you enter eternity you will see everything, and then you and I will have much to talk about."<sup>18</sup>

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