

BJÖRN MEIDAL & BENGT WANSELIUS:

***Strindbergs världar.***

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***The Worlds of August Strindberg.***

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Of the many works prompted by the 2012 centenary of Strindberg's death Björn Meidal and Bengt Wanselius's volume has to be among the biggest in every sense. As the cover blurb tells us, 'This is the most extensively illustrated biography of Strindberg produced to date' and at 500+ pages of heavyweight quarto paper the text is best read and the pictures best admired while sitting at a desk. The publisher has also taken the unusual course of publishing an English translation, splendidly done by Sarah Death, simultaneously and in identical format.

I imagine that most readers will start with the illustrations, of

which there must be six or seven hundred, sometimes two or three small snapshot portraits of individuals to a page, sometimes large seascapes, landscapes and townscapes spreading across two pages. They are mostly photographs, mostly surprisingly crisp and non-sepia, some of them taken by Strindberg himself, and while some of them are inevitably familiar, by far the majority of them will be new to most readers. And they are a joy; even without Meidal's text it would be a pleasure and an education to browse this photographic collection. What Wanselius has done is to provide us with the visual context of the literary and cultural history of the latter part of the nineteenth century and, more specifically, to focus it around the many 'worlds of August Strindberg', so that there is not an illustration that does not illuminate some aspect of the title figure, his family, his circle and his places. It is a quite stunning achievement.

As is Björn Meidal's biographical portrait. Given that Meidal edited the last seven volumes of Strindberg's letters, there are few people who can have the degree of familiarity with Strindberg that he has. In the Foreword to the present book he writes: 'I had the privilege of completing the major, definitive edition of Strindberg's letters. In more than 10,000 surviving letters I could follow his life day by day'. (This and other quotations are taken from Sarah Death's translation.) Meidal's account tends to focus on the straightforwardly biographical, in so far as anything about Strindberg's biography can be straightforward, but that does not mean that the works are given short shrift. What brings his portrayal to life, however, is precisely his day-to-day knowledge. The overarching sweep of the life is all there – the marriages, the affairs, the feuds, the ideological inconsistencies, the prejudices, the financial shambles – but it is Meidal's mastery of the small and telling detail that scores over virtually every other Strindberg biography. Before writing *Giftas I* (*Getting Married I*) Meidal tells us, 'The time had come for him to send off for his favourite pen nibs, the Sir Joshua Mason 1001s, the medium- and fine-nib varieties, as he had "suffered all winter" from being forced to use inferior Swiss writing implements'; and when Strindberg was alone at Dalarö in the summer of 1891 we learn that he wrote to his cousin Gotthard to send 'A Dozen Condoms (gutta-percha), Leja's largest = 10 Kronor per Dozen'. In Meidal's account there is a

refreshing absence of the kind of trite psychologising that bedevils much of what is written about Strindberg. How much more telling of the character of the man is Meidal's recounting of his reaction to the negative criticism of *Svenska folket* (The Swedish People) by certain professional historians: one such, Oscar Montelius, is dismissed as a 'third-hand historian' and ... 'Where Montelius is concerned, I crap on him. I shall fuck him in the wig until he is bald'.

At times the treatment of the works has something of the feel of encyclopaedic entries, as is perhaps inevitable in view of Strindberg's enormous oeuvre, even in a work of 500 pages. A hundred works are mentioned, some in more detail, some in passing – *Miss Julie*, for instance, gets c.800 words, *A Dreamplay* c.270 words – but Meidal packs a considerable amount of information and even some analysis into the small compass available. Importantly, Meidal also succeeds in very briefly contextualising works, both in biographical terms and in literary historical terms.

A rewarding volume, then. There are, however, a number of paratextual elements that make the book rather less user-friendly than need be. Firstly there is the complete absence of dates on the contents page: we are given headings such as 'Germany-Denmark' or 'Sweden Again' without any information as to the years covered by the rubrics. No problem, of course, to the expert already familiar with Strindberg's biography but inconvenient to others, particularly perhaps to students or to readers of the translation. Nor is the running text itself over-generous with dates. The illustrations, however, are meticulously dated throughout, which is helpful, and there is a life-and-work timeline several pages long at the end of the book – although, given the size of the volume, the latter is literally heavy to consult. Secondly, there is the lack of a proper index – all we are provided with is an index of persons. In view of Strindberg's peripatetic life, places would certainly have been a helpful addition, and perhaps even more useful would have been page references to works mentioned – again at the end of the volume there is a simple list of 'works referred to in this book', but it gives neither page numbers nor dates nor, incidentally, is it a complete bibliography of Strindberg's works. Thirdly, while there is a bibliography of 'All works of major importance used in this volume'

provided, there are no numbered references at all, which makes it impossible for the interested reader to follow up specific points. All this makes one wonder a little about what target audience the publishers had in mind.

But these are quibbles. At the end of the Foreword Björn Meidal writes: 'I have done my best to write without the benefit of hindsight and to take seriously his [Strindberg's] anxious, surprised questions: 'Where am I?', 'How did I get here?', 'Who have I become now?' and 'What shall I do?'. In words and in pictures Meidal and Wanselius have made a very fine job of answering those questions.

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