

REVIEWS

PETER FORSSKÅL:

Thoughts on Civil Liberty / Tankar om borgerliga friheten,

D. Goldberg, G. Jonsson, H. Jäderblom, G. Persson & T. von Vegesack (eds), Atlantis, Stockholm, 2009, 40 + 39pp.

Amongst the many pamphleteers active in Sweden-Finland during the 1750s and 1760s, contributing to a very lively public debate on key social, economic and political issues, Peter Forsskål (1732-63) has received relatively little attention from Swedish scholars, and is largely unknown outside Scandinavia except for his botanical research and his contribution to the Danish expedition to Arabia (during which he died from a fever). After studies at Uppsala and Göttingen, Forsskål in 1759 submitted his 10-page tract *Thoughts on Civil Liberty* for publication, but the Censor, Niklas Oelreich, insisted on changes before it was published late that year. Even so, the printed version met such strong reaction that it was banned. By then most of the print-run of 500 copies had already been distributed, so only 79 copies were destroyed.

This edition reproduces Forsskål's original text, with comments and explanatory background both in Swedish and in English translation. The censored published version is available on-line. So few 18th-century Swedish political tracts are available in translation that the present publication is in itself an important landmark. But it is of particular historical interest as one of the earliest contributions to the growing interest in civic rights in Enlightenment Europe – written well before either the American or the French revolutionaries compiled their own declarations of rights. Forsskål's text is typical of radical liberal thinking of the later half of the century, with a strong emphasis on economic as well as social issues. It may be compared for example with the Rules of Government drafted by the Danish historian Peter Frederik Suhm in 1774 (see *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Copenhagen, 12/VI, 1972), or the subsequent Virginian declaration of rights of 1776. Forsskål defined individual freedom and civil liberty broadly, subject only to the interests of society as a whole, and noted the threat posed

by “those who are the most powerful ... by dint of their positions, estate or wealth”. The best defence of civil liberty, he argued, was a combination of limited government and “unlimited freedom of the written word”. In the uncensored version Forsskål also argued that true religion could speak for itself, without the need for protection through censorship. Forsskål’s short tract covered a lot of ground, helping to create a major debate in Sweden which led to the abolition of censorship in 1766. This very elegantly presented edition will give Forsskål the wider readership he deserves.

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