

THE SWEDENBORG
MEMORIAL MEDAL,
issued by the Academy
of Sciences in 1852.



Swedenborg's return

Christer Nordlund

The photograph to the right captures a unique event in the modern history of the Academy of Sciences. It is 5 April 1978 and a band of dignitaries have gathered in the Session Hall to witness the Academy warden ceremonially placing a skull on a black velvet cushion. This is not just any old cranium; one month previously, the historic Sotheby's auction house in London had announced the object for sale under the heading "Swedenborg's skull". Its presentation read: "An original skull apparently of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the celebrated Swedish scientist, savant philosopher and theologian, founder of the New Jerusalem (or Swedenborgian) Church." The skull had now, through the ministrations of the Academy of Sciences, been acquired and transported to Stockholm to be observed, studied and photographed. It would subsequently be placed in Swedenborg's sarcophagus in Uppsala Cathedral, where a special memorial service was held on 4 May.

That the Academy of Sciences would become involved in this way with an 18th-century skull may seem odd, but this event is linked to a long tradition in the Academy's history of knowledge, one that deals with preserving the memory of Swedenborg.

Links between the Academy of Sciences and Swedenborg go back to 1740, when he was elected as member number 60, after nomination by Linnaeus. Swedenborg was then at the peak of his scientific career, a well-travelled and respected official and a member of parliament. Alongside his work at *Kungliga bergskollegiet* [the Royal Collegium of Mining and Metallurgy], the civil service department that was responsible for state control of the Swedish mining industry, he had developed a creative authorship in natural philosophy, covering general geological and cosmological subjects, such as the structure of matter and the universe's origin and development. He also studied the anatomy of the brain and investigated the question of the nature of the soul and



INSPECTOR AT THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, Gustav Lundqvist displays Swedenborg's cranium in the Session Hall. Head Librarian Wilhelm Odelberg stands just behind him.

immortality, as well as the relationship between the physical and mental worlds. Swedenborg was never particularly active in the Academy of Sciences, partly because he promptly entered a scholarly dispute with member Anders Celsius on the issue of the nature of the compass. Just three years after his election he stopped attending the Academy's meetings entirely. But Swedenborg still endeavoured to retain his membership and published at least one work in the *Transactions*: "Beskriftning huru inläggningar ske uti marmor-skifvor, til bord eller annan hus-zirat" [Description of the Mode in which Marble Slabs are Inlaid for Tables and Other Ornaments] (1763). In his

diplomatic eulogy, Academy member and Mining Councillor Samuel Sandel stated that, despite everything, Swedenborg had been a worthy member.

However, Swedenborg's later fame was not primarily based on his contributions to science and philosophy, but how, over time, he developed his own theological system, which came to be the foundation of a new religious movement. It is difficult to draw a sharp line between Swedenborg's science and his theology; like many of his thinkers of his time, Swedenborg was deeply religious and regarded science as a way of attaining knowledge of God. However, his theology was special. It developed in the wake of a religious life crisis that affected him during a foreign trip in the early 1740s. This crisis was followed by a revelation that God had called on him to interpret and convey the true Christian faith. Swedenborg also felt that he had received direct access to the "spirit world". He thus started deep studies of Christianity's records, while also gathering knowledge of the transcendental through visions, dreams and communication with spirits and angels. Interpretations were gathered and systematised in a long row of Latin texts in the borderland between philosophy, theology and spiritism, and which were published abroad due to Swedish censorship.

The theological system that Swedenborg developed was built upon the words of the Bible. Its foundation was that the universe and all life was God's creation, but this conceptual construction differed from evangelical Lutheran teachings in several ways. What made it distinctive was the idea that there is a direct correspondence between physical reality and the spiritual. According to Swedenborg, the spiritual world comprises a kind of dimension between the earthly life and heaven and hell. A person who dies enters this dimension, which is where the person's destination is determined. All angels have previously been human; whether someone becomes an angel or not depends on how they lived their Earthly life. Swedenborg did not believe in the forgiveness of sins through salvation, nor in a trinity; instead, what counted was a true love of God and the sum of the deeds performed. His starting point is that people are free to choose, so it is up to each person to choose a god-fearing and faithful life. These teachings thus encompassed a strict moralism, but also the hope of a happy future on the other side.

It has been suggested that Swedenborg was affected by mental illness and that his visions and revelations were the result of hallucinations. Even in his time, his claims of contact with spiritual beings were met with scepticism and criticism. In his work *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), the philosopher Immanuel Kant called him the "Arch-Dreamer among all the dreamers". However, this did not prevent others from regarding Swedenborg as a credible prophet with an attractive message. He had proselytes during his lifetime, but the great breakthrough occurred after his death. The first congregation founded in line with Swedenborg's teachings, the New Church, was founded in London in

1787. It was soon followed by others, both in Britain and other countries. A Swedenborg Society was founded in London in 1810, with the mission of disseminating Swedenborgian literature. His teachings also spread to the USA, where the first churches were built in Baltimore and Philadelphia in the early 19th century. The General Church of the New Jerusalem was constituted in 1897, and Swedenborg had thus become one of the most famous Swedish names internationally.

Against the background of Swedenborg's modest contributions to the Academy's work, combined with his later career as spiritualist and interpreter of heaven, one could imagine that the Academy of Sciences' interest in him would have declined with time. Instead, the opposite happened. An early indication of this was the establishment of the Swedenborg memorial medal in 1852, eighty years after his death. This development can be traced onward through the Academy's attitude to his literary estate; after Swedenborg's death, this material was donated to the Academy library, while his private library was sold via an auction house, Bokauktionskammaren in Stockholm. Initially, the Academy of Sciences gave the collection little attention and were not particularly thorough when loaning manuscripts to members and foreign Swedenborgians. However, regard for the donation grew in parallel with Swedenborg's international reputation, leading the Academy to both guarantee its ownership in the legal sense and intensify archival work on sorting, cataloguing and supplementing the material in the 19th century. In the early 1900s, a special committee was established to publish Swedenborg's works and, since the 1920s, a grant has been awarded for the purpose of supporting Swedenborg-related studies. Through this memory culture, the Academy became an actor that promoted both the knowledge of Swedenborg and, indirectly, the cult surrounding him.

So how did Swedenborg's skull end up in this story? The Academy of Sciences has never had any formal responsibility for his remains. When Swedenborg died, he was buried at the Swedish Church in the East End of London. He lay there until 1908, when the church was demolished and the coffin moved to Uppsala Cathedral, where his skeleton was placed in a magnificent sarcophagus. However, the Academy's interest in Swedenborg's body began with the revelation that the skull in the sarcophagus was not the correct one. According to various sources, the original coffin had been opened at the end of the 18th century and the skull swapped, because the original was a desirable object for 19th-century skull collectors and phrenologists. The subject interested researchers, and a series of scientific studies was conducted to clarify the issue. In the 1960s it was established that the skull in Uppsala did not belong with the rest of Swedenborg's skeleton, and that the real skull was in the possession of an elderly couple in Swansea, Wales.



THE MEMORIAL MEDAL issued by the Academy of Sciences in 1852, eighty years after Swedenborg's death.

Once the circumstances had been clarified, the question arose of whether the true skull should be united with the rest of the remains. In some quarters the question was regarded as curious, even ridiculous, but there were prominent persons within the Academy of Sciences who took it with the greatest seriousness. Wilhelm Odelberg, who was head librarian at the Academy of Sciences' library and therefore the one who preserved the Swedenborg collection, has stated that he personally felt a great responsibility towards Swedenborg – according to him, “one of the Academy's foreground figures through the years” – and the then permanent secretary Carl Gustaf Bernhard apparently felt the same. Odelberg therefore assumed the task of representing the Academy and attempting to acquire the skull straight from the owners in Swansea. His mission failed, but the Academy did not give up. When the skull was later put out for open auction, the Academy, together with the Swedish state and the Swedenborg family, made funds available with the aim of winning the bidding. The price was estimated at 4,000 pounds, but the issue was understandably sensitive. The auction ended in the Academy's favour in less than 20 seconds, and the skull was then transported to Stockholm with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No money was ever paid, and Sotheby's were awarded the Academy's Swedenborg medal as thanks.

This business of a deceased member's skull is probably a one-off occurrence in the modern history of the Academy of Sciences. However, work on preserving Swedenborg's heritage is old and responsibility for this remains with the Academy. There is now also an international commitment to do so. The collection that is kept in the archive – almost 40,000 pages in the form

of printed texts, manuscripts, drafts, diary entries and letters – has being assessed of such value that it was placed on the UNESCO world heritage list in 2005, as part of the documented collective memory of the peoples of the world. In itself, its scope naturally contributes to the value of the collection; such rich personal archives from the 18th century are rare. But its value is also linked to the cult around Swedenborg and his teachings. As it says in UNESCO's motivation for deciding to award world heritage status to the archive, Swedenborg's message is still heard around the world and some people even regard the preserved documents as relics. Talk of a living Swedenborg cult in the midst of the knowledge society is entirely justified.

★

An introduction to Swedenborg's life and ideas is provided by Tore Frängsmyr, *Svensk idéhistoria: Bildning och vetenskap under tusen år, vol. 1: 1000–1809* (Stockholm, 2000). Swedenborg's relationship with the Academy of Sciences is covered in detail in Inge Jonsson, "Swedenborg and the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences", in Karl Grandin (ed.), *Emanuel Swedenborg – Exploring a "World Memory": Context, Content, Contribution* (Stockholm, 2013). Samuel Sandel's eulogy was published as *Åminnelse-tal, öfver Kongl. Vetenskaps-Academiens framlidne ledamot, Assessoren i Kongl. Maj:ts och Riksens Bergs-Collegio Herr Emanuel Swedenborg* (Stockholm, 1772). The management of the Swedenborg collection is examined in S. C. Eby, *The Story of the Swedenborg Manuscripts* (New York, 1926) and Maria Berggren, "The Swedenborg archives in perspective: A collection and a catalogue", in *Emanuel Swedenborg – Exploring a "World Memory"*. Wilhelm Odelberg describes the Academy of Sciences' efforts to bring the skull to Sweden in "Emanuel Swedenborgs kranium – förlorat och återbördat", *Arte et Marte: Meddelanden från Riddarhuset* (1993), 1–5, as well as in his biography *Lärdom för livet* (Stockholm, 1999). The memorial medal is presented in Cecilia Bergström (ed.), *För efterkommande: Kungl. Vetenskapsakademiens medaljer 1749–2007* (Stockholm, 2010). UNESCO's world heritage programme can be read about in *En introduktion till Memory of the World* (Stockholm, 2012), to which Karl Grandin contributed the text "Emanuel Swedenborgs arkiv".