

From a Diary, September 1985

How strangely things happen with books! This is a dark night, silent at 4 in the morning, in the small Swedish town of Eslöv half an hour by car from Malmo. I shall not sleep again this morning, because an idea has arrived.

We have enjoyed coming, that's one vital point; flying across to Copenhagen after an American night in the Hilton at Gatwick, walking through the sunny streets to settle at Hans Bagger's long table, candle-lit, for coffee and apple tart before seeking a book. We found just one, true and unexpected, a mid-seventeenth century Danish law work in the old binding of its owner, called Ravn, whose raven stamp adorned both covers and the fly-leaf. 'A true book', we agreed. Nobody to buy it from us, not feeling rich, just this perfect accord of books which we share and manage still to accept as the best guide.

After stately dinner at our hotel, the Palace, the city clock's harmony kept me awake each quarter till midnight; but after the next half-hour of realising it would strike no more till morning I was so roused and fretful as to manage only brief and dreaming sleep.

Yesterday we crossed early by 'the Highspeed Craft' to Malmo, after a rush-hour bus to the Havnegade, and took a taxi to Mr. Jansson's flat. As one of the rules of our trade is friendliest hospitality, after a smoky and dubious hour or more with his books he took us out to excellent lunch. His 'best bindings, back in cardboard boxes from exhibition', came one by one from their wrappings for my rejection. After lunch, back in his room, whether from schnapps or politesse or the slow grinding of my brain I chose a book while Charlotte dozed, a splendid sixteenth-century binding upon a Swiss St. Augustine of moderate distinction. And Jansson's wife, as no taxi came, drove us all to Eslöv. It is not a sophisticated place; a Swedish message for us on the door of this 'City Hotel' directed us to the café where we would find in an envelope the key to the building and our

room. Luckily Jansson was with us to translate. Then out we went to Trollenäs Slott.

All this began three weeks ago with the arrival of a book auction catalogue, 'Skandineriska Bok Auktoner AB, Katalog I.' The auction, at Trollenäs castle, sounded fun and a couple of books caught my eye, first among them two volumes of Propaganda Fide grammars, described as 'type specimens', ranging from the start of such tracts in 1629 to the late eighteenth century when these were apparently bound for the King of Sweden by gift from Rome. I consulted Simon, our Russian department, because the earliest tract represented the first appearance in print of Georgian, a matter of fairly trivial importance. The excuse for a jaunt seemed adequate, arrangements by the Scandinavian tourist office tempting.

So out we went to view yesterday, at the delightful castle of Trollenäs. A moderately disappointing assembly they were, but the Propaganda Fide though visually unexciting did not really disappoint upon second acquaintance. A few other possibilities there are of course, as for instance a Lutheran catechism for American Indians from Sweden of the late seventeenth century.

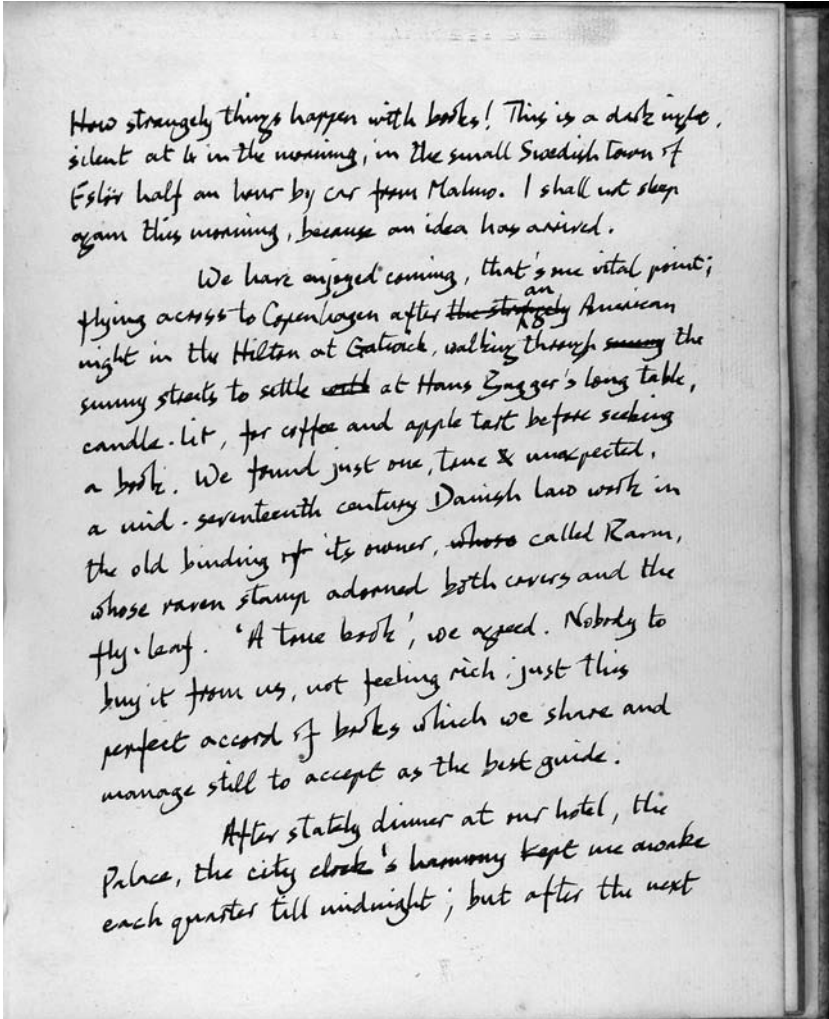
Working out price after supper here, while Charlotte bathed, I thought we should try to get the Propaganda Fide tracts. Now in the early morning they hit me as vital! Books search to express the intellectual sense which first put out feelers towards them.

I should have taken the hint before, let a penny drop, for ten days ago I ordered from a catalogue John Chamberlayne's *Oratio Dominica*, printed at Amsterdam in 1715, the Lord's Prayer in 151 languages. As that printer possessed no exotic types the more unreadable languages were engraved, with below a transliteration under the heading 'Lectio'. So these were for missionaries to read, in whatever peculiar accents, in remote places where they hoped to establish that prayer at least.

I've been writing this last fortnight a paper for South Africa on *The Place of Special Collections in a University*, advocating the acquisition for museum purposes of a large category I call 'useless books' meaning by the phrase those which may wake the imagination but will not be read. And I'm inching towards thinking out lectures—classes—in a year's time at Tulsa on books and publishing.

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Now at Eslöv in the early morning all these pennies drop. *Printing and the Mind of Man*, they called the exhibition. If one part of that large phrase interests me, it is the history of religion – rather than of medicine, or philosophy, or engineering. However many decades too late I arrive to consider collecting that theme, which suggests – I'm



A page of the diary from Sweden.

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thinking of Christianity – earliest Bibles, polyglot versions, even the rare mission presses, this morning's book falls within focus. Even the Kelmscott Chaucer struck me as disappointing upon first sight.

In publishing history, Christianity must have spread by three stages, liturgical use, including the Bible; polyglot printing for scholarly purposes – critical editions – which people now admire as a chapter in type history; and mission printing for a world communion. If I'm far too late for the mission presses, is not this Propaganda Fide assembly an extraordinary event? Does it not represent the birth of stage three? I believe a type specimen book existed already, but here is the start of mission work, first tools for that strange and probably misguided heroism. Those most prominent heretics the Moslems had been tackled already by a Bible in Arabic – what about the natives of Borioboola-Gha, Rome was beginning to ask in the early seventeenth century?

Rare they are, I'll take the auction catalogue's word for that. Their existence is noted by Updike. So much for boredom. But sixteen of



A confusion of Diaries from many a book journey..

the little pamphlets, assembled thus in 1784? How did they still possess examples to give away, from one century and a half before? If the eighteenth century under an enthusiast saw new awakening, as the catalogue says – for the century before seems something of a gap, as I remember in Updike – the long sleep had left these copies upon shelves, or in parcels, or old sheets were happily discovered.

Five of the sixteen grammars bound thus have dates from 1629 to 1636, one is from 1713, one from 1753, nine were printed between 1771 and 1784. They include the first ‘books’ printed in Sanskrit, and the first in Malabar types.

Too late for Bibles, and for mission presses, here is the start of stage three, Church recognition of a task among remote people of the world. Now is half past five, and in eight hours I’ll hope to have it, cross in the late afternoon with those two volumes to Copenhagen, put them to rest for a while at Culham tomorrow, pass them to James¹ for whatever they need during my month in Japan and South Africa.

You can always buy books at auction, only holding up a hand, but you need the conviction which has come; then you hold it up after the point of folly has in the view of all others been passed.

It *may* be quite a well judged visit, nothing so obviously important as to tempt towards all heights: we’ll see. Plenty to discover: I do not know the special connection between Gustaf III and the Propaganda Fide. Jansson’s chat gave us interesting hints, as that this was not the King’s copy because the Royal Library owns one already!

Again, the inscription (Swedish): ‘Presented to the King by the Society for the Propaganda Fide in Rome, 1784.’ They may not all have been given in 1784: is the binding Italian, or Swedish? Did a few such pamphlets exist in the Royal Library, and Gustaf’s librarian had them bound up thus? We may find out.

I’m not so thorough as to have discovered what already existed in languages of which these did *not* provide first appearances: here anyway were the missions’ first working tools.

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1 James Brockman, bookbinder, who can always be depended upon to do what is right for a book.