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## Tegnér's Saga

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### Tegnér's Saga

#### Abstract

Biography of Swedish poet who inspired Longfellow's poem, "Tegnér's Drapa"—the poem that first inspired "joy" in Lewis.

#### Additional Keywords

Tegnér, Esaias—Biography

## Tegnér's Saga

Hanna Stenström

I suppose all of you have heard about how "joy" was first awakened in C.S. Lewis when he read Longfellow's poem "Tegnér's Drapa." Some of you also know, that this poem was written when Longfellow learned about the death of Esaias Tegnér, a Swedish bishop, whose *Fritiofs Saga* Longfellow had translated into English. But who, then, was this Swedish poet-bishop?

He was born in 1782, the sixth child of a poor clergyman in the province of Värmland, in the middle of Sweden. His mother was an intelligent woman who could write poetry but who was also a practical minded and able housewife.

Tegnér's father died in 1792. In 1793 Esaias left home to work with an official in the inland revenue. He was supposed to learn a useful profession. All his early education was given at home, mostly by his brother, and he also learned by reading books on his own. He studied Latin, French, and some Greek, and read books in subjects like philosophy, history and astronomy, although not according to any prescribed plan. He discovered Norse mythology and sagas, and also wrote poetry even at this early age. Later on he learned English and read *The Poem of Ossian*.

In 1797 Tegnér came to work for a nearby ironworks owner, Kristoffer Myhrman, as a private tutor for his sons. At this time Värmland's iron production was of great importance, and Myhrman was an ambitious man who had become rather rich. He was also a man of some education, who shared the views of the Enlightenment, with a knowledge of Latin, French, German and English. Here the young Tegnér could study the Greek and Roman classics, Rousseau, Voltaire, Racine and *The Poem of Ossian*, in addition to fulfilling his duties. He fell in love with the youngest daughter in the Myhrman family, Anna.

It became more and more obvious that this young man was meant for an academic career. In the autumn of 1799 he went to the town and University of Lund, located in the southernmost part of Sweden, to study Latin, Greek and Philosophy. The young Tegnér lived in poverty, studying hard to be able to find a job and fulfill his dream to marry Anna. One of his older brothers was in love with one of her sisters (who in the end married someone else); this made him eager to promote the union between Esaias and Anna. The two were secretly engaged with each other when she was 17 and he still a poor student of 20.

He tried getting a commission at the University of Lund and to achieve fame as a poet. His first published poems had names like "Livet" (Life), "Kulturen" (Culture), and

"Tålmodet och Hoppet" (Patience and Hope). He finally married in 1806, became a vice-librarian at the University of Lund, and began writing his first great poem, which was published in 1810 – "Det Eviga" (The Eternal). This was intended as an anti-Napoleon poem. He praises Beauty, Truth and Right, which are everlasting, and disparages that which is created by violence, finding it frail, short-lived, and dying away like a wind in the desert. The poem is more than a political pamphlet; it is far more an expression of philosophical Idealism of lasting value.

In 1812 Esaias Tegnér became Professor of Greek at the same University. Both his family and fame as a poet were growing. He was often in the company of merry friends, and while he is remembered as a jolly fellow, he did have period of deep depression later in his life. His interest in politics was often reflected in his poetry dealing with contemporary events. There was also much patriotic poetry written. Some of his poems, like "Det Eviga" and *Fritiofs Saga* have become classics, and were for many years required reading for all school children.

Tegnér was a son of the Enlightenment and the 18th century, liberal in his youth, but increasingly more politically conservative as the years passed. He united 18th century irony, wit, sensualism and admiration for reason and clarity with the 19th century romantic hero-worship, belief in inspiration, and the greatness of imagination and poetry. In his poetry we meet the legendary figures of both Homer and Snorre. His irony and wit are most shown in his lively and well-written letters, where he can leave the rhetoric required at great official events, such as jubilees, and in patriotic poems. Tegnér had read the sceptic Voltaire, but was also influenced by Plato, Kant, Schiller and Goethe. In some aspects he was a romanticist, but he was critical to the new romantic movement in Swedish literature of the time – the Phosphorists<sup>2</sup> – on behalf of reason and clarity. He carried on the "classical inheritance."

In 1811 he became a member of a literary society called Götiska Förbundet (The Gothic Society). It wanted to revive interest in the ways and writings of the Vikings. Although sceptical to the possibility of such a revival, Tegnér participated in the activities and wrote poems on Old Norse subjects, the greatest among them being *Fritiofs Saga*. It is a story told in twenty four poems; a story about the love between the bold viking Fritiof and the lovely Ingeborg. They are separated and reunited. It is also about Fritiof's search for peace in his soul, and reconciliation with the god Balder, whose temple Fritiof had set on fire through an accident and has to rebuild.

This Götiska Förbundet seems strangely familiar to a member of a Tolkien Society: the members took names of characters from the Norse sagas, published a magazine, had habits like greeting each other with an old and at that time obsolete word "hej"<sup>3</sup> and singing a song "Göterna fordom sutto i ring" (The Goths of yore used to sit in a ring – my translation).

When the poems about Fritiof were published, Esaias Tegnér was already a member of the Swedish Academy.<sup>4</sup> He was also Bishop of the diocese of Växjö, in one of the southern provinces of Sweden.<sup>5</sup> For a very long time he tried avoiding to become a clergyman, the usual profession in those days for a man with his education. But he was ordained in 1812, despite his efforts to avoid it. He had never really worked in a parish before he became a bishop in 1824. Now he finally received an income that made him feel secure. He was not the most pious of bishops, but he was an able one, doing more than his duty. He was influenced by 18th century theology and had difficulties with believing in parts of Christianity, such as the Atonement. He once said "Theology is a skull covering a lily." But there is no need to call him a pagan or a hypocrite. He counted himself a believer, although he was theologically a child of his age. Being not only a poet but an educated and practical minded man, he desired that clergymen study philosophy, history and geography, as well as theology. He wanted to improve the education of would-be clergy and those in the ordinary schools. As a bishop, he suspended bad priests and drunkards. Many new churches, well known for their bigness and lack of beauty, were built to meet the needs of the time. A loving person, he brought light and mirth to the parishes he visited. He was also for a time a member of the Swedish Parliament.

While he was bishop, he fell in love with a young woman, Emilie Selldén, who became his open mistress. Earlier he had been seriously in love with a woman who became his friend and confessor, but not his mistress. It is said that he needed his capable wife, but could not help falling in love with young, beautiful and witty women.

The 1820s and 30s were a time of hard work and growing fame, but also a time of passions and depressions. He also suffered from physical illness. The outcome of a depression was one of his few personal poems "Mjältsjukan" (an old Swedish word for "spleen or melancholy"), written in 1825 or 1826. It is well composed, but utterly sad and filled with disgust of life and poetry. In 1834 he wrote another more personal poem to his mistress "Den Döde" (The Dead Man). While it shows great skill, it is far removed from the rhetoric and trumpery of official speeches, being an appeal to the beloved to remember him when he is dead, because not even death can still his love.

In 1840 Tegnér suffered a stroke. In the remaining years

he was from time to time reckoned insane, and spent a period in an asylum in Germany. After a short period of recovery, he died in November 1846.

He lived in the era of early romanticism, but he was in a way a very unromantic person. Romanticism believed in "the mad genius," the madder the better. He was mad in his final years, but as such he was a bad poet and a worry and burden to his family, and this was neither great nor romantic.

Though he was for a great part of his life a bishop, and before that a scholar and a professor – a man working hard to perform his duties in the midst of society's problems, he saw himself primarily as a poet. His production was large, and as shown above, covered different subjects such as "the Giant's daughter Gerda," Napoleon, love melancholy, and appeals "pro patria." He is also renowned for his speeches in verse: at a jubilee celebrating the Reformation, at a jubilee of the Swedish Academy – where he vividly portrayed Swedish authors of the 18th century, and at solemn occasions at the University.

Four or five years before his death he wrote one of the few good poems of that period: "Avsagd" (Farewell). There he declares that "only singing did I truly live" (my translation) and says farewell to poetry which was "reality for me, and life in life and core of reality" (my translation).

When I think of the link between Swedish romanticism and English fantasy, between the rather free-thinking Swedish bishop Tegnér and the great apologist for orthodox belief C.S. Lewis, I sometimes smile. The two men do not seem to have very much in common! But thinking it over, I find some things shared between them, besides their interests in the old Norse sagas. First, they shared a broad outlook: they tried to unite the traditions from Athens, Jerusalem, and the pagan North – although Lewis had more of Jerusalem and Tegnér more of Athens. Second, they used those old things in new ways. For example, in *Fritiofs Saga* the subject is taken from a late Norse saga but the mode of verse in some of the poems is in Shakespearian blank verse. I do not think it is necessary to give examples of how Lewis used old myths in his very personal manner! Third, they admired clarity in thought and expression. Tegnér lived in the era of romanticism but opposed obscurity that was part of much romantic poetry. He was a classicist, a defender of reason who once said "the obscure saying tells the obscure thought" (my translation).

But in the works of C.S. Lewis we can see how this admiration for reason and fight for clarity in thought and expression is mixed with the love for myth and saga in a way that is not making theology more shallow or is carried away from orthodoxy – just the exact opposite.

(Endnotes continued on page 60)

concluding conversation with a Valley Archivist, they politely disagree over the importance of history. The latter finally asks Pandora to define history. Pandora says: "A great historian of my people said: the study of Man in Time." But she adds: "You aren't Man and you don't live in Time... You live in the Dream Time." "Always" says the Archivist. "Right through Civilization, we have lived in the Dream Time" (172). The "Bitter grief" in the Archivist's voice is not intelligible in terms of her character. Rather it is another dramatization of the oscillation between affirmation and doubt, which comprises utopian hope in *Always Coming Home*.

Although Le Guin's latest exploration of "no-place" is open-ended in its self-consciousness over utopia's seemingly impossible relation to history, it nonetheless means us to come away from the novel admiring and even longing for the Valley. This intention is illustrated by several points of affirmation in the "return" phase of Pandora's and the reader's circular journeys. Through Pandora's frequent addresses to her audience, she and we, her readers, have been united, both by our guilt as participants in an oppressive society – basically the Caucasian First World – and by our corresponding inability to imagine a historical beginning to "utopia" without an apocalypse. This guilt has no "solution" in the novel except perhaps the necessity of acknowledging it and then going on, or returning, to the work of imagining utopia. Thus, one of the points of affirmation occurs in the section "Pandora Gently to the Gentle Reader" (339), in which she imagines leading an overzealous reader into the Valley. Pandora's and the reader's interdependence is emphasized: she begins "When I take you to the Valley," and ends "we have a long way yet to go, and I can't go without you" (339). The motif of the hope in Pandora's box also recurs here when she says: "We'll go on, I hope and we'll see the roofs of the little towns..." (339). The "I hope" reminds us of the tenuousness of utopian hope even as it indicates Pandora's dependence on the reader's willingness to travel with her.

Pandora and the reader also arrive separately at moments of affirmation. Pandora writes three poems that show that the paradoxes that have caused her anxiety are now resolved, but inside or from the Valley. She openly allies herself with the Kesh mentality that prefers Coyote's origin myth and says "What luck, to have got here to the Valley!" (162) when she says in one of the poems "I don't care if I am possible" (487). This poem ("Newton Did Not Sleep Here") explains that the bridges between our world and the Valley are "Wind, the rainbow, / mist, still air" and that we can and must learn to walk on them.

While Pandora's resolution comes when she asserts her identity as Valley poet, we the readers are brought into closest contact with the Kesh by a poem written by them to us: "From the People of the Houses of Earth in the Valley to the Other People Who Were On Earth Before Them" (404-05). This poem brings the recurring metaphor of

children full circle: here the Kesh explain that they have always been among us as the "other" – the "sold woman," the "enslaved enemy," the "hungry" and "the powerless" and finally "the children" that we did not know:

We were the words you had no language for.  
O our fathers and mothers!  
We were always your children.  
From the beginning, from the beginning,  
we are your children. (405)

The effect of this affirmation is critical or open-ended because it asserts that the responsibility for having helped to imagining utopia is defined by our responsibility for having helped imagine this real world into being. In this double responsibility lies the possibility of utopia. Perhaps more than time this is Pandora's gift to us. \*

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### Tegner's Saga, continued from page 56

#### Endnotes

1. Through his mother Esaias Tegnér was related to some other important authors: Erik Gustaf Geijer, who lived at the same time as Tegnér and knew him personally. He was an historian (I think Karl Marx had read his works), poet and author of some hymns. He was also a famous apostate from political conservatism to liberalism. His change of view is by some called his apostasy. Gustaf Fröding, a poet who lived at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. He is still a popular author whose poems have in many cases been made into songs. Selma Lagerlöf the Nobel Prize winner, and author of some great novels. They were all born in the province of Värmland. Selma Lagerlöf and Gustaf Fröding were two of the leading authors in the literature of the 1890s, when fantasy and saga returned to Swedish literature after a period of naturalism and realism. Then authors retold tales from their home provinces reviving the interest in local folklore. Värmland's inhabitants became known as a joyful and a little bit crazy people.
2. The most important phonoscript was Per Daniel Amadeus Atterborn, a poet who is remembered as the author of fairy-tale play called *Lyskägglens Ö* (The Island of Bliss). The great part of his and the other Swedish romanticists' productions are not read today except by students of literature. There are some authors in Swedish literature who mixed romanticism and other influences who have survived.
3. Today, "hej" is the normal, familiar word of greeting.
4. This is the same Swedish Academy that administers the Nobel Prize of Literature. It was founded in 1786 by King Gustaf III, as part of his efforts to sponsor literature and art. It had the French Academy as a model. It edits a large dictionary of the Swedish language and promotes literature.
5. For those unfamiliar with the ecclesiastical situation in Sweden, after the Lutheran Reformation the Church of Sweden became the only and established state church. This continued until the late 19th century when different denominations, such as Baptists, came and were allowed to exist as Sweden became an increasingly modern, democratic society. The Church of Sweden is still the established church, a situation similar to that in England.