

The English Letters of Pastor Schrøter

By J. F. West, M. A.

To greet you, professor Christian Matras, on this happy occasion of your seventieth birthday, I know of no way more appropriate than by saying something about a Faroeman who almost exactly a hundred and thirty years before you, also celebrated his seventieth birthday in Tórshavn. He, like you, was unimpaired in physical and intellectual vigour, and was still diligently working for the advancement of his country, especially for the development of its language and its literature.

In an article in *Dansk biografisk leksikon*, you have yourself given us the main outlines of the life of pastor Johan Hendrik Schrøter. He was born in Tórshavn on 25th February 1771, son of the government doctor Christian Gottlob Schrøder and Anna Elisabeth Hammershaimb. After his father's death while he was still a boy, Schrøter attended the Tórshavn Latin School from 1784 to 1790, before spending a year in school at Slagelse and entering Copenhagen University. In 1797 he returned to the Faroe Islands as curate to the minister of Suðuroy; and in 1804 he succeeded to the living. He retired in 1826; and two years later he settled in Tórshavn, where he lived until his death in 1851.

You tell us how Schrøter was an assiduous and skilful collector of the traditional poetry of the Faroe Islands, and that in his work for the Faroese language he forms a link between his two relatives on his mother's side, Jens Christian Svabo, and Venceslaus Ulricus Hammershaimb. Thus he helped to lay

the foundations of those studies which you have yourself carried forward with such distinction. But in Faroese historical studies, too, pastor Schrøter has much to tell us. For he was a man of all-inclusive interests, was always keen to establish contact with foreigners, and he kept up a vast correspondence. Indeed, he may well have been one of the main channels through which new ideas flowed into Faroe during that great age of change, the early nineteenth century.

For twenty years, Schrøter regularly exchanged letters with an English baronet, Sir Walter Trevelyan (1797—1879). The two first met in the summer of 1821 when, as a companion of the celebrated Danish geologist Dr. Johan Georg Forchhammer, Trevelyan spent four months in the Faroe Islands. The travellers spent two weeks on Suðuroy, during which time Trevelyan came to know the pastor well, since they twice travelled the length of Suðuroy together — southwards over the mountains, and making their return by boat along the east coast. They obviously became very friendly, for Trevelyan made a water-colour sketch of the pastor in the back of his Faroe journal.¹

However, the first of the large bundle of letters, written in English, from Schrøter to Trevelyan, now preserved in the British Museum², shows that for ten years after Trevelyan's departure from Faroe, the two had exchanged no word. It was after Trevelyan had made a present of books to the Faroe Islands Library, then recently established, that the two began to correspond. From June 1831 until Schrøter's death, they were constantly writing to one another, and from the old priest's letters to his English friend there emerges a very lively picture of the Faroe Islands in their first great age of economic and constitutional advance.

In view of Schrøter's notorious flights of fancy over the traditional history of the Faroe Islands, one may fairly ask what reliance may be placed on his letters as a source for the history of his own times. My judgement is that Schrøter's unreliability is strictly confined to his folk-lore, and that on

other subjects he is an intelligent and reliable witness. On folklore, indeed, we certainly do find him making some wild speculations. In a letter of 30th October 1832, he canvasses the probability of the Carthaginians having discovered the Faroe Islands in the course of trading voyages to Ireland, and he returns to this theme in several subsequent letters. By comparison, his treatment of King Sverre is fairly rational, and the version of *Det færøiske Sagn om Kong Sverre* which he sent to Trevelyan on 20th May 1848 is very similar to, but slightly longer than, the text later printed in *Antiquariske Tidsskrift* 1849—51. The most entertaining of all is a genealogy which Schrøter inscribed in the copy of his Faroese translation of the *Færeyinga Saga* which he sent to Trevelyan in 1833. In this, Schrøter traces his descent on his mother's side all the way from Grímur Kamban, by way of Sigmundur Brestisson and the Dame of Húsavík! Yet in these same letters Schrøter discusses international politics or the state of the Faroese economy, in terms that command our respect.

In the letters sent during the war of 1848—50, the reader gets a vivid picture of the sheer isolation of the Faroe Islands before the days of the electric telegraph and even of the steam packet. On 20th May 1848, Schrøter wrote to Trevelyan, who had sent him a supply of English newspapers by way of Shetland, as follows:

Dear friend!

Your friendly and interesting letter of March 13th I had the honour to receive April 26th, also the interesting newspapers, that affords me and others a more detailed information of the State, that now is so alarming for us here; a time of war in the reign is always a melancholy affair for the colonies. Our situation is now indeed precarious, and we are very anxious for news, as well deplorable as favourable. May God grant your honour's humane wish, that arbitration by the Powers may settle the quarrel, but at present it seems to me there is no prospect for that. That the Danes

at last will be overpowered, is evident, in case they are left alone to fight the battle.

Not only was news hard to come by, but few had a sufficient background of education and general knowledge to make a sound assessment of it. For instance, further on in his letter of 20th May 1848, Schrøter writes:

A Prussian doctor from Jena is now here investigating the zoology. He has already got several fine specimens, but no new species. He intended to remain here to the month of August, but is now afraid and will return to Norway with a Norwegian brig freighted with timber for the Monopoly to this port. Still, he was sure to be safe here for us, although there are some foolish farmers in Kollefiord, that imagine he is the Prince of Augustenberg disguised in such clothes! I did laugh heartily when one of them told me he was sure it was him.

Several of the letters of 1848 show how enthusiastic the support was which the Faroe Islanders afforded to the Danish cause. Schrøter speaks of the collection taken up for the war:

All are here enthusiastic in the King's cause. We in Thorshavn subscribed to war expenses 1,360 Rbd., about £150, from this poor town. It was thought well enough. The Sheriff, Judge, Doctor and Minister subscribed each 50 Rbd., but Merchant Nolsøe 500. You may also conceive that his property is much improved since you were here. I subscribed 100 Rbd., my housekeeper 20 Rbd., and my servant, a poor lad, 5 Rbd., the fourth of his wages. One Faroese went along with our trader to enlist for a sailor on a man-of-war.

In his next letter, Schrøter tells how the total collection was expected to amount to between 3,500 and 4,500 Rbd.,

from a population of 7,880. Schrøter later speaks of several Faroemen who volunteered for service in the army or navy. There seem to have been about three volunteers in the navy, and ten in the army, including one officer, Lieutenant Bærentsen of Sund. The letters do not tell of any Faroemen killed or injured, though one was taken prisoner after the destruction of the warship *Christian VIII*. Within a few months, his parents got a letter from him with the news that he was being quite well treated.

Always uppermost in the old priest's mind was, however, the development of the Faroese economy. Dry statistics will easily show how the twenty years covered by the correspondence were vital for the development of the Faroese fishery, and important, too, for Faroese agriculture. Indeed, Schrøter himself provides plenty of statistics, for both he and Trevelyan liked them — but he also gives us a human angle on the developments. We learn who made the experiments and what feelings they had about the new age.

Schrøter was an enthusiast for an increase in the Faroese population and for a corresponding increase in cultivation. In his very first letter he tells Trevelyan that if four times as much land were to be cultivated, Faroe would be happier with 20,000 inhabitants and free trade, than then with 6,500. In a letter of 20th September 1836, he speaks with pride of how much land round Tórshavn had been brought under cultivation since Trevelyan's 1821 visit:

If you could see the territory around Thorshaven, I am convinced you would find upwards of 100 acres English now better cultivated than the former infield of the King's farm; and for all that, the sheep are more numerous and fatter.

In July 1847, he remarks on the change in the physical appearance of the area round the town:

The prospect of the enclosures around Thorshavn is now really charming if compared with its wild aspect formerly. I hope it will increase hastily. I suppose it is most of the stones cleared away, and the land well drained.

In the last year of Schrøter's life we read that 200 acres (80 hectares) were under cultivation, and that the purchase of this land by the smallholders was then under discussion.

The farming experiments carried out by Schrøter and his friends in the last 20 years of his life, with the aim of improving husbandry, make quite an impressive list. In 1836, he sent to Shetland for seed potatoes. Next year, he planted Shetland rhubarb with success. In 1842, he tells of successful cabbage cultivation on the Shetland pattern, allowing two seasons for growth, with turf ashes applied the first year, and strong manure the second.

Schrøter was also keen on the improvement of the animals of the Faroe Islands. In 1832 he imported a young ram from Shetland, and in 1844 he was speculating on the idea of introducing apalca sheep. That year, too, he and some of his friends tried the method, recommended by Trevelyan, of salting grass instead of making hay. Next year, Trevelyan sent him some seeds of tussock grass from the Falkland Islands. Schrøter remarks:

This is indeed very curious that I now in my old age have had the fortune to plant grass from Isles hardly mentioned in our geographical books, when I was a boy.

However, he had the same difficulty with this grass as he had with his cabbages — the sheep persisted in breaking into his enclosure in winter and eating the plants. Schrøter also had very good results with turnip and carrot seed sent him by Trevelyan, and after the Irish potato disease appeared in Faroe, he tried out Danish seed potatoes.

In the development of the fisheries, the decade 1841 to

1850 was a vital one. The importance of the pilot-whale fishery in this period is very clearly illustrated. Schrøter tells with obvious excitement how 3,146 whales were killed in 1843; 2,300 in 1844; over 2,500 in 1845; and 2,962 in 1847; and that the 1846 figures was only low because of the measles epidemic. We read of the introduction of the net at Vestmanna, of how in 1844 the Monopoly ran out of barrels for this unexpected harvest of train-oil, how farmers started feeding whale-meat to cattle, and how the very bones became an article of export to England. We find, too, that the law of 1833 covering the distribution of meat after a killing (still, in essentials, the method used today) follows a system devised by pastor Schrøter and his brother-in-law Jørgen Frands Hammershaimb, and first used on Suðuroy as early as 1801.

Perhaps the most interesting detail in Schrøter's account of the development of the cod fishery is what he says of the Icelandic fish-curer Jacobæus, whose work in Tórshavn led to the summer labours of the Faroese fisherman henceforth bringing a fair return. In a letter dated 1st September 1845, he says:

The klipfish curer has bought so much raw cod from poor people here in Thorshavn and hereabout, that it dried exceeds 6 tons. This is a great benefit to the poor fishermen, as they otherwise in these two months, from 15th June to 15th August may lose all their fish by vermin. Now it is paid them £15 per ton, that is, £90, or above 800 rigsbankdollars. It would be far more, but the stormy weather did not permit them to go outside of Nolsøe. Still, it is to continue. The fishcurer has bought a house here in Thors-havn, and one of the fishing sloops is to remain here.

In 1849, the fish-curer was training some of the boys and girls of Tórshavn in his craft.

Schrøter was keen for freeing the trade and improving navigation to the Faroe Islands. He was concerned not only

with commerce, but with news and public enlightenment, and with opportunities for conducting his extensive correspondence. Even in those days of monopoly, however, more vessels sailed to and from Faroe than might be imagined. Schrøter sent letters by Shetland fishing-sloops, by odd traders taking bones to England, and by shipwrecked seamen returning home, as well as by the ships of the Royal Danish Monopoly. It emerges from the letters, too, that there was far more commercial contact between Faroe and Shetland at this period than is generally realised, and that amtmand Pløyen's visit to Shetland in 1839 was far from the only occasion when men and ideas travelled between the two archipelagoes.

During this period, too, more and more foreign travellers were finding their way to the Faroe Islands — and pastor Schrøter met them all. Schrøter's English letters are thus not only important in themselves, but also important as pointers towards further source documents on Faroese history of this period which may be awaiting our discovery. The most important of the many visitors to Faroe during this period were a French expedition under Paul Gaimard in 1839; professor Robert Bunsen and his companion professor Bergmann who paid a brief visit in 1846; and the English naturalists John Wolley and J. T. Edge, who made a five-week ornithological tour in 1849. What may be found among the papers of these travellers remains to be seen. It is not impossible that even texts of Faroese *kvæði* are still to be discovered among them. On 10th September 1839, in speaking of the visit of the French expedition, Schrøter writes:

We were all in company one night trying the Faroese dance. They got from me some old songs about Charlemagne and some other French kings — likewise some account of Faroe.

And it may well be that he repeated this kindness for other visitors.

With these letters is a photograph of the old pastor taken in 1849 — one of the very first photographs made in the Faroe Islands. It was taken by Sergeant Jaeger of the Tórshavn garrison, who possessed a daguerrotype apparatus. Schrøter is dressed in his canonicals, and is wearing a wig. He tells us how this came about — not through vanity, as one might think:

I was that day baptizing a child, and in the costume of the Lutheran Church, but I was totally ignorant how to place me, and I thought only my face was to be seen on the plate. That is why my hands are seen; and I had my wig on, because it was cold, and there was no opportunity to sit in a house. This is the reason why I perhaps look a little younger than I am.

It was two years before a suitable opportunity arose to send this photograph to England in safety; but the summer before Schrøter's death (14th November 1851), H. C. Müller travelled from Faroe to England to visit the Great Exhibition, and took the portrait with him. Thus we are able to gaze on the features of this kindly, gossipy old man who, in his letters to his English friend, has left us such a vivid series of sketches of his times.

ÚRTAK

Greinin endurgevur í stuttum sumt av innihaldinum í brævasavni, skrivaðum av Johan Hendrik Schrøter presti (1771—1851), til enska baronetin, Sir Walter Calverley Trevelyan, og nú í varðveitslu á British Museum í London. Høvundurin sýnir á, at hóast Schrøter, tá hann nemur við føroysk siðsøgulig evni, her eins og aðrastaðni er nóg so sprækin í sínum hugflogi, lýsir hann kortini við brøvum sínum í mongum øðrum førum líkindini í Føroyum í tíðarskeiðinum 1831—1851.

Millum tey evni, sum nomið er við í brøvunum, eru viðurskiptini í Føroyum í stríðsárunum 1848—1850; velting upp úr nýggjum í Føroyum, eina mest um Havnar-leiðina; ein long røð av landbúnaðarroyndum; og

gróðurin í føroyskum útróðri. Ókunnufólk, ið vitjaðu Føroyar í hesum árum, verða øll umrødd, og høvundurin ætlar, at ensku brøv Schrøters fara at fáa undan kavi mangt nýtt, virðismikið tilfar viðvíkjandi føroyskari søgu fyri hetta tíðarskeiðið.

REFERENCES

1. The Trevelyan Diary is now preserved in the University Library, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, together with a small number of letters of Faroese interest.
2. British Museum Add: 29,718/9.

Thanks are given to the British Museum for permission to reproduce the portrait and to quote extracts from the letters.