



# The Multifarious Editions of Hans Christian Andersen

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**Brian Alderson** on how Andersen has been published.

In 1893 the Scandinavian scholar R Nisbet Bain wrote sternly about the poor quality of translations of Andersen. Why then have Andersen's stories continued to be subjected to a plethora of cavalier retellings? **Brian Alderson** explains.  
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Well, here we are at the beginning:

*Der kom en Soldat marscherende henad Landvejen: Een, To! Een, To! han havde sin Tornister paa Ryggen og en Sabel ved Siden...Saa mødte hen en gammel Hex paa Landeveien, hun var saa aekel, hendes Underlaebe hang hende lige ned paa Brystet...*

Thus the first words in the first tale in the first little volume of children's stories by Hans Christian Andersen: **Eventyr fortalte for Børn** published in Copenhagen in 1835:

*A soldier came marching along the road: one, two! one, two! He had his knapsack on his back and his sword by his side?But then he met an old witch on the road. She was so ugly her lower lip hung right down on her chest? [my translation].*

What then is Andrew Matthews up to in his recently reissued **Orchard Book of Best-Loved Stories from Hans Christian Andersen** ?

*A soldier was walking smartly down the road, with a pack on his back and a sword at his side...He hadn't gone far before he met an ugly old witch, whose bottom lip hung down over her chin.*

What happened to the dramatic 'one, two! one, two!?' Who says that 'he hadn't gone far?' Why has that underlip got shorter? 'Ah,' Mr Matthews will probably say, 'I'm not doing a translation. Look at my Foreword to the book. What I'm doing is a 'retelling' and I say there that my aim is 'to make the stories immediate and enjoyable for a modern audience, while staying true to the spirit of Andersen'.'

A debatable point, Mr Matthews. For have you not in those opening words to 'The Tinderbox' actually reduced the immediacy, added a redundant phrase, and sliced out one or two phrases which are essential to 'the spirit' of your author? Is a modern audience really too lacking in powers of concentration that they need to be cosseted along with an unnecessary abridgment?

But perhaps it's not always a question of their concentration. Perhaps there's another school of thought which sees Mr Andersen as altogether too brusque in his storytelling methods. For the publishers of the **Oxford Treasury of Fairy Stories** (2003) 'The Tinderbox' features as a traditional story that has been 'loved for hundreds of years' [ie. a hundred and seventy] and is thus fair game to be 'brought to life as never before' by a 'world-class storyteller',

Geraldine McCaughrean:

*There was once a leaf trembling on a twig, the twig on a branch, the branch on a tree [keep going, gentle reader, this is the start of 'The Tinderbox'] the tree by a road, and under the tree ? a big fat witch in an apron. Along the road came a soldier [who later turns out to be called Tommy] as thin and sharp-nosed as the bayonet on his rifle...*

By this time though Andersen is probably used to such travesties ? after all, his first English translator spelt his name wrong on her title-page ('Anderson?'). When his **Eventyr** first came out in 1835 he had already published poems, satires, theatrical pieces, travel sketches, and, just before the **Eventyr**, a novel, **Improvisatoren**, which was to make his name in Europe. But it was his friend, the physicist Ørsted who remarked of that book that it might make him famous but that the children's stories would make him immortal ? but as we now see, the cost of that immortality is a widespread misunderstanding that, like the Brothers Grimm in Germany, he was just retelling, Matthews-fashion, somebody else's tales. So why should not the reteller be retold?

### Literary creations

The answer is that his stories (which, in the official 'canon?', add up to one hundred and fifty-six) were literary creations whose texts must be regarded as no less sacrosanct than those of any other author. (How would Ms McCaughrean like it if we hacked her masterpieces around in an effort to bring them to life as never before?) The trouble is though that Andersen could not help but lay himself open to being traduced, first because he chose a form for his tales that brings them close to that of the ever-exploitable folktale, and second because he wrote them in a language that has little currency in the world beyond Denmark's borders. The foundations for the immortality of the **Eventyr** lie in their succinctness, in the free play of the author's imagination, and, above all, in the directness of his communication with his listeners. Roundabout explanations, fanciful embellishments, are eschewed in favour of a diction that replicates the way a storyteller might tell his stories 'live?', with throwaway remarks, and puns, and funny or ironical jokes ? that was 'the salt' he said.

But in 1835 neither Denmark nor Europe was ready for such a novelty and although, with new tales coming from the press every year, Andersen soon became the most celebrated writer in his native land, his progress beyond was slower and was fraught by the problems which his texts posed for translators who could not appreciate the revolutionary nature of his style. (Germany took him up fairly rapidly and it was here that you find one translator, worried about the efficacy of a single pea in the princess's bed, upping the number to three peas, while a colleague, mistaking the Danish word 'grimme' for 'grøne', produced a story ? which later also appeared in England ? about a green rather than an ugly duckling.

### Awareness of style

Such foolishness has bedevilled a true understanding of Andersen's genius from that time forward. In 1893 a Scandinavian specialist at the British Museum Library, R Nisbet Bain, published his own translation of **The Little Mermaid and [twenty-six] Other Stories** and prefaced it with a highly critical assessment of all foregoing Victorian translations. He did not exactly turn the tide but from the 1930s onwards a new awareness of the special demands that Andersen's colloquial style imposed upon translators came to the fore and a sequence of sensitive and responsive texts in English were set in train. 1935 saw the emergence of R P Keigwin, who would later go on to translate 84 stories for what became known as 'the World Edition'. In 1937 the actor Paul Leyssac, who was half Danish, published one of the best ever translations in **It's Perfectly True, and other stories**; and after the War there were equally acceptable versions, all figuring in books for children, by L W Kingsland, Reginald Spink, and Naomi Lewis, whose Puffin edition is soon to be reissued as a hardback.\*

### Content and presentation

Now, with the worldwide fuss occasioned by Andersen's bicentenary, the signals have been set for yet more serious translations to be coupled up to the earlier models (no retellings here). And so well-recognised are the difficulties and

the pitfalls that await the translator that an extensive comparative assessment of what the market has to offer must turn to larger questions of content and presentation. If you look at that first 1835 volume, and many of its successors, you will hardly be impressed by Danish marketing strategies. Initially the tales came out in tiny scruffy booklets, without illustration, and it was left to superior tradesmen in Germany, and especially in England, to jolly things along a bit. Before Denmark ever saw an illustrated **Eventyr** there were German editions with litho-tints, and, in the first ever English translation in 1846, the first ever colour plates ? and even when Andersen found an acceptable Danish artist, Vilhelm Pedersen, his drawings were first engraved for a German publisher.

Since those times, England, Germany, and, later, the United States have led the world in variegated Andersens: anything from the six-volume **Complete Stories** done by Jean Hersholt for the Limited Editions Club of New York in 1949, with hand-coloured drawings by Fritz Kredel, to Berlie Doherty's rape of 'The Snow Queen' in a sloppy little paperback from Scholastic a year or two ago. If we accept that Andersen was first and foremost a storyteller rather than a story-writer then what matters are his texts with their own picture-making capacity, rather than somebody else's visualisations plastered alongside.

For this reason, much praise to Penguin and Granta for giving primacy to their translators' words (Nunnally and the Franks respectively). The first has only murky reproductions of Andersen's scissor cuts at the start of each story, and the second rather harsh reproductions of some of Pedersen's drawings. I grieve though at the distracting illustrative overkill which besets the new editions of the translations by Naomi Lewis and Neil Philip. In the latter case the overweight over-production is especially to be regretted because of all the new editions it is the one that seeks most eagerly to give us Andersen beyond the customary limits. For, as already noted, Andersen acknowledged 156 stories as his 'canon' and running through these is a thread of narrative craftsmanship and imaginative experimentation which must be fully taken into account before any wild generalisations are made about his place as storyteller. (A 'full set' ? and more ? can be had in another overweight volume: a complete reprint of Hersholt's translation issued as a single fat book by the British Library, but since I supplied a preface to it, along with notes on its reillustration, it must be out of bounds for this discussion.)

### **The diversity of Andersen's storytelling**

In a rough computation one could say that 'the general reader's' Andersen, and perhaps 'the child reader's' too amounts to some thirty tales, mostly appearing at points between 'The Tinderbox' of 1835 and 'Blockhead Hans' of 1855. All the stories included in Naomi Lewis's book belong within this group, eighteen of the twenty-two in Frank, and twenty of the thirty in Nunnally. In Philip however almost half the forty stories are taken from the less frequently visited parts of Andersen-land, giving some sense of the diversity of his storytelling.

It would be misleading to say that some of those parts are not depressing or mawkish (death comes as standard in the **Eventyr** ) or that children are perceived as the intended readers. A story like his final one, 'Auntie Toothache' (to be found in Nunnally and Frank), questions the whole validity of his art, while one like 'The Will-o'-the-Wisps are in Town' (only in Hersholt) treats the subject almost as an exercise in surrealism. In these outermost seas of narrative it is hard to see retellers finding any profitable trade ? the early translators had a hard enough job fathoming what he was up to ? but a more attentive reading of the later tales may help to convince those who offer Andersen to children that his artistry extends beyond the conventional limits. As old Nisbet Bain said in 1893, there was a 'want of reverence' among those who simplified or distorted his tales: 'a feeling that he was, after all, a mere teller of fairy tales, of trifles, which might be Englished anyhow and by anybody?'. So to do is a betrayal not just of Andersen but of children too.

\* Synopses of past failings are given in such modern biographies as those by Elias Bredsdorff (1975) and Jackie Wullschlager (2000), and dire examples are currently on view in the exhibition at the British Library.

The illustrations are taken from **The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen** , selected and translated by Diane Crone Frank and Jeffrey Frank with the original illustrations of Vilhelm Pedersen and Lorenz Frolich, published by Granta, 1 86207 760 6, £9.99 pbk.

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