



Andersen and the English

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Brian Alderson on English translations and illustrations of **Andersen**.

Brian Alderson surveys attempts to translate Andersen in words and pictures.

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When Patrick Hardy asked me to undertake the new edition of Andrew Lang's **Colour Fairy Books** for Kestrel, one of the things that we had to decide was what to do about Andrew Lang's texts. For although these twelve books make up a great treasury of the world's folk tales they preserve them in a form that is often stilted when compared to the fluency of the told story, and may often sound cumbersome to the listener in the late twentieth century.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in Lang's treatment of Hans Christian Andersen, who enters the series in the fourth volume, **The Yellow Fairy Book**. Here, and in its immediate successor, the **Pink**, Lang includes some sixteen tales from Andersen - about whose nationality he seems uncertain. For although at one point he refers to him as 'our Danish author', he also calls him 'Herr Andersen' and specifically states that his translator, Alma Alleyne, has worked from German versions of the stories. As a result, the texts of Andersen in the original **Yellow** and **Pink** fairy books do not measure up to the character (or sometimes even the structure) of their source stories. Thus, as with many other stories in the series, we decided to pitch Andrew Lang (and Alma Alleyne) overboard and to introduce versions which we hoped would have a more authentic flavour to them.

Andersen is a particularly good example of this need for editorial tinkering because, unlike the anonymous tellers of the folk tales, he exerts a powerful and intensely personal influence on his stories. His Danish **Eventyr** may carry about them the hints of a traditional past, but they are impregnated with his individual character as a storyteller. Only rarely before the **Eventyr** began to appear in 1835 had anyone allowed the voice of the storyteller to emerge with such assurance in a children's book (look at the first sentences of the first story, **The Tinder Box**), and never had that voice had the range of inflection that Andersen commanded. Conversation, irony, straight narrative, throwaway asides - the stories possess a battery of effects that are the property of a live narrator confronted by a live audience. If an editor or a translator does not recognise this fundamental quality in Andersen's stories then he is selling both his author and his readers short.

In working on the Lang 'Fairy Books' therefore (where I decided to do the translation myself), and in considering what to say about versions of Andersen that I meet up with as a reviewer, my reaction is governed by one factor only: truth to the original. Truth, that is, as far as can be managed in the impossible business of converting fluent, near-colloquial Danish Andersen into an English equivalent.

I realise that this is not a very fashionable attitude (and never has been). I notice, for instance, in the 1983 **Signal Review of Children's Books** that that eminent editor, Judy Taylor, can happily praise the pictures and dismiss the typography of a couple of Andersen picture books, without commenting at all on what has happened to the original raw

material; and I notice that the annotator (Elaine Moss?) of the **Good Book Guide to Children's Books** (1983) can endorse as 'sensitive' Naomi Lewis's truncated text of **The Snow Queen** without questioning if massive abridgments of this masterly tale are legitimate. (I draw a veil over the rubbish in that same annotation about Errol Le Cain's deeply *insensitive* illustrations.)

Nevertheless, it was in the hopes of justifying a critical stance which makes Andersen paramount that I wrote for IBBY a booklet on what the poor man has suffered at the hands of his English admirers. In that all-too-brief essay and survey I tried to show how his genius has had to struggle against dull and thoughtless translators, and how his incomparable style has too often been obtruded upon by Le Cain-like gentlemen with clever paintbrushes. But even though I list in this booklet some ninety-three English editions of Andersen in one form or another there are precious few that I would care to recommend to the discriminating readers of **Books for Keeps**.

Without doubt the first choice (also, interestingly, just about the cheapest) is the collection of twelve tales translated by Naomi Lewis and illustrated by Philip Gough: **Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales** (Puffin, 0 14 03.0333 2, 95p). This little book is the outcome of many years' reflection on the nature of Andersen's genius, and it is put into English by a writer with a wonderful ear for the equivalencies of English prose - so that the rest of us, who are working too quickly or are too close to the edge of our knowledge sound jerky or unnatural by comparison. (This, I think, is one of the things that worries me about Erik Haugaard's version used in the **Classic Fairy Tales** illustrated by Michael Foreman. When it first came out I welcomed Haugaard's huge, complete Andersen (too) enthusiastically - partly because he made accessible so many stories that had never been properly translated before. On maturer reflection however, and after more experience, I find blemishes in the book - especially the tendency to expand phrases - which show up uneasily alongside such versions as those by Naomi Lewis.)

Of the other small collections that have many commendable features I would pick Stephen Corrin's often very alert fourteen tales in **Ardizzone's Hans Andersen** (Deutsch, 0 233 96996 9, £5.95) and Reginald Spink's reliable, workmanlike versions in the 'Children's Illustrated Classic' series (Dent, 0 460 02739 5, £2.50). It would be nice too to tell readers to go out and buy the largish selections that were translated by R. P. Keigwin (four volumes published by Edmund Ward) and by Paul Leyssac (a delightful version published by Macmillan in 1937) but these labours of love are long out of print. The same is true of L. W. Kingsland's translation for two books put out by the Oxford University Press, but some of his work has been brought back in **The Nightingale and Other Tales** (Worlds Work, 0 437 23062 7, £5.95), although here it is accompanied by crude and unacceptably intrusive illustrations by Mary Tozer.

For it is another corollary of my criterion for judging editions by Andersen that the illustrator should not overpower Andersen's own voice. This was something that he was nervous about himself, I suspect, since the early editions of his tales were all unillustrated and since he later chose draughtsmen like Pedersen and Frolich whose work harmonised so well with his own style. Today though, in the picture-book editions, there is hardly one where translation and pictures add up to a satisfying whole. Some interesting items have appeared in a longish series of landscape format picture books put out by Kaye & Ward, who do make an effort to print complete stories in standard translations, but the coloured illustrations are often very quirky (James's translation of **The Fir Tree**, 0 7182 0891 9, £3.50) illustrated by Otto S. Svend is perhaps the best example in print of this series at its most reliable). Rarely though do you find anything with the quality and care and affection that went into Nancy Ekholm Burkert's **The Nightingale**, with its matching translation by Eva Le Gallienne (Heinemann). But while so much dross - from Le Cain to Ladybird - flourishes, that truly 'sensitive' work is out of print.

In sum therefore, I find that I am recommending only about half-a-dozen of the sixty-odd books listed under 'Andersen' in the latest **Books in Print**, with perhaps half-a-dozen optional extras among the picture books. Is this, I wonder, seen by readers of **Books for Keeps** as a severe and unpractical thing to do, or is it (what I believe it to be) a rational attempt to do justice to a great writer?

Hesitantly, I also wonder whether a similar degree of selectivity might not be applied to less august children's books. The fat years, before Thatcher's Razor, encouraged a good deal of careless publishing and even more careless spending. A bit more rigour in deciding which books really are for keeps might well be welcome.

The Yellow Fairy Book,

ed Brian Alderson, ill. Eric Blegvad Kestrel, 0 7226 5435 9, £7.50

The Pink Fairy Book,

ed Brian Alderson. ill. Colin McNaughton. Kestrel, 0 7226 5703 X, £7.50

Brian Alderson's booklet **Hans Christian Andersen and his Eventyr in England**, IBBY (British Section) 0 903838 03 6, is available from Chris Kloet, Tameside Libraries and Arts. Council Offices, Wellington Road, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancs OL6 6DL. Price, £4.00 post free.

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