THE DIARY OF A PARISH CLERK
and Other Stories

Steen Steensen Blicher

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PREFACE

Denmark's great Golden Age poet and short-story writer, Steen Steensen Blicher, was born curious. And this curiosity aroused in him an interest in Denmark's great neighbour towards the west, even though Britain and Denmark were on opposite sides during the Napoleonic wars. It was initially such Scottish poets as James Macpherson, who appealed to him, and it was the latter's *Poems of Ossian* that subsequently caused him to compare the Scottish Highlands with the Jutland moorland.

Throughout his life Blicher, as pastor, poet, social reformer and hunter, retained his interest in everything British, and continued to find inspiration in British poetry and prose. He asserted in his memoirs that 'More than one Englishman had taken him to be a fellow countryman', despite the fact that English was at that time only spoken in Denmark by sailors and merchants. Famous novelists like Goldsmith and Scott were normally read in Danish translation.

This Scottish/English inspiration has given the Blicher Society reason to believe that there is a basis for sending this present selection, consisting of seven out of the available ninety short stories, across the North Sea, and outwards to the English-speaking world at large.

During his lifetime many of Blicher's stories were translated into German, and it would have pleased him to know that they have also been published in English. The aging writer's last application to the Danish king was for funds for a journey to Westmoreland in order to study the links between the English language and the Jutland dialect, and visit his friend, the linguist Richard Cleasby. But this journey never came about. When, in 1847, Cleasby died, Blicher wrote in a poem in

English: 'Yes, I have had you in my house/ and in my church, where you stood listening/ with awe and sung our Danish hymns.' Shortly afterwards Blicher himself died, leaving his short stories, which, together with Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, are among the greatest of Danish nineteenth-century literature.

The Blicher Society is delighted that this edition has come into being, and wishes to thank everyone, from the translator Paula Hostrup-Jessen, the authors Margaret Drabble and Knud Sørensen, the consultant, Professor Sven H. Rossel, Seattle, to the many Blicher devotees who have supported this venture in other ways.

The Society also wishes to thank The Athlone Press for their co-operation, as well as Queen Margrethe II and H.R.H. Prince Henrik's Foundation, Oskar and Lida Nielsen's Foundation, Konsul Georg Jorck and Emma Jorck's Foundation, The Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, The Royal Danish Embassy in London and The Danish Literary Information Centre for their economic support.

Erik Harbo
Chairman of the Blicher Society

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Drabble

Steen Steensen Blicher is a writer whose work, although proudly and profoundly Danish in character, was much influenced by English and Scottish literature. He never came to Britain – indeed most of his life was spent in his native Jutland – but his stories reveal strong links with our own literary history. Yet their interest is not antiquarian. They are as lively and accessible today as when they were first published.

Blicher speaks to us with apparent directness, arresting the reader's attention with an informal tone of personal intimacy and immediacy. His matter and manner seem engagingly simple: one can well understand why in Denmark he remains a classic, popular with readers of all ages. But on closer inspection, or on a second reading, we become aware that his stories work on several levels, and are neither as artless nor as naive as they appear. The short story as a form was young in his hands, when he published his first prose piece in 1824, and he developed it with a masterly narrative skill. He speaks to us, in fact, in many voices, all carefully differentiated. He prefers the first person, but we cannot trust what this first person tells us, for Blicher introduces us to a variety of what are now recognised as 'unreliable narrators', and many of the stories serve also as dramatic monologues, unfolding to us the personality, the prejudices, and the limitations of the story teller, as well as events of the tale he tells.

We meet here, in these freshly-translated versions, the parish clerk, perhaps Blicher's most celebrated character study, whose life remorselessly unfolds from the high hopes of youth to tragic stoicism; the child Steen, learning of but not quite comprehending adult passion and sacrifice; the poetic fop boasting of Copenhagen fashions, teased and mocked by

the village maiden; the wandering scholar, accidental witness to a tale of violence and derangement; the anguished judge, presiding helplessly over a mystifying miscarriage of justice; and the pastor, unable to give comfort to his closest friend. In each story of this collection (except the last, 'The Three Festival Eves', which represents a slightly different folk mode) we are aware of a psychological complexity beyond the immediate grasp of those who act as recorders or participants: Blicher, with remarkable economy, suggests an unexplored hinterland of suffering and longing. His style is lucid, but his characters elude simple moral judgements.

Perhaps the most enigmatic of his figures is 'Mrs L', the anti-heroine of 'Tardy Awakening', an intriguing precursor of Flaubert's Madame Bovary, or of some of Kipling's frustrated wives on the British Raj. The actions of this seductive small-town beauty are open to many interpretations: both her sexual desires and her calm acceptance of them are utterly convincing yet strangely opaque. She is a startling creation for a Jutland pastor, and we certainly cannot identify the pastor who describes her with the pastor Blicher who created both narrator and unfaithful wife. Scandalous stories were told about Blicher's own wife, and one feels there may be some autobiographical feeling here, but there is no edge of resentment. He writes neither as sentimentalist nor as satirist.

Beyond Blicher's psychological realism lies another hinterland. In the natural world which inspired both his prose and his poetry. His work is a powerful evocation of the Jutland landscape, with its bogs and brown moorland, its skylarks, its vipers, its stags, grouse and bittern, and its scattered population of peasants, farmers, poachers, gypsies, and huntsmen. A keen huntsman himself, Blicher uses many metaphors drawn from the sport, and his description of the duck-shoot in 'Alas! How Changed' is a small comic masterpiece. Writing in the Golden Age of Danish romanticism, he embodies the Romantic faith shared by his British and German contemporaries: he believed that we are formed by the landscape we inhabit.

Yet this landscape too has its paradoxes. Is it eternal, or is it in itself a symbol of change and decay? Blicher, like Walter

Scott, whom he greatly admired (though he did not like to be described as his imitator), was keenly aware that country ways of life, in the nineteenth century, were subject to irreversible change, and, like Scott, he was anxious to record them before they vanished, and to stimulate, if possible, a pride that would keep some of them alive. The theme of the passage of time sounds as a constant threnody in his prose, and it is no accident that his first published works were translations of the *Poems of Ossian*, by the Scottish poet James Macpherson. Ossian was said to be the last of his race, the last of the Gaelic bards of a vanished Scotland, and Blicher at times clearly saw himself as an isolated voice speaking from a remote world: Ossian's Scotland becomes Blicher's Jutland.

Did Blicher represent an end or a beginning? Like Scott himself, he represented both. Scott loved to dwell on heroic defeat, on the lay of the last minstrel, on the death of the Highlands, yet he created the historical novel as we know it – indeed, it is not too much to say that he helped to create the image of Scotland as we know it. Similarly Blicher, although possessed of a profound melancholy, a deep sense of the futility of human endeavour, and an interest in and sympathy with loss of class and status, was an energetic innovator. He opened the eyes of Denmark to the rugged beauties of one of its apparently less-favoured regions: he created the sensibility which would appreciate and conserve it. It is no surprise to discover that his work is invoked by the Danish Tourist Board.

Romanticism, as a movement, looked both ways, to the past and to the future. Its early stirrings, in the late eighteenth century, were more marked by a nostalgic sense of loss than by a revolutionary fervour: Ossian was only one of the 'end of the race' figures who attracted literary attention. Goldsmith wrote about the deserted village and the 'last and greatest' of the Irish bards, the blind Carolan; William Cowper wrote about lone castaways and blasted oaks and fallen avenues, and was quoted with approval by the anti-romantic Jane Austen. Thomas Gray, in 'The Bard', celebrated the last poet of Wales, defeated and forced to suicide by the invading English army under Edward I. A few decades later, Byron saw himself as

'the last and youngest of a noble line' ('Elegy on Newstead Abbey'), Southey sang of the 'Last of the Goths', and Mary Shelley in 1826 published a novel about the end of the world called *The Last Man*. One can see links of mood and subject in all these authors, most of whom blended a sense of patriotism with an awareness of inevitable defeat.

We can also see a connection with Walter Scott's exact contemporary, William Wordsworth. Wordsworth, like Blicher, was a man whose writing sprang from deep roots in place: like Blicher, he chose to wander the countryside, alone and on foot, interesting himself in all conditions of people. He met and cross-questioned shepherds, farmers, gypsies, tinkers, and women driven mad by loss. A character like the Hosier's Daughter would not be out of place in Wordsworth's first volume, *Lyrical Ballads*, and Blicher would, one feels, have recognised the dignity of Wordsworth's Simon Lee the Huntsman. Both writers sought the company of ordinary, often inarticulate people: indeed, Blicher extended his researches further than Wordsworth, for he is said in later years to have been quite at home drinking in the canal-side taverns of low-life Copenhagen, and unlike Wordsworth, although he became famous, he never became thoroughly respectable.

There is something poignant about the figure of Steen Steensen Blicher, Denmark's most celebrated author, shabby, in debt, and given to drink, wandering the countryside like a Wordsworthian beggar, like the ghost of himself. Yet this forlorn and seemingly helpless victim was and remained a highly conscious artist, keenly aware of the aesthetic and technical problems of presenting a world as yet unpainted and unsung. In his work, he was no primitive. Should he, we can see and hear him wonder, opt for a 'Scottish realism' of overloaded detail, or for the discursive style of the village storyteller, or for the detached scholarly narrator, or for mock-epic, or for a Netherlandish 'low-life' canvas? His varied choices are all deliberate. He may well have learned not only from Scott and Ossian, but also from the innocent first-person tale of Goldsmith's long-suffering and heartbreakingly optimistic Vicar of

Wakefield, whose adventures Blicher also translated. Yet Blicher's style and his subjects are his own, and they are timeless.

In one of his finest works, 'The Diary of a Parish Clerk', through one voice recording one bewildered and disappointed life, Blicher can make us hear the sound of history. Morten Vinge, in his last diary entry, describes himself as 'a leafless tree on the moors' and 'the last of my family': the phrases have a romantic, Ossianic ring, but Morten and Blicher have outlived Ossian, and they share a stubborn brave resilience. Macpherson's Ossian was a sentimental forgery: Blicher's Morten is the real thing.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

FOOTNOTES

Since Steen Steensen Blicher himself employed footnotes, not only in order to clarify various terms and phrases in the Jutland dialect but also to provide dramatic effect, I have retained those of his footnotes which are relevant to the English translation. They are to be found at the foot of the page concerned. Additional notes which I have considered helpful for the English-speaking reader are collected page by page at the end of the book.

I should like to thank Professor Sven H. Rossel of the University of Washington, who has acted as consultant on this project, the opera singer Erik Harbo, Chairman of the Blicher Society, for his help with the Jutland dialect and Blicher's characteristic use of the Danish language, and, not least, my husband Carl Hostrup for his never-failing support.

I am grateful to the Danish Literary Information Centre for financial support, and to the British Centre for Literary Translation, University of East Anglia, for providing me with a month's respite from other tasks. I am furthermore indebted to the social historian, Dr Victor Morgan of the University of East Anglia, who helped to clear up several trans-cultural translation problems.

Paula Hostrup-Jessen

STEEN STEENSEN BLICHER'S LIFE

1782 Blicher is born in Vium parsonage on 11 October.
1796 The family moves to Randlev in East Jutland.
1796 Pupil at Randers grammar school.
1799 Matriculation. Commences theological studies at the University of Copenhagen.
1807 Publishes Vol. I of the translation of *Poems of Ossian*.
1809 Publishes Vol. II.
1809 Obtains a doctorate in theology.
1810 Appointed master at Randers grammar school. Marries his late uncle's 17-year-old widow, Ernestine Juliane.
1811 Appointed farm manager at father's parsonage in Randlev.
1814 Publishes first collection of poetry, *Poems. Part I.*
1819 Appointed pastor of Thorning-Lysgaard.
1824 Publishes his first short story, *Fragments from the Diary of a Parish Clerk*.
1826 Appointed pastor of Spentrup-Gassum.
1827 Publishes translation of Oliver Goldschmidt's *The Vicar of Wakefield*.
1828 Writes his first poem in the Jutland dialect, inspired by the Scottish poet William Laidlaw.
1833 Publishes his short stories for the first time in book form.
1839 Arranges the first big mass meeting in Denmark on the Jutland hill, "Himmelbjerg" (Sky-Mountain).
1842 Collects his dialectal writings and publishes the work, *E Bindstouw* (The Knitting-Room), with its genuine appeal to the common people.
1848 Dies on 26 March.

Blicher wrote 95 short stories and about 340 poems. He is the author of several translations and wrote many works dealing with rural economy and social reform. His complete oeuvre fills 33 volumes, *c.* 7000 printed pages.

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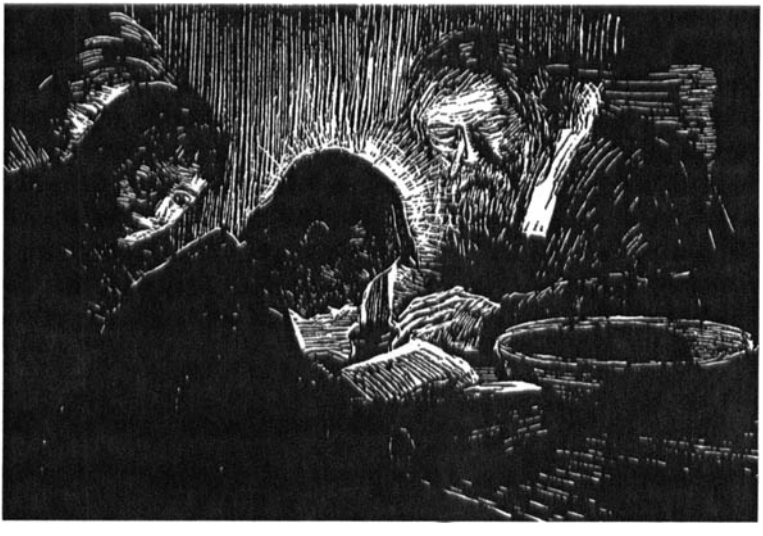
Føulum, January 1st, 1708

God grant us all a happy New Year, and save our good Pastor Søren! He snuffed out the candle last night, and mother says he will not live to see the next New Year[1] – but I dare say this has no significance. It was nonetheless an enjoyable evening: when Pastor Søren took off his cap after supper and said, in his usual fashion, *'agamus gratias!'*[2], he pointed at me instead of Jens. This was the first time I had read our Latin grace. A year ago today Jens said it; but then I had listened wide-eyed, for I didn't understand a word, and now I know half of Cornelius[3]. I have a feeling I shall become the Pastor of Føulum. Oh, how happy my dear parents would be should they live to



see that day! And then the pastor's Jens could become the Bishop of Viborg – as his father says. Well, who can tell? Everything is in the hands of God. His will be done! *Amen in nomine Jesu!*[4]

Føulum, September 3rd, 1708

Yesterday, by the grace of God, I completed my fifteenth year. Jens cannot rival me in Latin now. I am more diligent than he is: I stay at home and study, while he goes out hunting with Peer the gamekeeper. He will never become a bishop like that. Poor Pastor Søren! He knows it, to be sure; his eyes fill with tears when he sometimes says to him, *'mi fili! mi fili! otium est pulvinar diaboli!'*[5]

At New Year we are to start Greek. Pastor Søren has given me a Testament in Greek. 'It's a strange kind of scrawl, don't you think? And it still completely baffles you,' he said kindly, pinching my ear, as he always does when he is in a good mood. But bless us! – how surprised he will be when he hears I can read quite fast already!

Føulum, die St. Martini[6]

Jens is heading for a fall. Pastor Søren was so vexed with him that he spoke Danish to him all day. To me he spoke Latin; once I heard him say, as if to himself: *'vellem hunc esse filium meum!'*[7] It was me he meant. And how miserably Jens stammered at his Cicero! I know very well how it came about, because the day before yesterday, while his father was at a wedding in Vinge, he was with Peer the gamekeeper over in Lindum woods, and – God save us! – a wild boar tore his breeches to shreds. He lied to his mother and said that the Thiele bull had done it; but she boxed his ears soundly – *habeat!*[8]

Føulum, Calendis Januar[9], 1709

Proh dolor! Pastor Søren is dead – *vae me miserum!*[10] When we had sat down to dinner on Christmas Eve, he put down his

spoon and looked long and sorrowfully at Jens – *'fregisti cor meum,'*[11] he sighed, and went into his bedchamber. Alas, he never rose from his bed again. Since then I have visited him every day, and he has given me much instruction and good counsel; but now I shall never see him again. On Thursday I saw him for the last time; never shall I forget what he said after he had spoken to me most movingly: 'God give my son an upright heart!' He folded his bony hands and sank back on the pillow: *'pater! in manus tuas committo spiritum meum!'*[12] Those were his last words. When I saw the pastor's wife put her apron to her eyes, I ran out feeling very ill at ease. Jens was standing outside the door weeping. *'Seras dat poenas turpi poenitentia,'*[13] I thought; but he fell on my neck and sobbed. God forgive him his wildness! That is what has grieved me the most.

Føulum, Pridie iduum Januarii MDCCIX.[14]

Yesterday my dear father went to Viborg to arrange for my dinners when I start school. How I long for that time! I study all day, to be sure, but the days are so short now, and mother says we cannot afford candles to read by. I cannot make head or tail of that letter to Tuticanus[15] – no, things were very different when good Pastor Søren was alive. *Eheu! Mortuus est!*[16]

It is a terrible winter! The snowstorm wages furiously; there is a snowdrift reaching right to the ridge of our barn. Last night Jens shot two hares in our kitchen garden – he will soon have forgotten his poor father. But if Peer the gamekeeper finds out there will be trouble.

Føulum, Idibus Januarii[17], MDCCIX

Father has not come home yet, and the weather is as foul as ever – if only he doesn't lose his way. There goes Jens up at the barn, with his gun and a brace of birds in his hand – he's coming in here . . .

They were partridges he had shot on Mads Madsen's dunghill. He wanted mother to roast them, but she didn't dare, for the gentry might come to hear of it!

Føulum, XVIII Calend. Febr.[18]

Alas, alas! My dear father has frozen to death! The Squire of Kokholm found him in a snowdrift and has brought him home in his cart. I have wept so much that I can scarcely see out of my eyes – my mother as well. God help us both!

Føulum, February 18th

I hardly recognized Jens again – in the green coat he was wearing, and with a green feather in his cap. 'Can't you see', he said, 'I'm a huntsman now! And what are you? A schoolboy, a Latin-babbler!' 'Nay, God help us!' I replied, 'my Latin days are over. I can be the pastor where you're the bishop! My mother shall not starve to death while I'm singing at people's doors in Viborg.[19] I must stay at home and earn her keep. Alas, Jens, if only your father had lived!' 'Don't let's talk about that!' he said. 'I should never in my life have learnt Latin – the Devil take such twaddle! Now, listen! – you could get a place up at the Manor. You'd have a good time and live well!' 'How should I manage that?' I replied. 'Well, we'll have a try!' he shouted, and ran off. After all, he is good-natured, is Jens, but