

Denmark's Ugly Duckling



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon
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WHEN my wife and I went backpacking through 4 Nordic countries from August to October last year, we did not forget to visit Odense, the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen.

We all know Andersen. Like millions of people all over the world, we had grown up listening to his evergreen fairytales, and our children and grandchildren too enjoyed those tales as much as we did.

Andersen was not just a very successful story-teller. He was also a prolific writer who wrote many successful plays, novels, poems and travelogues. In fact, his life itself sounded like a fairytale and was much reflected in the widely read "The Ugly Duckling".

Andersen was born on 2nd April, 1805, to a very poor family. His father was a cobbler and his mother, a washer woman. He was, however, able to receive education with the financial support of a kind-hearted gentleman. From a young age, Andersen's ambition was to become a successful opera singer, but he later discovered that he had a greater talent for writing. Many of his plays were accepted for stage performances and his novels won critical acclaim. He also travelled quite widely and published many travelogues.

His greatest success was, of course, in the many fairytales that he wrote and which had become accepted as the embodiment of universal values. However, in his love life, Andersen was a total failure and this might perhaps be attributed to his lack of good looks. Despite trying hard, he never did win the heart of any woman and he died a bachelor on 4th August, 1875.

Today, the H.C. Andersen House in the heart of Odense is a museum that showcases his life and works.

Among the exhibits are sculptures, photographs, paintings and narratives. With enough time and patience to go through the exhibits, one will be able to gain quite a profound insight into Andersen's life from the information provided.

I was particularly intrigued by the part about Andersen's meeting with Charles Dickens when the former travelled to England in 1847. Andersen was pleasantly surprised to find that his fairytales and other works had been widely read overseas, and he even was a guest of Prince Albert in Scotland.

Dickens, 7 years his junior and a big admirer of his, invited him to stay with his family. But Andersen was not able to communicate well with Dickens and his family because of his poor command of the English language. He also over-stayed his welcome, much to the chagrin of the hosts. Yet Andersen truly believed that his meeting with Dickens was a great success and, in one of his travelogues, he described his stay in the latter's house in great detail. Dickens, appalled at the over-exposure of his private life, decided to terminate their friendship.

Andersen's fairytales have been translated into more than 155 languages, and his statues and those of the characters that he had created can be seen throughout Denmark and in many parts of the world. The bronze sculpture of The Little Mermaid sitting on a granite boulder at the Copenhagen waterfront for just over a century, is a national icon of Denmark and Andersen's works are now a common heritage of mankind. ■



Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.