

One of the two German phrases I know is, "Wir Pflügen," meaning, "We plow." (The other is, "Zwei gluwains, bitte," ostensibly, far more useful.) In its fuller title, "Wir Pflügen und wir streuen Den Samen auf das Land," would be better known to us as that most English of hymns, "We plough the fields and scatter... etc" - except that it's German! Written by Goethe's close friend, Matthias Claudius, it was based on a peasant thanksgiving song Claudius had heard while serving as a Commissioner of Agriculture, a concurrent post he held when he was a newspaper editor (and after regaining his faith following a nasty bout of atheism).

Thankfully, Jane Montgomery translated into English the shorter (6 verses) version of the original 17 verses(!) before she died on Dartmoor in a carriage accident.

Johann Schultz, a musician well known throughout northern Europe in the second half of the 18th century, had survived both trying to save the Copenhagen music library from a fire, and being shipwrecked. He then wrote the hymn's tune, which we all know so well.

Strange how someone's legacy ties in so much with the part others play. Strange, too, what it is that carries forward after we have gone.

Jesus said, "For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour." True: we all benefit from something that someone else has done.

But the converse is true, too. As Betjamin parodied, of the farms of his day, but applied here as an allegory for life in general:

We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground
So that no wicked wild flowers
Upon our farm be found.
We like whatever helps us
To line our purse with pence;
The twenty-four-hour broiler-house
And neat electric fence.
*All concrete sheds around us
And Jaguars in the yard,
The telly lounge and deep-freeze
Are ours from working hard.*

What, then, will we sow? What will others reap from it?

Graham