

The Life and Letters of N.F.S. Grundtvig

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Denmark's Catalyst: The Life and Letters of N.F.S. Grundtvig. Edward Broadbridge and Hans Raun Iversen. Aarhus University Press, 2023. Pp. 514. 499,95 kr.

Denmark's Catalyst is a remarkable achievement, both in its scholarly appraisal of N.F.S. Grundtvig's influence on the development of the modern state of Denmark and its penetrating view into the life of a complex individual. The biography completes a six-volume series on Grundtvig's work, including his thoughts on education, theology, history, and philosophy. That the series culminates with his biography and personal letters seems entirely appropriate, since Edward Broadbridge has dedicated much of his life to researching and translating the works that are necessary to understand the evolution of Grundtvig's thought and its influence on Danish society. This volume was released simultaneously in English and Danish (with Hans Raun Iversen assuming the lead role on the Danish edition). Having such an important resource immediately available to the English-speaking world shows remarkable foresight and commitment.

Grundtvig was born in 1783 into a Denmark that was monarchical, hierarchical, and deeply Lutheran. Grundtvig himself had come from a long line of Lutheran pastors, but the Lutheran consensus in Denmark was beginning to wane at the end of the eighteenth century, as anyone who reads Søren Kierkegaard can readily attest (and Kierkegaard was a contemporary of Grundtvig). Although deeply religious, Grundtvig struggled with many aspects of Lutheran theology and with the mandates of the state church being forced upon Danes without regard to their personal religious convictions. His early years were marked by a fascination with Nordic mythology and the German Romanticism of Schiller, Fichte, and Schelling. Indeed, his internal conflicts over his Christian upbringing and his desire to cast off the bonds of orthodox Christianity led to a mental breakdown at an early age. Given his romantic leanings, it comes as something of a surprise that this existential crisis did not result in a rejection of

the church, but rather a dramatic moment of conversion and, ultimately, embracing the call to priesthood.

But the call to church ministry did not end Grundtvig's intellectual and spiritual quest. He continued to publish translations of Norse mythology which he saw as books of wisdom that were entirely consistent with Christian principles. The triumph of the good in the cosmological battles of the Norse gods sets the stage for the triumphant Christ in the Christian's battle with the world. This idea is encapsulated in the Grundtvigian adage, "Human comes first and Christian next." In placing humanity first, Grundtvig does not seem to be suggesting that Christian truth is inferior to that expressed in the eddas and sagas; it simply recognizes that Christian theology is built upon an understanding and appreciation of what it means to be human. However, Grundtvig's appropriation of this truth would have profound implications for every aspect of Danish life.

One result of Grundtvig's inclination toward Romanticism is his idealization of women. Throughout his life he was attracted to women from the upper ranks of society. As a young man, he was employed as a house tutor for the son of a wealthy Danish family on the island of Langeland. During his stay there, Grundtvig fell in love with Lady Constance Steensen de Leth, his employer's wife. Constance was not only beautiful, but also charming, well-educated, and exceedingly kind to the young tutor in her household. Even though Grundtvig ultimately married Lise Blicher, the daughter of a rural dean, he continued to write poetry for years in celebration of Constance, rivaling the sort of devotion with which Dante wrote about Beatrice. It was a depth of feeling that he would never have for Lise.

Although Grundtvig served as a pastor in the Lutheran church, he broke with many Lutheran traditions. He engaged in an ongoing war with the Christian rationalists who felt Christianity was to be promoted through logical argument. Grundtvig felt strongly that belief was founded on the work of the Spirit, not on abstract arguments, and he openly rejected the idea that Danes were legally required to participate in Holy Communion, an imposition which he felt was clearly a violation of individual conscience. Because of his vocal rejection of the state imposing Christian beliefs and practices, Grundtvig often drew the ire of leading church officials and theologians. The attacks were so vicious that Grundtvig eventually resigned from his position in the Danish Lutheran church.

As Broadbridge and Iversen often note, Grundtvig's life not only paralleled the waning influence of the Danish church, but also the diminution of the Danish state. As a result of the Napoleonic wars, Denmark surrendered all the land that is now modern Norway. Then, with the rise of Prussian power in the region, the Danes lost control of the Schleswig-Holstein duchy at the base of the Jutland peninsula. In all, the Danes lost nearly four-fifths of their territory. One of Grundtvig's principal contributions was to unify the remaining area with a strong and independent national identity based on their Viking roots, their Christian heritage, and a strong sense of obligation to their fellow citizens.

As well as his philosophical influence, Grundtvig made a direct contribution to Danish identity through his many songs, poems, and hymns. He was a prolific writer who often served as an unofficial poet laureate on occasions of national importance, such as mourning the destruction of Copenhagen after the British bombardment of 1801 or composing a paean to Queen Caroline Amalie for her enlightened educational and political views. His original hymns served a similar purpose within the church, marking the major liturgical events of the year—Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. These songs lived in the people's hearts in a way that no sermon or political treatise ever could.

In addition to his influence on his native country, Grundtvig has also achieved international acclaim, primarily for his ideas on educational reform. Grundtvig found the educational institutions of his day to be dull and uninspiring. He wrote extensively about the "people's high school (*folkehøjskole*)," which differed in many ways from traditional Danish education. First, it would be a school for those who were not destined for university education. It would emphasize practical skills and civic education rather than rote memorization. Secondly, it would not just be for young people, but a "school for life" that would encourage adult education. Finally, it would create opportunities for teachers and students to interact with each other. In other words, Grundtvig wanted education to be a pleasurable experience, to be "life-giving." Broadbridge and Iversen chronicle in detail the way Grundtvig's vision continues to be carried out today through numerous academic conferences where Grundtvigian educational principles are being explored and model schools, in many nations, where these principles are being put into practice.

Grundtvig's life took a major turn in 1851 when Lise, to whom he had been married for 32 years, died at the age of 63. Grundtvig's life with Lise had often been difficult. He had befriended a number of beautiful, intelligent women over the years, and although these affairs remained platonic, they were no less hurtful to Lise. With Lise gone, Grundtvig pursued a relationship that he had already formed with Lady Marie Toft, a widow who had come to him seeking counsel on various religious questions. Their first encounter ended rather acrimoniously, but over time they grew close. Within a few months of Lise's death, they announced their engagement. Lady Marie was 30 years younger than her suitor, and in many ways she had more in common with Lady Constance, who had captured Grundtvig's heart as a young tutor, than with his former wife. In 1854, Marie gave birth to their son, Frederick, and a month later, she died from an infection. Grundtvig was heartbroken.

But this was not the end of Grundtvig's romantic attachments. In 1857, Grundtvig met with Lady Asta, a countess whose husband had recently died. Asta knew Grundtvig through her acquaintance with Lady Marie Toft. She, too, was attracted to the spiritual wisdom of this kindly old man, and in April of 1858, Grundtvig was once again a married man, and in 1859, at the age of 76, he was once again a father. Grundtvig would live with Asta until his death in 1872. Broadbridge and Iversen tell these stories with little commentary, but it is clear that Grundtvig had a nearly hypnotic effect on these women, who served him devotedly through his declining years. While such late-life romances might seem strange, perhaps even scandalous, to some, the marriages were, by all accounts, happy and successful. And they certainly speak to the vigor with which Grundtvig pursued every aspect of his life, whether speaking from a pulpit, campaigning for change in parliament, or participating in family life.

There is perhaps no *single* individual in American history with such wide-ranging influence over the formation of the United States as Grundtvig exerted on modern Denmark. George Washington was, no doubt, a foundational figure as a general and a politician, but for economics, philosophy, and theology, Americans would have to look elsewhere. But Danes generally recognize Grundtvig as the single most important voice in their national formation. Some of Grundtvig's stature may be due in part to Denmark's small land mass and cultural uniformity. His famous speech in Schleswig where he addressed 10,000 people from Skamling

Hill and defended their right to speak Danish in a duchy dominated by German-speakers might have been considered a minor regional event in a larger country. Similarly, his ability to appeal to the shared history and mythology of the Danish people might have been more challenging in a larger, more diverse country. Still, there is no doubt that Grundtvig was a remarkable influence on Danish character. Of course, there is also a potential for harm in a strong nationalist state. While political scientists are well aware of the importance of nation-building through symbolic acts—think of Grundtvig’s songs and hymns—there is also a sobering historical record of nationalism leading to both wars of conquest and internal purges. When Grundtvig proclaims the glories of Denmark, even suggesting its churches are the culmination of Christian history, it is possible to cringe, knowing how such ethnocentrism can lead to dire consequences. The balance between a healthy national identity and a pernicious xenophobic intolerance remains the great challenge of democratic states. Denmark seems to have navigated well between that Scylla and Charybdis; its neighbor to the south did not fare as well.

For those who are students of Denmark’s history, this careful study of Grundtvig’s life provides an indispensable resource for coming to a deeper understanding of its founding figure. But for those who have little acquaintance with Denmark’s formation, there is also much to be gained from this treatise. Denmark has been widely praised as a model democratic state, one in which principles of justice and fairness are not only enshrined in law, but also spring from the *zeitgeist* of the nation. In *Denmark’s Catalyst* we find great insight into the formation of those values that have given rise to the modern Danish state—values that many other countries might do well to emulate.