

The Sacred Core of Wisdom of Another Culture

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Steven M. Borish: The Land of the Living: The Danish folk high schools and Denmark's non-violent path to modernization. Blue Dolphin Publishing: Nevada City (California), 1991. xxxiii and 488pp.

This is an extremely interesting and valuable book. While it is intended primarily for readers outside Denmark, it contains much which will be of interest, and I believe of importance, to Danish readers as well. The writer's approach is that of a sociologist and anthropologist. Steven Borish seeks to give a picture of the development of Danish society over the last two centuries, and asks why and how it is that Denmark has been able to evolve in such a non-violent way. As his sub-title indicates he is particularly concerned with the place of the folk high schools in this development. Not the least interesting part of the book is the section in which he describes the year which he spent (October 1982 to July 1983) as a student in the high schools of Kolding, Silkeborg, and Askov.

Professor Borish has not been afraid to combine within the covers of his book different approaches to his material. He unites the historical account of the land reforms of the eighteenth century and the beginnings of the Grundtvigian movement in the nineteenth with a sociological analysis of the salient features of Danish society today. He also gives a very vivid personal impression of his experiences at the three high schools where he chose to study. We are left in no doubt of their differences but we also see something of what they have in common.

The writer's own family background is Jewish. Much of his initial impulse to visit Denmark came from his meeting with Danish volunteers in kibbutzim in Israel. He observed that the presence of Danes in an international group tended to improve the general quality of social relations. He was puzzled by this and wondered why it should be. He began to read what he could find about Denmark past and present and found it quite inadequate to answer his questions. He decided he must find out for himself.

»The provisional research hypothesis that guided this study in its early stages was a simple one... It can be summed up in a sentence; there is something of real importance to be learned from a study of Danish culture and history.« This hypothesis came as a great surprise to his fellow Americans, so deeply ingrained is our Anglo-American prejudice that what is small can hardly be of any general significance and our rather arbitrary assumption that five million is a small number. Why do field work for a Ph.D. in anthropology in Copenhagen of all places? »Anyone could understand going to Copenhagen for a tourist trip. But why should a sensible person go there and waste time studying and learning about Danish culture?« As Borish remarks with the quiet humour which keeps recurring in his book, »If it is true that Denmark has something of value to teach the world, then not merely the lesson itself *but even the fact that such a lesson exists* have been well-kept secrets« (p. 46).

In the course of his exploration Borish leads us into very different fields. Part III of the book is principally historical in character, introducing the Anglo-American reader to the reforms of the late eighteenth century and the ideas which lie behind the folk high schools; also giving an introduction to the life and work of Grundtvig. Part IV, which studies themes in Danish national character is more analytical and contemporary and uses a more sociological method. I found myself particularly fascinated by chapter 8, »Hygge and the Art of Celebration«. I wait with interest to discover what the reaction of my Danish friends will be. At times the author seems to be elucidating cultural and social differences between North America and Europe as a whole, and here the English reader finds himself on the European side; but the interest of the book lies in its careful and perceptive observation of the specific social conventions which characterize Danish life. Here the writer has used both sociological analysis and personal intuition. He is by no means wholly uncritical as becomes clear, for instance, in his section on *Janteloven*.

One of the things which impresses him greatly is the Danish sense of the past as a living reality. He describes a farming family in Jutland whom he got to know well and their fields over the years. »A rural farm family working their land had this reverence for the past which is one mark of the truly educated person« (p. 90). He himself came to share this sense of history. At a later stage in his book he remarks, »Danish national character will never be found in a laboratory or a test tube; it is a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces are to be found in classrooms, in village churches, in train stations, and in ancient documents. It is there in the faces of the living if you can see it; it also lies buried in the written testimony of the dead« (p. 342). Two of the features of the Danish attitude to life which he finds particularly impressive and which clearly differentiate it from the culture of North America are its acceptance of the limitations of the human condition and its realism in the face of the inevitability of death.

It is clear that Borish did not begin with an interest in Grundtvig. He himself tells us, »I had written Grundtvig off as some kind of a Nordic culture quack before my interview with Hans Henningsen; in our conversation I gained a whole new respect and insight into what Grundtvig represents both for the folk high schools and for Danish culture« (p. 406). Hans Henningsen at Askov and Bent Martinsen at Silkeborg clearly had a crucial part in introducing him to Grundtvig.

Those who are already familiar with Grundtvig's work will not turn to this book to learn new things about Grundtvig himself. They will however learn to see him in a new way, seeing him through the eyes of a social anthropologist whose viewpoint is transatlantic and international. They can hardly fail to notice the value which Borish places on the insights and understanding which are still to be gained through the life of the high schools. At the end of his own high school year Borish writes, »I had come (to?) thinking that a folk high school was primarily an academic institution. Now I had seen that a folk high school was an experience in community and in personal growth, one in which academic learning plays a definite, if circumscribed role... I felt that through the time spent in the folk high schools I had been privileged to touch deeply the sacred core of wisdom of another culture« (p. 407).

I cannot help wondering what Danish readers will make of that phrase »the sacred core of wisdom of another culture«. I have no reason to suppose that Borish uses this rather unfashionable formula carelessly or without thought. As one who also looks at Denmark from outside, though from a less geographical and cultural distance I find it both illuminating and moving. I hope that this book will encourage many, both inside and outside Denmark, to consider more deeply the particular qualities of Danish society which the author has found to be of such value and significance; and the all-pervading influence of Grundtvig in them. There can be no doubt that these qualities are threatened at the present time by the possibility of what Borish summarizes in the phrase »the Germanization/Thatcherization/Americanization of Denmark«. That is all the more reason for trying to see more clearly what exactly those qualities are and how they may be strengthened in Denmark and acknowledged more widely in the outside world.

Om Guds datter i folkehøjskolen

Af William Michelsen

Midt i højskolen. En antologi om det folkelige, det politiske, det universelle og det historisk-poetiske. Udgivet i anledning af Foreningen for Folkehøjskoler 100 års jubilæum. Redaktion Else-Marie Boyhus. Gyldendal 1991. 269 sider.

Lad det være sagt straks. Det er en prægtig bog, Højskolebladets redaktør i samarbejde med foreningens formand *Ove Korsgaard* her fejrer foreningens 100 års-jubilæum med. Den er værd at læse og gennemarbejde for enhver, der arbejder med Grundtvigs tanker og i Grundtvigs spor. Lidt over halvdelen af dens 10 forfattere har akademisk baggrund, resten har deres baggrund i den grundtvigske højskole - den, der voksede frem som resultatet af Grundtvigs tanker om og arbejde for »Skolen for Livet«. Sådan var det også med dem, der skabte de første folkehøjskoler. De fleste var akademikere, der brød ud af den akademiske tradition for at lære menigmand at forstå sig selv og blive skikkaet til at deltage i det politiske liv. Hvilket er blevet et forbillede for andre folk, i endnu højere grad i dag end nogensinde før.

Bogen er en samling artikler af meget forskelligt indhold og længde, fordelt i 3 afsnit med en indledning af *Ove Korsgaard* og en slutning af *Ejvind Larsen*, og det er denne sidste artikel, der har givet anledning til, at Grundtvig-Studier har fået bogen tilsendt til anmeldelse. Men hele bogen, ikke mindst *Ove Korsgaards* indledning, »Højskolen til debat«, er gennemsyret af Grundtvigs tanker, hvilket har fået det fornøjelige udtryk, at den er illustreret af tegninger fra dette århundrede, der alle forestiller Grundtvig selv, sådan som tegnerne har forestillet sig ham. De viser, hvor forskellige forestillinger eftertiden har gjort og gør sig om denne usædvanlige mand, som samtiden enten blev grebet af eller vragede,