Fra Grundtvig-litteraturen

England og Grundtvig

By A.M. Allchin

Helge Grell: England og Grundtvig. Grundtvigs møde med England og dets betydning for hans forfatterskab. Center for Grundtvig-studier. Aarhus Universitet 1992.

With his new book, Dr. Grell makes a further distinguished and constructive contribution to our understanding of Grundtvig and particularly to our knowledge of his relationship with England. The book, as we might expect, is marked throughout by clarity and balance of judgment. Approaching the question from the Danish side the author is particularly concerned to see how Grundtvig's English contacts influenced his intellectual development. He recognizes fully the extent to which the three visits to England in 1829, 1830, and 1831 influenced Grundtvig's subsequent thought, but he sees the influence more as a matter of gradual growth than as a question of abrupt or sudden change of direction.

The book consists of three main sections. The first deals with Grundtvig's attitude towards England in the years before his visits; the second deals with the 1829, '30, and '31 visits themselves; the third treats his attitude as it had evolved after these three visits. The most original part of the book, and from the English point of view the most interesting, is to be found in section two. Grell has identified three main groups of people with whom Grundtvig was in contact. There were the archivists and literary scholars who had some knowledge of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. There were the intellectual circles in London which he contacted in 1829 and '30. There were the academics whom he got to know in Cambridge in the summer of 1831. It is difficult to praise too highly the careful investigative work which lies behind this section and which has clarified many points about Grundtvig's months in England.

In London, Grundtvig was in touch with a group of men of radical views, many of them lawyers or journalists. They tended to be Unitarian by religious conviction. They were people of some renown in their own day, but of little abiding significance in English intellectual history. The only writer among them who is remembered to this day is George Borrow whose highly original travel books still delight English readers. Borrow, as Grell rightly remarks, was »et fantastisk sproggeni«. Grundtvig describes him as »en Kæmpe af en Karl, just ikke yndig, men fremsagt og som det synes ligefrem og tjenstvillig«. Borrow, we may note, though he had Unitarian connections, was himself a combative evangelical with a great dislike for the pope.

In Cambridge, Grundtvig made contact with a very different circle, university men, amongst them scholars of real distinction, Connop Thirlwall, Augustus Hare, above all William Whewell. It was a group in which German ideas on theological and philosophical topics were better known than was usual in

England at that time, a group which had certainly been influenced by the leading ideas of Coleridge. Grell considers the possibilities of contact between Grundtvig and Coleridge, revealing incidentally Coleridge's interest in Henrik Steffens. Wisely, as it seems to me, Grell concludes that what we have here is two men working in parallel with significant points of agreement as well as difference, rather than any direct influence from one to the other.

It is interesting that Grundtvig's closest friend in this circle seems to have been William Whewell, Master of Trinity and a man of considerable significance in Cambridge University in the mid-nineteenth century. In some ways Whewell was a more conservative thinker than other members of the group. He was also the most wide ranging in the spread of his intellectual interests, scientific, philosophic and literary. Here at last Grundtvig was meeting a man of something like his own caliber and it would be fascinating to know more about their exchanges.

If I have a criticism of the book it is that it works too exclusively at the level of ideas. Grundtvig in England was having his first total human experience of a foreign country. At the beginning in 1829 he did not find the experience an easy one. I suspect that in the first weeks he sometimes had difficulty in making himself understood and he may well have been confused by the variety of accents he would have heard on the streets of London. The two drafts of a letter of introduction to Archbishop Howley which remain from that first year show that his mastery of the English language was still quite uncertain.

But from the beginning he began to make extremely significant discoveries in his work on the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, discoveries which moved him very deeply, imaginatively and intellectually. After days of intense concentration on the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, it would not be altogether surprising if in his evenings he did not always have the energy to pursue intellectual contacts of any great significance.

But it is clear that each year Grundtvig found it easier to make contact with his English friends and acquaintances. The letter of 1836 to Whewell which is reproduced on the cover of Grell's book, to which Grell refers on page 52, reveals something of what the 1831 visit to Cambridge had meant to him. In a letter written to introduce a young Danish scholar who intends to visit Cambridge. It is an altogether delightful letter showing at once how much Grundtvig's English had improved; it is composed in clear, vivid, eloquent, if occasionally inaccurate English. We really seem to hear Grundtvig talking English in these lines as he speaks of Trinity College, which he remembers as »the solemn and yet cheerful abode of study and kindness where for the first time I learnt duly to appreciate the spirit and institutions of Old England«. Solemnity and cheerfulness, study and kindness do not always go hand in hand. Grundtvig had seen them combined in the life of a Cambridge College. He was to combine them anew in a very different context in his vision of a folk high school.