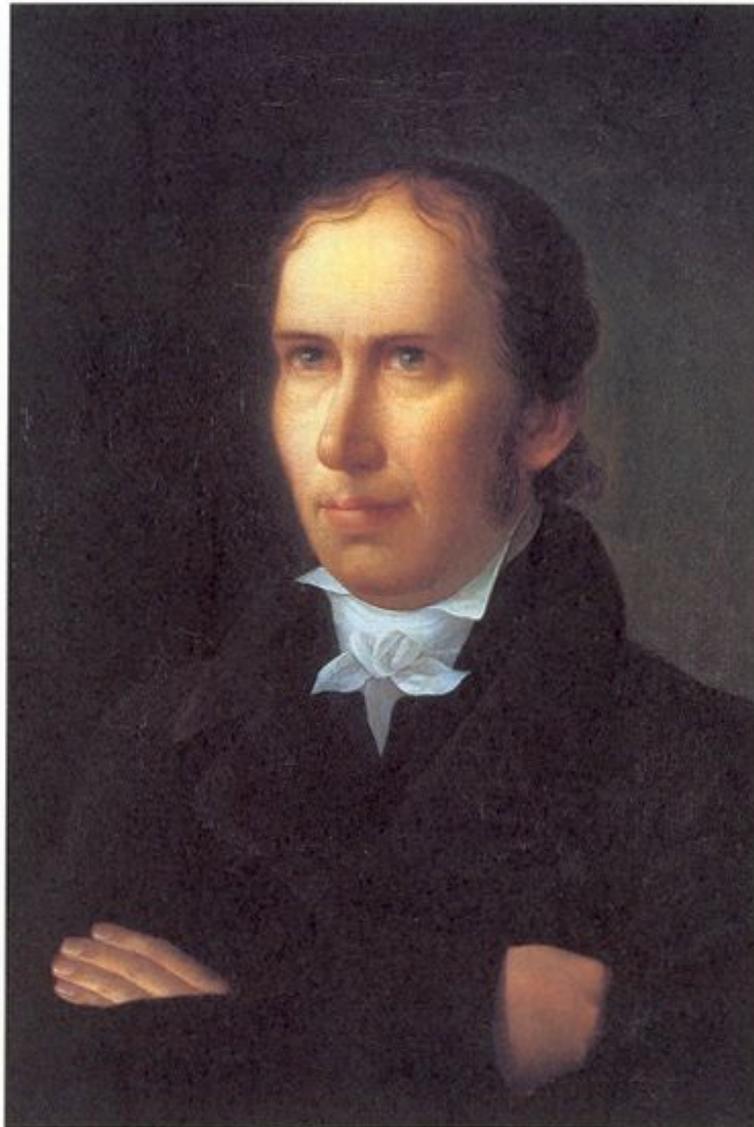


N. F. S. Grundtvig, folk high schools and popular education

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N. F. S. Grundtvig, folk high schools and popular education. Nikolai Frederick Grundtvig (1783-1872) was a prolific writer contributing major works in theology, education, literature, politics, and history. He was also a poet and hymn-writer. Outside Denmark he is probably best known for his contribution to educational thought and practice, and to social reform – in part through his pioneering of folk high schools. Mark K Smith explores his contribution.

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Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) is one of the most significant figures in Danish history. He might not be as well known as some of his younger contemporaries such as Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) or Hans

Christian Anderson (180-75) but he had a profound impact on Danish life (Lawson 1994: 613). His writing around Nordic and Anglo-Saxon literature and customs helped fashion a sense of what it was to be Danish during the second half of the nineteenth century. Nikolai Grundtvig's contribution to Lutheran theology stimulated considerable debate, and his hymn-writing left a legacy of several hundred. In education he advocated popular, autonomous places of learning – what became known as folk high schools. He was a prolific writer and it has been estimated that a collected edition would need about 130 large volumes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark).

Life

The son of a Lutheran pastor (and from a long line of country parsons), N. F. S. Grundtvig looked back at his home life with some affection. He found it rich spiritually and humanly – in significant part due to the affection and attention of his mother, but also through time spent with an older woman, Malene Jensdatter, who lived in at the vicarage. She sang and told stories simply and yet vividly, 'so that all through life Grundtvig came to regard her as a manifestation of the piety, worldly wisdom and gift of language of the common people' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark). Grundtvig developed a particular interest in Icelandic language and folklore.

Nikolai Grundtvig was initially educated at home, then by a private tutor (another clergyman) in Jutland. He went on to study at the free school in Aarhus and at the University of Copenhagen. He passed his course in theology by the time he was twenty – too young to be ordained – and becoming a clergyman, at that point, was not what he wanted anyway. Grundtvig worked for three years as a personal tutor – an experience that was to deepen his appreciation of education. His interest in mythology and literature was augmented at this time by studying the work of Fichte, Schelling, Shakespeare and Schille. By 1809 he had had a number of books published including *Northern Mythology* and *The Fall of the Heroic Life in the North*. The former was greeted as a significant development in the study of Old Norse thought. Grundtvig earned his living during this period by teaching history and geography.

In 1810 his father asked Nikolai Grundtvig to become his chaplain. His father was 76 – and unable to fully discharge his duties. Grundtvig didn't particularly want to interrupt his work but did so to help his father. To take up the position he had to preach an examined, trial, sermon. The examiners awarded him the highest mark. But, as with so much in his life, when the sermon was printed it caused a storm. The sermon was published under the title 'Wherefore hath the Word of the Lord vanished from His House?'. It was a violent attack on the contemporary clergy for betraying the message of the Christian gospel. A number of clerics in Copenhagen complained about Grundtvig and he was reprimanded, 'not for the sermon's content, but for having it printed with the provocative title' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark).

When his father died in 1813 Grundtvig applied for, but failed to get, his living. He returned to Copenhagen, writing at a prolific rate during this period – producing two volumes of history, plus a number of poetic works. In 1822 he was appointed curate at Our Saviour's Church in the district of Christianshavn. Grundtvig stayed for four years, busy both as a writer and as a clergyman, however his theological views continued to bring him into conflict with mainstream Lutheranism. Indeed, following a pamphlet published in 1825 (The Church's Reply – written in response to a book by H. N. Clausen) Nikolai Grundtvig was prosecuted and forbidden to preach for seven years. Some of what he had written about Clausen was judged to be libellous. As Lawson (1994: 614) has commented, the polemical tone of his writing, combined with the abrasive nature of his behaviour meant that for a considerable part of his life he was a preacher 'who was either forbidden to preach or allowed to preach but not administer the sacraments'. Theologically, he argued for the authority of 'the living word' and for the organization of the church through independent, self-organizing congregations. His experience of the church at Christianshavn and his continuing reflection had moved him away from a view of the Church as having its foundation in the Bible towards one in which the heart was a living community of Christians.

Grundtvig returned to his studies (with some financial support from the Crown. He also received some support later from friends to write hymns). With some movement towards democracy in Denmark in the 1830s, Grundtvig turned increasingly to writing about education. He believed that the 'lower orders' needed education to participate in the

new advisory assemblies (*op. cit.*: 613). In later life Nikolai Grundtvig became pastor to the church of Vartov hospital, Copenhagen (a home for elderly women) thanks to the intervention of Christian VIII on becoming King. He served at Vartov from 1839 to his death in 1872. In 1861 Grundtvig was given the title of Bishop. He continued to write and translate poetry. Grundtvig also became active politically. At first he occupied a broadly conservative position – but then developed a much more reforming, liberal position. He remained a controversial figure – but one with a growing band of friends and supporters.

N. F. S. Grundtvig was married three times. His first wife – Elisabeth Blicher (1787-1851) – was a clergyman's daughter. They were married in 1818 and they had three children. The same year that Elisabeth died, Grundtvig married again – Marie Toft (1813-54), the daughter of, and widow of, a landowner. She had considerable sympathy with Grundtvig's thinking – but tragically died a few months after giving birth to their son Frederick. In 1858 (when he was 75) he married again to another widow – Asta Reedtz (1826-90), born Lady Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs of an old aristocratic Danish family.

The living word

Central to N. F. S. Grundtvig's thinking was the notion of the 'living word' (the term Christ used at the Last Supper). He talked of life as follows:

I saw life, real human life, as it is lived in this world, and saw at once that to be enlightened, to live a useful and enjoyable human life, most people did not need books at all, but only a genuinely kind heart, sound common sense, a kind good ear, a kind good mouth, and then liveliness to talk with really enlightened people, who would be able to arouse their interest and show them how human life appears when the light shines upon it. (1856 quoted in Borish 1991: 18).

The first glimpses of Grundtvig's vision of the folk high school can be found in the preface to his 1832 study of Scandinavian mythology *Nordic Mythology*:

There will be the common centre from which the institution branches out into all the main lines of practical life, and back to which it endeavours to gather and unite all the energies of society. Here, all the civil servants of the state who do not need scholarship but life, insight and practical ability, and all of those who wish to belong to the rank of the educated should get the very best chance of developing themselves in a suitable direction and of getting to know one another. (Grundtvig quoted in Lawson 1994: 614)

Nikolai Grundtvig had visited [Robert Owen](#) and New Lanark to learn about the approach to schooling and education being pioneered there at the Institute – and we can see elements of what he saw there reflected in his thinking.

N. F. S. Grundtvig's first major work on education – *The Danish Four Leaf Clover* – appeared in 1836 following the first sessions of the provisional advisory councils (see above). His concern was to try to cultivate the 'loveliness' of the four leaves – the King, the people, the homeland, the language (Lawson 1994: 615). His solution, in significant part was the folk high school with bards or skalds – 'real teachers' – at their centre. The central aim of education was enlightenment about life – *livsoplysning* – with enlightenment originating 'mostly from the single person's own life or least be tried to see how it fits' (quoted by Lawson 1994: 615). This book was followed in 1838 by *Skolen for Livet og Akademiet i Soer* (The School for Life and Academy at Soer). The Academy at Soer was, essentially, a school for the children of the aristocracy. It's orientation encapsulated for Nikolai Grundtvig, a lot that was wrong with education. He particularly took issues with the focus on Latin studies and examinations, and the lack of concern

for practical matters. He argued for 'mutual education' and 'living interaction' (a secular corollary to his focus on the living word) (op. cit.: 616). Lawson discusses this as follows:

In a secular context Grundtvig meant that the the 'living word' was not formal instruction or lecturing as such but the communication of personal life between teacher and taught; either the teachings live in the life of the teacher and are actively responded to by the student or they do not live at all, the teachings being mere dead words. The 'living word' is not Biblical fundamentalism but the spiritual communication of the 'truth', words of power and authority evoking an active response in the listener. (1994: 616)

Such an understanding of education was not confined to the classroom but flowed through community life – and could be cultivated within the sort of setting that a folk high school provided.

Folk high schools

Nikolai Grundtvig continued to develop this theme in his writing. In 1840 he published *Bøn og Bregreb om en Danske Højskole i Søro* (Request for and Idea of a Danish High School in Søro). By this point he was getting into the nitty gritty of organizing and running such a project – discussing things like the process of mutual teaching and conversation, and the formation of students' councils. Not unexpectedly, given the direction of his thinking and his initial starting point, he placed a strong emphasis upon student participation (Lawson 1994: 617).

The first Danish Folk High School was actually opened in Rødding in 1844 by Kristen Kold a follower of Grundtvig. The idea for the folk high school had originated in part from the need to develop residential forms of schooling – because of the dispersal of populations in rural areas. The school's prospectus claimed it would provide a place 'where the peasant and the citizen can obtain knowledge and guidance for use and pleasure not so much in regard to his livelihood but in regard to his situation as ... a citizen' (quoted in Moller and Watson 1944: 27). As [Henry Morris](#) was to do later, Grundtvig and his followers made connections with the development of substantial social movements – in cooperative agriculture, village meeting houses, independent congregations and so on. Lindeman comments (1929: 32).

In both the Danish and German models of adult education is included two aspects a. intellectual, cultural and spiritual growth and b. a folk or group motivation and end.

Hence the significance to later generations of community educators.

The folk high schools of Denmark... are for farmers; students live in residence as part of a group; the farmer-residence aspect is fully as important as the fact that they have come there for study. (Lindeman 1929: 32)

N. F. S. Grundtvig argued for a network of self-governing folk high schools ('Schools for Life'). Alongside this he made the case for a Nordic University ('The School for Passion').

In conclusion

By 1864 Denmark had fifteen Folk High Schools, by 1914 there were 83 (Rordam 1965) and the movement was well established in Norway, Sweden and Finland and isolated examples operated in the USA, UK, Japan Czechoslovakia and Switzerland (Manniche 1939: Davies 1931). It was argued that they made an immense contribution to the economic and cultural resurgence of a previously backward nation. Moller and Watson (1944) also maintained that the cultural and intellectual climate they, more than any other institution, created, enabled Denmark to unite against Fascism and resist the lure of collaboration to a degree not encountered elsewhere.

In the last fifty years their focus has shifted away from the concentration on rural pursuits. They are:

- open to all those above eighteen years of age;
- avowedly and by law not competence giving;
- not academically competitive, with no grades or marks at all given;
- outside of mainstream Danish educational system. (Borish 1991: 8)

As Borish goes on to say – two further features astonish outside observers. First, that these schools receive 85 per cent of their expenses from the state. Second, they are free from state control in philosophical orientation (thus you have radical or feminist schools; Christian schools, folk high schools for athletic instruction or for music, foreign languages or retired people).

In N. F. S. Grundtvig's work we can see some themes or strands that have been central to much adult, progressive and informal education thinking:

- the [fellowship](#) of teachers and students living and working together and learning from one another, as well as sharing in the running of the school.
- the importance of the 'living word'.
- the stress on common humanity even though one needs a thorough understanding of one's own culture before understanding that of others.
- education as a 'living interaction' – a coming to terms with the meaning of one's own existence rather than vocational training or formal instruction (we can see this most strongly in the work of later writers such as [Eduard Lindeman](#)) (Lawson 1994: 618-9).

The contribution of folk high schools to fighting Fascism is also down, in significant part, to Grundtvig's contribution. His concern for the preservation and development of culture and identity did not take a narrow path. Instead he argued for *folkelighed* – 'community life that embraces everyone' (Peter Manniche 1971 quoted by Lawson 1994: 619). Nikolai Grundtvig's vision had considerable power.

Further reading and references

Broadbridge, E., Warren, C. and Jonas, U. (eds.) (2011). *School for Life: N. F. S. Grundtvig on the Education for the People*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitet, Center for Rusmiddelforskning. A broad collection of writing on education in a new translation. The texts include poems and songs, periodical articles, introductions to books, an open letter to the Norwegians and a private letter to the King of Denmark. An accompanying CD (MP3 format) includes the texts read by Edward Broadbridge and the introductions by Clay Warren.

Lawson, M. (1994) 'Nikolay Grundtvig' in Z. Morsy (ed.) *Thinkers on Education 2 (Prospects)*. Paris: UNESCO. (Available as a pdf: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/grundtve.pdf>). Excellent summary of Grundtvig's contribution.

Lawson, M. (ed.) (1991) *N. F. S. Grundtvig: Selected educational writings*. Elsinmore: International People's

College/The Association of Folk High Schools. There are no full translations of Grundtvig's educational work into English – this was, until recently, the most comprehensive collection.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2006) 'N. F. S. Grundtvig'
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Links

Centre for Grundtvig Studies – <http://www.teo.au.dk/cfg/enhed/praesent>

Acknowledgements: The picture of N. F. S. Grundtvig circa 1820 is reproduced here on the understanding that this image is in the public domain. It was sourced from Wikipedia Commons.

I have also made heavy use of Max Lawson's work – see above – and would like to express my thanks and appreciation of his contribution to Grundtvig studies.

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