

## Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig

Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, 1783-1872, was a Danish author for almost 75 years. Most of his many works have not been read by great numbers either in his own day or subsequently. His ideas and attitudes are more important than the individual titles.



Grundtvig broke through the framework of the literary institutions and encompassed the entire population with his projects. His thoughts were first disseminated through his highly singable poetry, and then the teachers at the folk high schools; these taught according to no syllabus and led to no examinations, and on the basis of Grundtvig's loosely formulated plans they arose in various parts of the country, starting with Rødding in 1844, but in particular experienced rapid growth after the defeat in the 1864 war.

Academic and narrow vocational training was here replaced by a general preparation for everyday life as a Danish citizen. As a rule, Grundtvig's patriotic songs combined a national historical stance with a Christian view of mankind, and especially after the loss of the fleet in 1807 and of Norway in 1814 this played an important part in building up a new Danish identity based on a straightforward, energetic, active role in society.

In his many original and translated hymns, which were mainly published in his *Sang-Værk*, 1-5 (1837-81), he brought renewal to the National Church of Denmark by imparting a living, homely character to the great Christian festivals.

Even today, his hymns dominate the authorised hymn book, so much so that even non-churchgoing Danes can scarcely imagine Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide, weddings or funerals without the inclusion of some verses by Grundtvig.

Grundtvig's work as a theologian, scholar, poet and popular educator was epoch-making. In *Nordens Mytologi* (1808, *The Mythology of the North*), he was the first to see an inner cohesion in the pagan myths, and in a greatly expanded, revised edition in 1832 he was able to turn them into the paradigm of a modern Nordic view of life. In practice, his theology concentrated on the experience of baptism and holy communion, both proclaimed by words from the lips of Christ.

From the 1830s, on the background of a Christian faith brought to life in this way, he placed increasing emphasis on conditions of life on earth, keeping a suitable pace with the slow political developments in Denmark towards democracy.

He advocated a freedom that ensured the individual citizen the same potential for life and action in everyday life as that citizen would wish for his neighbours. By happiness, he understood the right undisturbedly to be oneself, without an eye to greatness and honour. He discovered the untapped abilities in the rural population corresponding to the distribution of population: he was talking about the majority of Danes.

At a time which cultivated an intellectual and artistic elite, he adopted the ordinary man's - and woman's - point of view, for in the Danes he saw a loving people with a patient female character that endures through some inner strength and finally conquers.

Despite stormy transitions from one phase to another in the course of his own life, he taught himself and others to look forward to a gentle growth in nature's divinely created order. The way of the world he saw as an enigma that would be made clear at the end of time.

On the basis of a kind of family feeling with everything human, he thought in terms of comprehensive fellowships: that of the congregation stretching all the way back to Christ, that of the history of the world stretching all the way back to Paradise, that of the history of Denmark going all the way back to King Dan.

He saw every form of compulsion in intellectual and spiritual life as being perverse. His great argument was for choice cutting through congealed institutions and lifeless writing. He advocated oral formulation, whether spoken or sung, and he made conversation with a lively exchange of views between the parties into his main educational tool.

He stressed the significance of a native language that had been handed down in its purest form by women and unlearned peasants.

As a poet he often combined content and form in potent images, the intent and meaning of which were prophetically obscure, and at other times he was able as no one else in his day to speak simply and comprehensibly on the most elevated subjects.

As a politician he could be extremely realistic, always giving voice to an anti-authoritarian attitude; he supported peaceful change rather than revolution. With Grundtvig, compromise became a way of life in Danish politics and society. He left behind him religious and popular movements which in the folk high schools, the church, the parliament and in the public at large are still influential in Danish society.

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