

PROPHET OF THE NORTH

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In New Europe

DENMARK in the middle part of the 19th century was a defeated nation in every sense of the word. She had lost her southernmost provinces to Germany and had lost Norway to Sweden. A third of her population, two-fifths of her territory, and most of her most valued resources had been the price of the two wars into which she had been drawn. Political democracy had been arrested in its growth. The nation was on the verge of disintegration. Her people were discouraged and despondent. Her church was spiritually stagnant; her school decadent.

Yet a half century later Denmark was as near a utopian nation as existed in the world. Not only were almost all her people literate, they were highly educated. Her agriculture had been altered from an economy based on wheat and cattle to one based on butter, eggs, and bacon. She had become the larder for northern Europe. Ninety-five percent of her farmers owned their own farms and her people all enjoyed a fairly equal share in the wealth of the nation. An eight-hour day, health insurance, old-age pensions, and women's suffrage had been achieved before many larger nations had obtained them. Her democracy had become three-dimensional—political, economic, and so-

cial. Within fifty years a peaceful revolution almost without parallel in world history had taken place.

Largely responsible for this remarkable transformation of an entire nation was Bishop Grundtvig, poet, philosopher, minister, educator, and statesman. So profoundly did he affect Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries that he is called the Prophet of the North. Nichola Grundtvig was a passionate believer in education as the solution for existing evils. Gathering together the youth of the country between the ages of 18 and 25, and giving them the right kind of education, could completely change Denmark, he said. Deeply religious, he was a vigorous critic of the church. He was an ardent patriot who delved into the mythology and history of his own and other lands to bring to the Danes a pride in their past as a foundation for pride in their present and future. He was likewise a champion of the common man—the farmer or peasant. Grundtvig was resolved that history and mythology, as well as religion, be brought to this man in simple language. That language, he felt, was the language of music and poetry, and he wrote voluminously with the idea of popularizing knowledge for the masses. Through these and other means he

left an indelible imprint on the Denmark of his day.

The school Bishop Grundtvig envisaged was a school for the masses rather than for the classes, and the motivation behind the school was to be religious. It was to be a democratic institution rather than an aristocratic one. The absolute necessity of education for everyone was his constant theme. "Obviously," he said, "only a few can and must be professors and learned folks at one time, but we must *all* be Danish citizens—enlightened and useful citizens." To him the ages of 18 to 25 were the most important and the most neglected educationally. He would have children remain in school until they were 14 and then send them out for the next four years to learn from first-hand experience while their minds and bodies were developing. Then, when they were riper, more mature, they would return for short periods of time to a form of adult school where they could search with great teachers for the answers to their questions about religion, fatherland, sex, and society, the burning questions of the age level.

Attendance at such schools should be encouraged by all possible means, but it should be voluntary, not compulsory. Inasmuch as the aim of such education was to inspire rather than to inform, to stimulate rather than to satiate, the term need not be long. As they have developed, the Folk Schools are

open to men ordinarily during the long winter months, and for women during the summer while the men are busy.

Nor were the schools planned by Bishop Grundtvig to be academic mills. There were to be no examinations, no grades, no diplomas. This was to be education for its own sake, rather than for rewards. Work, too, was to be a vital part of such schools. He was convinced that "it would be of great use and real pleasure if there were a well-managed farm connected with the folks high school and if this were surrounded by workshops of all kinds where every young man at the school could see really efficient management of his trade. Such an acquaintance with the many-sided practical activities would be a necessary condition for a real understanding of Danish social life and national institutions, subjects which should not be taught through dull statistics, but by a lively and intelligent Dane who had traveled all over the country with his eyes open, so that he had come to know birds, animals, and human beings, and had gained a real insight into the peculiar characteristics of the Zealander, the Jutlander, and the inhabitants of the small islands, and who could help to bring the young from all parts of the country into a real and living intercourse." To this Prophet of the North the best education was contagious, from heart to heart, sometimes by way of

words and sometimes without. Such education necessitated small schools where teacher and pupil could learn to know each other quickly and intimately and where students could learn to know each other similarly. Only in this way, he felt, could the respect for, and interest in, each other, which is the basis for real democracy, develop.

In order that these schools might be free to teach what they wanted to teach, and in the way that they wanted to teach it, they were to be private institutions. As developed, it is true that they have been subsidized by the state, but fortunately state subsidies have not meant state supervision, except in minor details.

As early as 1832, in the preface to his book *Great Mythology*, Grundtvig outlined the basic principles of the Folk Schools. In 1844 he attempted to found such a school himself. He was a prophet, however, and not an executive or administrator, and the school was unsuccessful. It was not until 1851 that the first such school was successfully established by one of his followers, Kirsten Kold. Gradually they spread until there were nearly 60 such institutions and about 6000 pupils in the decade of the 30's in

Denmark. It is estimated that a third of the farm population of that nation has attended a Folk High School. Certainly most of the cooperative society chairmen and most of the cooperative managers have gone at some time to such a school. One-half of the cabinet members during the period of the Social Democratic party control in Denmark were educated in the Folk High Schools. The influence of these institutions has been out of proportion even to these numbers because of the prominent positions that its former students have held.

Denmark now is passing through a period of national crisis at least as intense as that through which she passed in 1807-9 and 1864. She has one great resource now, however, that she did not have in those two periods, and that is a faith in herself, a faith in her future. That she has such faith is in large part due to the efforts of her greatest leader of the last century, Bishop Grundtvig. Because he dreamed so mightily and worked so intensively, Denmark of the 19th century underwent an internal peaceful revolution. What she has done once, she can do again, and with greater ease and more far-reaching results.

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