Grundtivigianism in America, Yesterday and Today

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by Thorvald Hansen

It has been said, "In Denmark, everyone is a Grundtvigian whether he knows it or not." This certainly is not the case in America. Indeed, there are very few Grundtvigians in this country, and the prospects for increasing that number are very slight. This is not because the followers of Grundtvig have been "hiding their light under a bushel," but because the vast majority has not accepted it as light.

Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) was a Danish clergyman whose interests ranged far beyond the church. Nordic mythology, educational philosophy, and political activism were but some of his many interests. He was a voracious reader and an equally voracious writer. During his 89 years, he wrote many books as well as some 1500 hymns. Some of his positions were an offense to the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the result that he was relegated to the position of chaplain at Vartov, a home for elderly women in Copenhagen. Here his preaching attracted many aside from the residents of Vartov. However, this is neither the time nor the place to present a biographical sketch of the life of N.F.S. Grundtivg, interesting as that might be. Rather, the intent here is to consider the impact of Grundtivigianism in America.

Grundtivigianism

It is neither possible nor necessary to give a complete description here of what it is that constitutes Grundtvigianism. It is enough to say something about his theological position and to present the basis for his educational view. Grundtvig saw the church not as an institution that has grown out of the Bible, but rather the reverse. He viewed it as a fellowship of believers, and, as such, its covenant of baptism and the Apostle's Creed took precedence over the Bible as the word of God. Unlike many of his opponents, who put the emphasis on Jesus as savior, he stressed all three articles of the

confession of faith. He saw God as the creator, Christ as the savior, and the Holy Spirit as the power of God at work in His people.

His recognition of God as the creator caused Grundtvig to see man in a different way. In a statement widely misunderstood, he said, "human first and then Christian." By that he meant, in the words of Johannes Knudsen, "That the humanity of individual living and of the indigenous life of a people, created in the image of God, has a primary influence upon Christian experience and fellowship. Basically there can be no dichotomy of human living and Christinan living."[1] A Danish theologian elaborates further on the importance of Christianity for human life, saying, "Christianity exists for the salvation of human life: its purpose being not to liberate man from life, but for life."[2] Another Dane, Hal Koch, differentiates Grundtvigian Christianity this way:

> Christianity is neither the correct opinions—which both orthodoxy and rationalism were prone to stress—or correct moral assumptions—which basically was the view of both the pietists and the rationalists—or the proper experiences and feelings—as the pietists believed—but the acts of God.[3]

Grundtvig's educational view ushered in the establishment of the Folk School in Denmark. Education should not be the exclusive domain of the elite. A democratically organized state required that the people have a broad general knowledge. Out of this thinking grew the Folk School as a means for the education of the people. Through such schools the general population was to be made familiar with the history, language, and literature of the country. Such schools were to be open to all and they were to be residential.

Though Grundtvig himself was a prolific writer, he put much emphasis upon what he called "the living word." The living word, the spoken word, was important in the life of the church and the school. "It was the words that men actually spoke, the words that came from their lips, that revealed and constituted the essence of their being."[4]

Theological Manifestations in America

Strangely enough, the first occurrence of Grundtvig's theological thoughts in America came among the Norwegians. Claus L. Clausen

was a Dane who worked among the Norwegian immigrants in America. As a young man he had often heard Grundtvig speak and he had been impressed by what he had heard. Of Grundtvig's preaching he wrote: "It was food for the development of a true Christian life, which in truth could be called healthful, unerring milk for newborn babes, but also solid food for adults."[5] For reasons of health, Clausen had gone to Norway; from there, he was persuaded to go to America as a teacher. This suggestion met with his approval and, accordingly, he and his wife arrived in Wisconsin in 1843. Within a short time, he was examined and ordained by a German pastor and began his work among the Norwegian immigrants.

Like Clausen, some of the Norwegians who came to serve as pastors also were impressed by Grundtvig's views, particularly his view of the Church. He saw the Church, rather than the individual, as being at the center of Christian life. One who came was J.W.C. Dietrichson, the first pastor among the Norwegian immigrants to have been ordained by a bishop in Norway. By the time of his coming, there were a few scattered Norwegian preaching places, but Dietrichson was an organizer. For his group in eastern Wisconsin he prepared a constitution that expressly referred to the revelation which had come in "God's Holy Word through our baptismal convenant."[6] This was an unmistakable Gruindtvigian statement. By 1851, Dietrichson had succeeded in organizing a synod. A constitution was adopted in January of that year, and the congregations were to act on it in May, but they failed to do so. There is no indication that the doctrinal statement repelled them, but they feared there was an element of clerical control in the constitution. Clausen was to serve as superintendent of the New Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.

It was not simply the presence of Clausen and Dietrichson that accounted for a Grundtvigian statement being incorporated into the constitution. For a number of years Grundtvig had been looked upon favorably in Norway. His churchly view and his belief that the Scriptures must be understood in the light of the Apostle's Creed gained a following in Norway. The chief exponent of Grundtvig in Norway was a pastor in Oslo named Wilhelm Andreas Wexels. He never worked out a theology, but, for at least a generation,

Grundtvigianism did become a stimulus to the religious life in Norway.

Three new pastors came to America from Norway in 1851. These men had been trained by professors who were shaped by Lutheran Confessionalism. They made a determined effort to eliminate the Grundtvigian influence by removing the offending phrase, *in our baptismal covenant,* from the constitution. All except Clausen voted for the elimination. Thus, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America did not become Grundtvigian, though it had come close to being such.

Grundtvigianism Among the Danes

By 1871, a group on the island of Funen, in Denmark, sought to learn what need there might be for Danish pastors in America. They sent three men, none of whom were Grundtvigians, under the leadership of A.L.C. Grove-Rasmussen, a North Schleswig pastor. Grove-Rasmussen was to investigate conditions and report back to the group in Denmark. He met with many Danes and traveled as far west as Grand Island, Nebraska. The two other men were within a short time ordained by Norwegian pastors and remained to work among the Danes in America.

Grove-Rasmussen returned to Denmark and wrote a 54-page report. He established the need for Danish pastors, but he learned that Lutherans in America were deeply divided. He also learned of a Norwegian-Danish Conference, but noted that its doctrinal statement contained a reference to the Bible as the only source of Christian faith and life. He felt that it would not be wise for Danish pastors to join that group because, "Scarcely any pastor in the Danish Church would be able to subscribe to such a statement in all honesty due to the understanding that has arisen among us as to the relationship between the Word and the written Scriptures."[7] Concerning Grundtvigianism, he wrote of the Grundtvig phobia [Grundtvig skræk] he had encountered in America, "At times one could both laugh and cry concerning the Grundtvig phobia that one could run up against there."[8]

Claus Clausen also had been well aware of this. Though he knew pastors influenced by Grundtvig to be competent and zealous, he

believed that, "All things considered, they will do better to remain in Denmark than to come here."[9] Some laymen also were aware of the Grundtvig phobia that existed in America. One, from Milwaukee, who described himself as a Grundtvigian, wrote to Clausen that although he would wish to have a Grundtvigian pastor come, "I can nevertheless see that they would have many special difficulties to fight against."[10] Another, from Luck, Wisconsin, expressed similar views.

The problem was by no means confined to Scandinavian immigrant pastors. The theological climate in nineteenth century America was decidedly conservative. The noted immigration historian Marcus Lee Hansen has written of what he calls "spontaneous immigrant Puritanism" and that "The immigrant Church was started on a career of Puritanism...."[11] Americans tended to judge immigrant churches on a Puritanical basis.

Nevertheless, Danish pastors did come. A few were avowedly Grundtvigian; most were not. The Danish Church was seen as opposed to a Bible-based theology, however, and the Grundtvig phobia was applied to them also. In spite of this, four men who had come by 1872 organized the Church Mission Society [Kirkelig Missionsforening] and proceeded with missionary activity. They were aware of the existence of the Norwegian-Danish Conference but preferred to remain independent. A year later the Church Mission Society was renamed the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was loosely organized, and it was not until 1879 that it gained a constitution. Within that Church could be found pastors and lay people with an Inner Mission, or very conservative, background. Others might have a Grundtvigian background, as well as those who had not been affiliated with either group. The Danish Church, as it will be referred to hereinafter, was a kind of umbrella church, sheltering all who had nothing more than a Danish origin in common. In retrospect, one can easily see that in a very conservative theological climate, such a church was headed for trouble.

And, trouble did come! For more than 20 years, marked by feuding and dissenting, the Danish Church existed as one body. Finally, in 1894, a division in the church came, with the Inner

Mission group withdrawing and forming their own church body. Two years later they merged with other like-minded Danes to form the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Danish Church, now the smaller of the two churches, remained to shelter Grundtvigians and others who, for whatever reason, preferred that Church. Though it was by no means exclusively or officially Grundtvigian, it continued to emphasize the primacy of the Church. Yet the Danish Church was often scorned by other Lutherans. As late as 1933, Abdel Ross Wentz, in his history of Lutheranism in America, suggests that the division of the church in 1894 came about because of the "False doctrine and state church ideas..."[12] of the Danish Church.

In spite of its critics and rather small membership, the Danish Church, the name of which was changed to the American Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1954, continued to exist until 1963 when, as a result of merger with three other Lutheran groups, it became a part of the Lutheran Church in America. Another merger in 1988 relegated it still further into the past.

Today, among the remnants of the Danish Church there are still many individuals in whom Grundtvigianism continues to exist. During the 1980s, three Grundtvig Conferences were held at Grand View College, with speakers from Denmark. The Archives at Grand View houses a collection of literature by and about N.F. S. Grundtvig, a collection that is perhaps the largest and best in this country. Meanwhile, men such as Dr. Johannes Knudsen, Professor Axel Kildegaard, Dr. Ernest Nielsen, and Pastor Enok Mortensen, all of whom are now deceased, have written extensively about Grundtvig. Their writings have aroused the curiosity of some of their professional colleagues to the extent that there is a distinct interest yet today.

Folk Schools

Though Grundtvig never established one, he is credited with the origin of the Folk School in Denmark; today, there are approximately 100 scattered throughout the kingdom. Folk Schools are generally privately owned, though they do receive some subsidy from the state. They are open to young people in their teens and twenties and

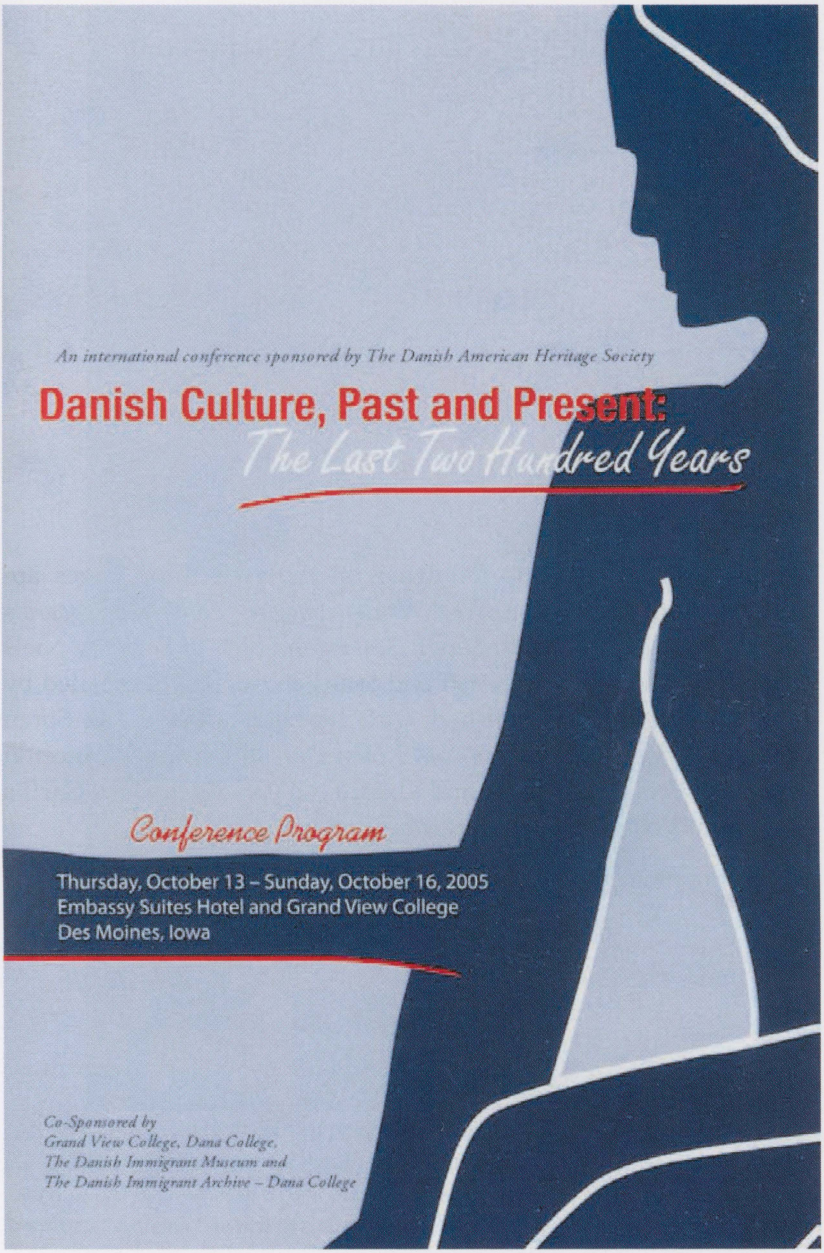
there are no entrance qualifications. A few schools specialize, but most emphasize liberal arts. The favored method of presentation is the lecture and there are no examinations or other factors associated with the traditional school.

Grundtvigian Danes who came to America were familiar with these schools and many had attended such. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that they should want to establish Folk Schools in the New World. The first such school was established at Elk Horn, Iowa in 1878. In rather rapid succession similar schools were begun at Ashland, Michigan; West Denmark, Wisconsin; Nysted, Nebraska; Tyler, Minnesota; and, in the twentieth century, at Solvang, California and Dalum, Alberta, Canada. Some of these institutions died rather quickly, but others, notably those at Nysted and Tyler continued until the 1930s.

One may well wonder why these schools, which seem to have been rather successful in Denmark, largely failed in this country. The reason usually given is economic; that is, without some government support, which they do receive in Denmark, such schools could not long continue. In my view there is another, and perhaps more fundamental reason: it is the fact that potential students in this country seek a degree, or at least a diploma, some evidence that they have received and absorbed some knowledge. Knowledge alone is not enough, and so potential students have shunned the Folk Schools.

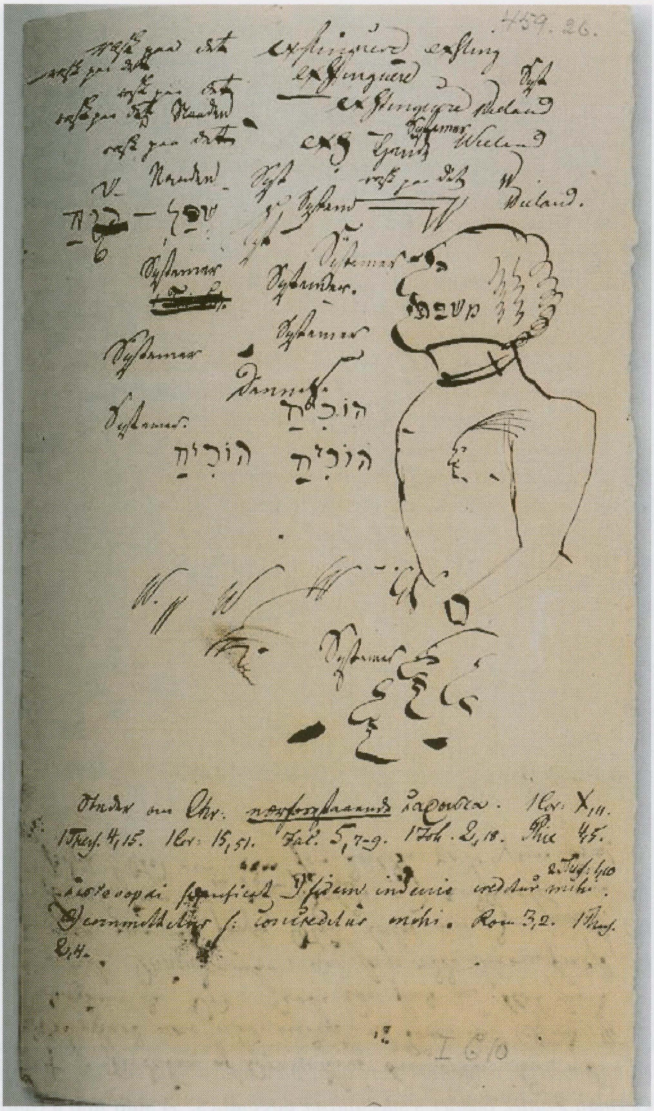
Grundtvig and the Folk School Spirit Today

If such schools have not succeeded in America, the Folk School spirit, which embodies an awakening through enlightenment and inspiration to an awareness of and involvement in the fullness of life, is not entirely dead. That same spirit pervades the annual gatherings at the Danebod Folk School in Tyler and the lecture series at Solvang. The Pacific Northwest Danes gather annually at Menucha, in Oregon, for similar reasons. So, too, do attendees at the Family Camp, which is held each year at West Denmark. Moreover, the annual recreation labs at Tyler, which attract a somewhat younger group, are an outgrowth of the same spirit. These rec labs,

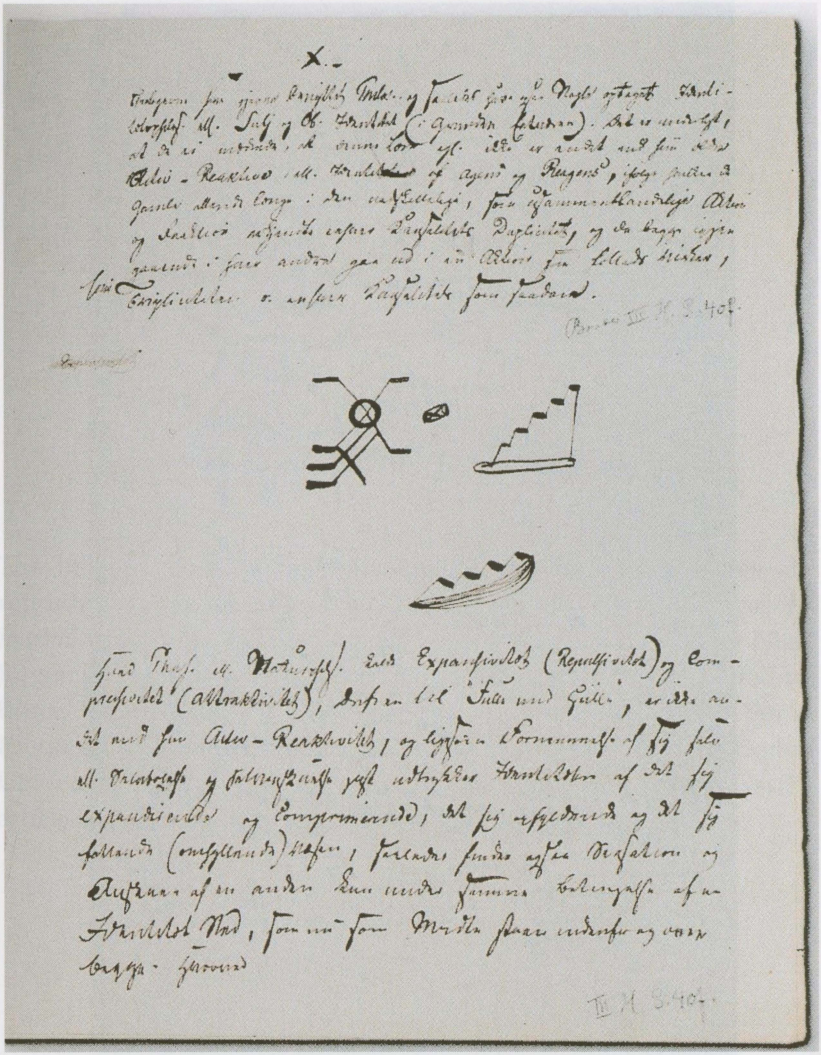


Cover of the conference program.

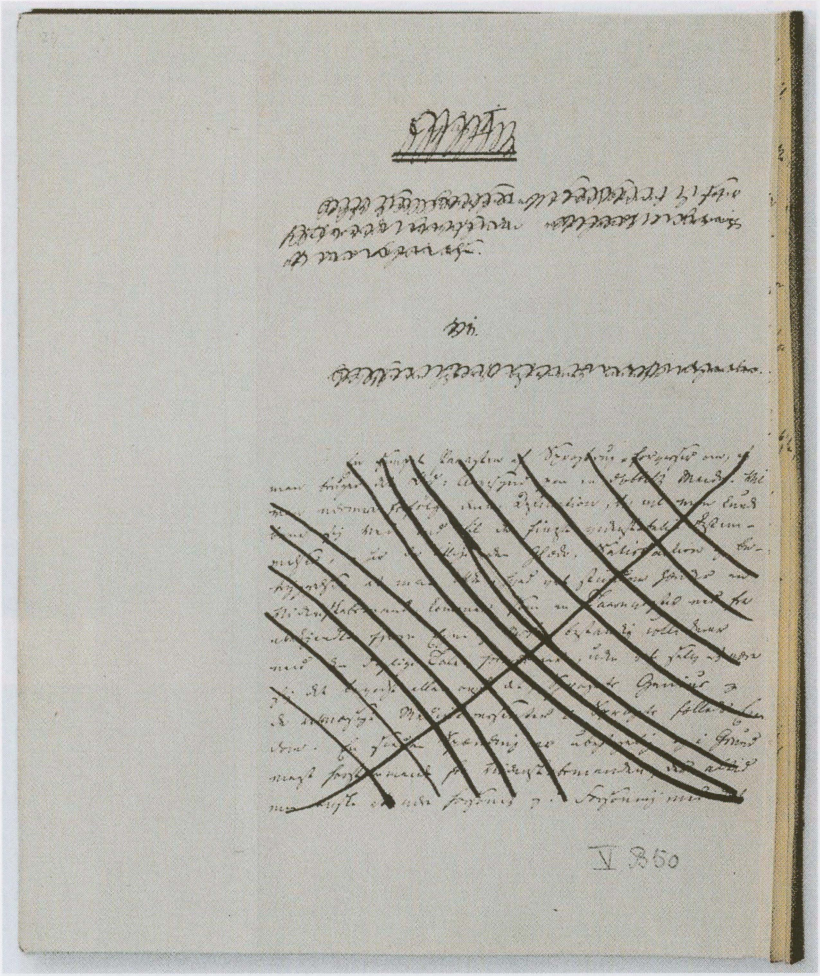
The images and captions following on the next three pages are reprinted with permission from *Written Images. Søren Kierkegaard's Journals, Notebooks, Booklets, Sheets, Scarps, and Slips of Paper* by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff and Johny Kondrup. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. Published with the assistance of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre and Royal Danish Library. Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford. 2003. See Joakim Garff's article in this book of proceedings beginning on page 109.



A torn off page with disjointed pen exercises or doodlings. The main figure is a (Prussian?) officer whose mouth is made of Hebrew consonants and who is surrounded by a series of words that are repeated over and over. Most frequent is the word "systems," which of course makes one think of Hegel. Undated, ca. 1833.



These strange abstract drawings were done on a folded folio sheet of excerpts from the German Frantz Baader's speculative dogmatics. A stair and a chain of mountains can be identified, but it is unclear what the apparatus on the left is intended to depict. Undated, ca. 1834. The section shown here is one fourth of the folio sheet.



Kierkegaard's deletions present a varied and fascinating sight. Here is one of the most peculiar; it is from one of the booklets containing the draft of The Concept of Anxiety (1844)*, the beginning of "Chapter I, § 1." The overlapping loops of ink together with the leaf-vein pattern of lines in the main text evince an unusual concern to delete what had been written — but not the least bit more! The deletions do not trespass onto the white paper.*

The following eleven images accompany the article by John R. Christianson, *Gyde-Petersen: A Skagen Artist in America* beginning on page 264.

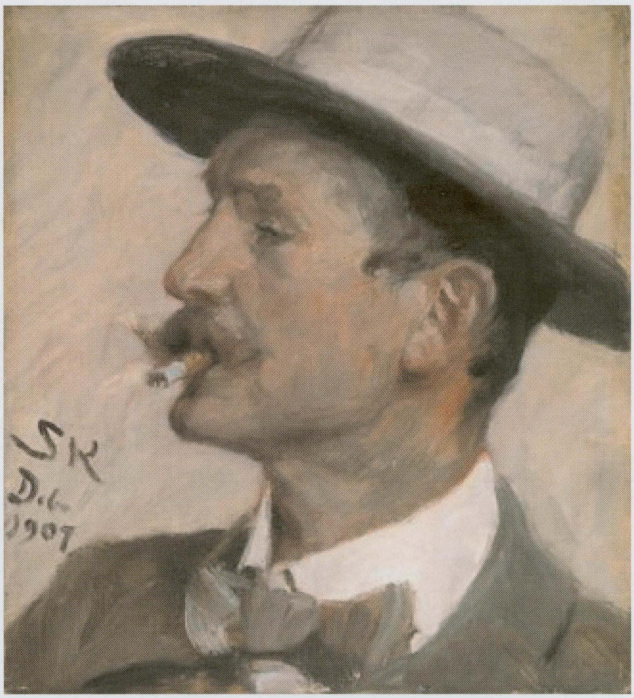


Image 1. *Skagens Museum, used with permission*
P. S. Krøyer Hans Gyde-Petersen *1907*

Image 2. Hans Gyde-Petersen, *Minnesota River Valley* 1924

Image 3. Hans Gyde-Petersen, *LeSueur River* 1924

Image 4. Hans Gyde-Petersen, *LeSueur River* 1924

Image 5. Hans Gyde-Petersen *Minneopa Creek* 1924

Image 6. Hans Gyde-Petersen *Irene Peterson* 1924

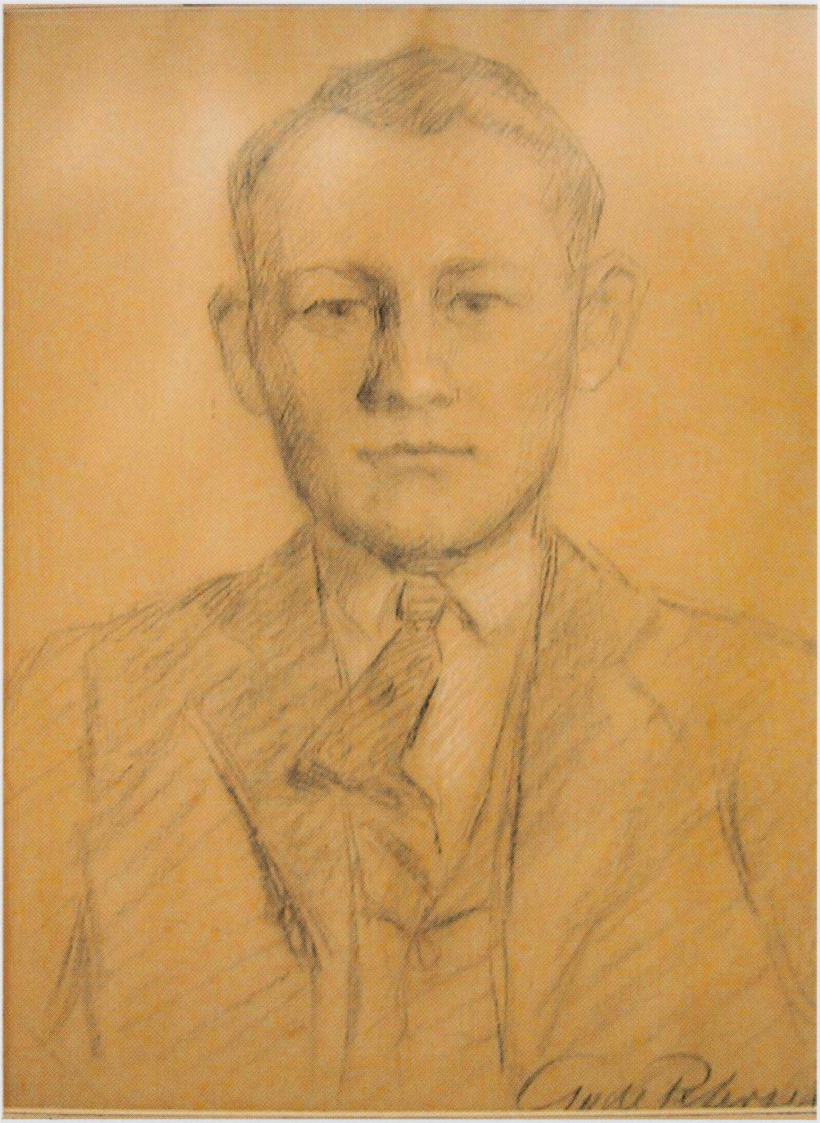


Image 7. Hans Gyde-Petersen *George R. Peterson* 1924

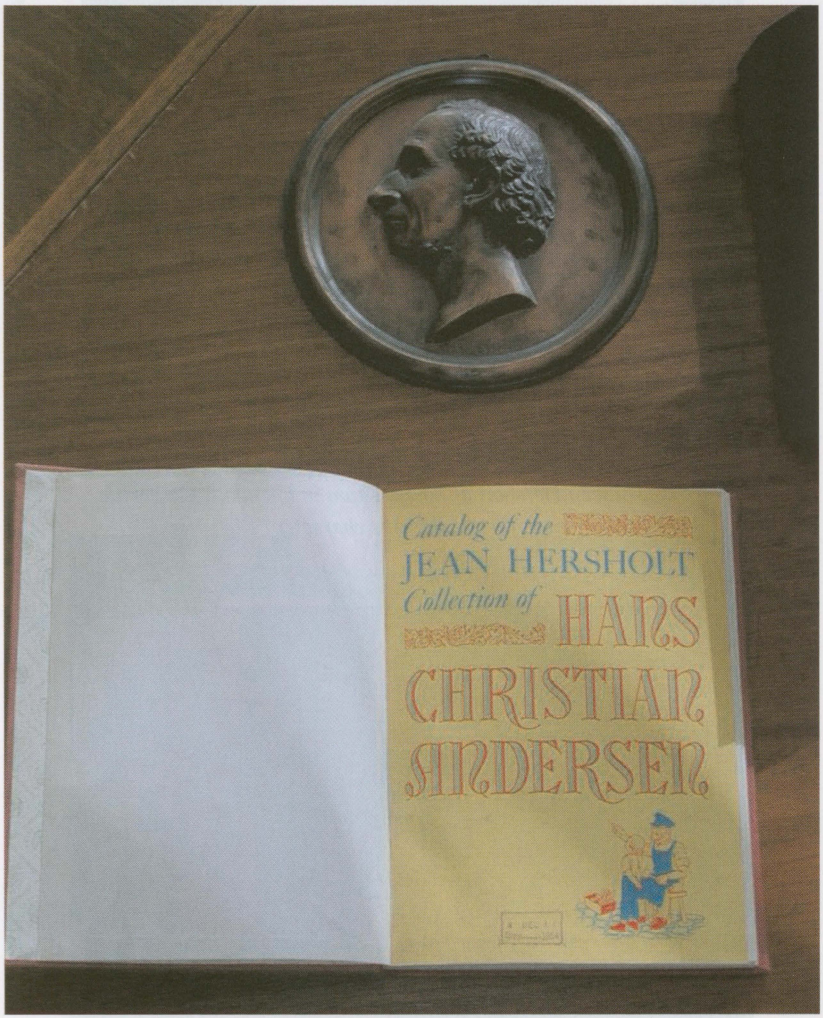
Image 8. Hans Gyde-Petersen *Still Life with Bowl of Fruit* 1924

Image 9. Hans Gyde-Petersen *Grant Grove* 1924

Image 10. Hans Gyde-Petersen *Old Trees* 1924

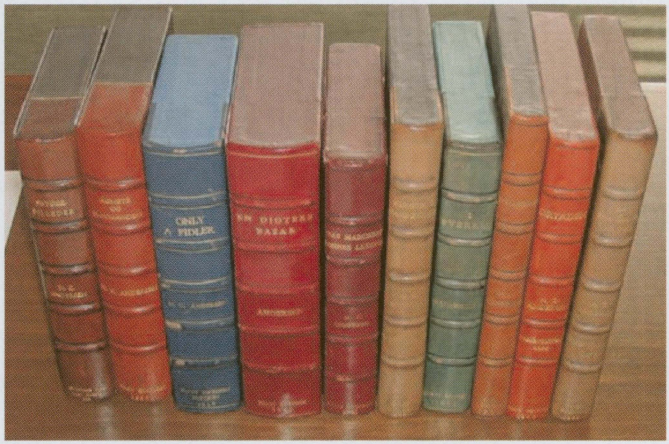
Image 11. Give-Egnens Museum, J. R. Christianson photo
Hans Gyde-Petersen *Kings River* 1924

The photographs on the following two pages come from a presentation on the Jean Hersholt Collection of Anderseniana at The Library of Congress by Kristi Planck Johnson and Taru Spiegel beginning on page 247.



Catalog of the Jean Hersholt Collection
Photo courtesy of Kristi Planck Johnson and Taru Spiegel.

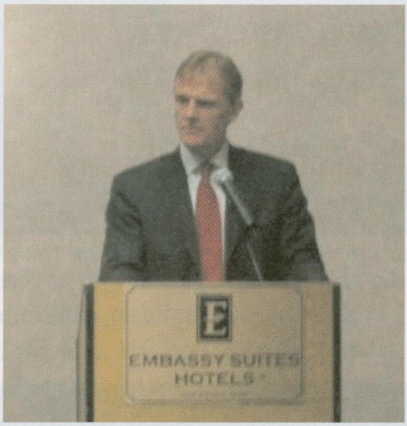
The grave of Jean Hersholt at Forest Lawn in Glendale, California. The statue represents Andersen's character "Klod Hans."



Translations of Hans Christian Andersen's writings in the Hersholt Collection at The Library of Congress.

Photo courtesy of Kristi Planck Johnson and Taru Spiegel.

The next two pages contain photos from the conference.



Danish Ambassador to the United States Friis Arne Petersen addresses the audience at the Grand Banquet.
Photo courtesy of Dean Larsen.

A large audience listens intently during a session on Hans Christian Andersen.
Photo courtesy of Dean Larsen.

Costumed young actors from Denmark were part of the Hans Christian Andersen Parade.
Photo courtesy of Dean Larsen.

Close-up of two members of the Hans Christian Andersen Parade
Photo courtesy of Dean Larsen.

as they are called, have now grown so large that three must be held each summer.

During the 1980s, three Grundtvig Conferences were held at Grand View College. For each, the major speaker was someone from Denmark who was a recognized authority on some aspect of Grundtvigianism. These meetings were fairly well attended by the Danish community, but few people came from outside that community. These meetings are no longer held for a variety of reasons.

In 2003, a Grundtvig Conference was scheduled to be held at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia.[13] However, this conference was later postponed and, to date, no new time has been set.

Not least, the monthly publication *Church and Life*, begun as the Danish *Kirke og Folk*, is a continuation of papers launched by the Danish Lutheran Church in America. Those papers were started and continue in the spirit of Grundtvig. Most of the readers have an ancestry that places them among the Grundtvigian Danes.

Conclusion

It will be seen, then, that Grundtvigianism has a checkered history in America. It has faced strong opposition from many quarters, and it has never been institutionalized. Books have been written about it. One of the best in the English language was written in 1997 by Canon A.M. Allchin, in England, although there is still a very limited literature on Grundtvig in the English language. To my knowledge, Grundtvig has never been taught in America, but the spirit of Grundtvigianism has been caught. This accounts for the meetings and camps that are held by the descendants of the immigrants to this day and which one may reasonably expect to continue in the foreseeable future. Grundtvigianism has never had a great effect on American thought, and it probably never will. Unlike Danes, most Americans know they are not Grundtvigians, but the remaining few who are, take pride in the heritage that has come to them from N.F.S. Grundtvig.

[1] Johannes Knudsen, *Selected Writings, N.F.S. Grundtvig*, Philadelphia, 1976, p.5.

[2] Kaj Thaning, *N.F.S. Grundtvig*, Det Danske Selskab, 1972, p. 83.

[3] Hal Koch, *Danmarks Kirke Gennem Tiderne*, Copenhagen, 1960, p. 139.

[4] Steven M. Borish, *The Land of the Living*, Nevada City, CA, 1991, p. 167.

[5] Claus L. Clausen, Diary, cited in Rasmus Andersen, *Pastor Claus Lauritz Clausen*, Blair, NE, 1921, p. 40.

[6] E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among the Norwegian Americans*, Minneapolis, 1960, Vol. I, p. 115.

[7] A.L.C. Grove-Rasmussen, *Reiseberetning*, Odense Denmark, 1871.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 34.

[9] Claus L. Clausen, letter cited in Rasmus Andersen, *ibid.* p. 151.

[10] F.L. Mathiasen, letter cited in Rasmus Andersen, *ibid.* p. 150.

[11] Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant Church in American History*, Cambridge, 1942, p. 114.

[12] Abdel Ross Wentz, *The Lutheran Church in American History*, Philadelphia, 1933, p. 261.

[13] See announcement in *Church and Life*, March 15, 2003, p. 2.