



FREDERIK LANGE GRUNDTVIG

A Magnetic Leader and Minister in the Danish Lutheran Church

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By THOMAS P. CHRISTENSEN¹

One of the most romantic characters in Danish-American history is Frederik Lange Grundtvig, dreamer, poet, naturalist, minister, and promoter of Danish-American ideals.

Frederik Lange was the youngest son of Nicolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, the most striking personality in Nineteenth Century Denmark, and through him a scion of the famous Skjalm Hvide family—the Adams family of Denmark. His mother, Marie Toft Grundtvig, was the heiress to a large country estate. He lived a sheltered life in childhood, for he attended neither public nor private school, being educated at home. But among his playmates were children of royal blood.

At the age of twenty-two he entered the University of Copenhagen where he remained five years, studying first one year of philosophy and then four years of political science. In none of these branches of learning did he afterwards distinguish himself. But he had by-interests which became permanent pursuits. Already as a student in Copenhagen he had written readable poetry, and his love of nature study—botany and ornithology—had been awakened.

After his graduation in 1881 his botanical excursions carried him far afield. On one of these trips he visited the country estate Tyllinge in southern Sweden, "beautiful Tyllinge" as he not without reason called it; for there he met, wooed and won the fair Birgitte Christina Nilsson.

The young Grundtvigs thought first of buying an estate in Sweden or Denmark, but finally the young lovers decided upon something both more daring and romantic, the story of which reads like a tale out of the Middle Ages. Instead of settling down at home they packed their trunks for a honeymoon on far-off Tahiti

¹This study has been based on the chapter on Grundtvig in the author's unpublished doctor's thesis *A History of the Danes in Iowa* (1924).

in the South Pacific; but, for some reason or other, they got no farther than Shiocton, Outagamie county, Wisconsin. There they bought a little farm and settled down to a secluded life in the greenwoods. While they farmed in a small way, Grundtvig spent much time hunting and studying the birds of the locality. Mrs. Grundtvig tried bravely to speak English with the neighbors' children. Both frequently went berrying and boating.

It was a red-letter day in the little farm home when the Danish minister, Reverend Thorvald Helveg and his wife from Neenah, Winnebago county, were visitors. Grundtvig and Helveg became life-long friends, and this friendship served as one of the determining factors when Grundtvig decided to become a minister.

According to Grundtvig's own statements he had not taken his young bride to the greenwoods of Wisconsin merely to spend their honeymoon, but also to have time to contemplate what his life work should be. His friendship with Helveg resulted in bringing to his attention the need of educated ministers for the Danish immigrants often living in secluded settlements; and, so it seemed to Grundtvig, reverting in some cases to a kind of barbarism.

Accordingly he began the study of theology privately—there was at that time no Danish Lutheran theological seminary in the United States—and some time after presented himself for examination to the directors of the Danish Lutheran church. Passing this satisfactorily in 1883, he accepted a call from then St. Johannes congregation in Clinton, Iowa, and there the Grundtvigs had their hospitable home during the following seventeen years.

SECRET SOCIETY CAUSED DIVISION

At the time that Grundtvig entered the ministry a controversy was raging in the Danish church because of the rise of a Danish fraternal organization under the name of the Danish Brotherhood. Like other American lodges it was organized mainly for the purpose of mutual

aid through cooperative life insurance, sickness and funeral aids; but it also had secondary social aims. The most objectionable features of the society to some of the Danish Lutheran church members, were its secrecy and ritual, which to them seemed little short of idolatry. Grundtvig entered heartily into this controversy. He read widely anti-masonic literature and soon posed as the champion against "all that fiendishness of which free-masonry is the head." Like other Scandinavian Lutherans—the Swedish, for instance—he favored the exclusion of lodge members from the church. But although on that point he completely dominated some of the annual church meetings, he was not able to carry exclusion through as a general church policy. Yet, it was adopted by his own congregation. Grundtvig's easily kindled enthusiasm perhaps carried him farther than his calmer judgment would sanction, and it may be that he admitted this to lodge members. Certain it is, that he had friends in "the camp of the enemy," friends who admired him for his devotion to the preservation of Danish life and culture in a foreign land.

It was, however, this devotion which brought about the theological dispute between the two factions in the Danish church—the Inner Mission People and the Grundtvigians—to the breaking point. The question in dispute was whether the Apostolic Creed or the Scriptures should be given preference in the church. Holding to the former of these contentions and denying the latter, the strict Grundtvigians appeared to the strict Inner Mission People as little better than heretics. Grundtvig increased the tensivity of the situation when he and others in 1887 organized the Danish People's Society, which aimed at the union of all Danish-Americans *not opposed* to the Church for the purpose of preserving the Danish language, life, and culture in the United States. Since a large number of the Grundtvigians became members of the People's Society, the Inner Mission People saw in the establishment of the society an attempt to unite Thor and Jesus, nationality and Christianity, worldliness and

godliness; and when personal animosities capped the climax of the controversy and made of the Danish church a house divided against itself, the inevitable split came in 1894.

This necessary, but deplorable event broke the heart of many a Danish minister. It sent Helveg back to Denmark, never to return permanently. It also made Grundtvig think of returning. He was offered the pastorate at the Marble church in Copenhagen, a very tempting offer. But he decided to remain in Clinton.

The church controversy gave Grundtvig one of the strong interests of his maturer years. It made him turn to the original writings of the Church Fathers for proof of his father's contention that the Apostolic Creed had been given to the apostles by Christ. All he found, however, was that the Creed had been transmitted orally among the Christians—though not necessarily in its present form—in the 2nd, 3d, and 4th centuries A. D. Most of the results of his researches were published in Denmark. In appreciation of this great work his own congregation presented him a collection of the writings of the Church Fathers, worth several hundred dollars.

The split in 1894 at first seemed to have cleared the way for the building of a Danish university (college) in the United States. Such an institution was also projected to be located in Grand View addition, Des Moines, Iowa. Much to the regret of Grundtvig, it was soon apparent that it could not be fully realized. The school became Grand View college, a theological seminary in combination with a folk high school. In time the latter gave way to a regular four-year high school department, and this again to a junior college in 1925. In Des Moines the school was long known as the Danish College.²

Though Grundtvig was a minister and loved by his congregation and others whom he served in a ministerial capacity, he will chiefly be remembered as an inspirer

²After the split in 1894 the Inner Mission People joined another Lutheran group to form the United Danish Lutheran Church, which maintains Dana College at Blair, Nebraska. Dana College is the only Danish-American four-year college, and Grand View College is the only two-year college in the United States.

of Danish-American spiritual ideals, in connection with his work as lecturer, poet, and colonizer. His studies of bird life in Wisconsin and Iowa stood him in good stead in writing some of his songs, many of which have a background of American scenery. In one of these songs (The drifting clouds in the west shed blood) he has used the call of the whip-poor-will with striking effect. The bird's call transcribed by the poet: "If you are willing," is the burden of the song and the poet's answer to the question whether the Danish immigrant can conserve his spiritual heritage in America. Several of Grundtvig's songs were printed in his "Song-book for the Danish-American People." For this work, he and others also adapted numerous Danish songs so that they could be used by Danish-Americans with less distorting of facts. The nature of these changes is well illustrated in the adaptation, in which the adaptor changed the lines: "I will not leave my home in the north nor exchange it for another on earth" to suit the Danish immigrant who had come to stay in the United States. The Songbook passed through several editions; and, in spite of numerous changes and additions, it continued to bear Grundtvig's name. It is used not only by the Grundtvigians at their gatherings, other than religious, but by other Danish-Americans as well. It is Grundtvig's chief contribution to the conservation and development of a Danish-American spiritual heritage.

The formation of Danish colonies according to definite, pre-arranged plans had begun about ten years before Grundtvig came to Wisconsin. He saw the value of such group undertakings and advocated the establishment of colonies by the Danish church. The founding of the colony in Lincoln county, Minnesota, was to a large extent his work. He was present at the celebration of its establishment in 1885. For this occasion he wrote one of his most beautiful songs, ("We turned our prows from the Fatherland's Shore") still frequently sung by the people of the Danish church.

A DANEDOM PROGRAM CRIPPLED

Under the auspices of the Danish People's Society, in 1887, Grundtvig and his friends presented a definite program for Danish-Americans. They appealed to all who loved Denmark, its language, culture and life, to help to conserve and develop Danedom through the establishment of the People's Society which was to encourage the founding and maintenance of Danish lecture courses, social centers or homes, libraries, schools, churches, and colonies among the Danish immigrants. Cooperation with the Swedes and Norwegians in the United States was sought; and the founders of the Society expressed their interest in and love of their adopted country. As we have seen, the growth of the Society was stunted by the controversy within the Danish church, and seriously crippled by the split in 1894. But it is still functioning, and has subsequently to Grundtvig's death in 1903, added two colonies to its credit.

Grundtvig's program for Danish-Americans was broad. Even in church matters he did not want the Danish church to shut itself up tightly within its own organization. At least on one occasion he expressed himself clearly in favor of cooperation with even non-Lutheran churches. He constantly advocated fidelity to the United States which he loved to call "the Rendezvous of Nations" (*Folkestaevnets Land*), implying of course, his faith in the future of the Great Republic as a land of wonderful possibilities through the mingling of the blood and culture of many nations, all living under a free government.

Grundtvig's death came at the untimely age of forty-eight, while he and his family were visiting in Denmark. He had expected to return to the United States, the land where he had dreamed and realized to a certain extent, the dreams of his maturer years; and where his only daughter had been born. There he had hoped for a further span of years of useful service at the projected university of the Danish church in Des Moines.

Though something of a dilettante as a scholar and an

organizer, Grundtvig was a power to reckon with in any cause he undertook to support. He had a magnetic personality. His ancestry and his name threw a glamour about everything that he said and wrote. The simplicity and sincerity of his religious faith made him loved by all classes of Danish Lutherans. His insistence on the value and beauty of Danedom made enemies for him among certain classes of Danish Lutherans, but it also made friends for him in circles much wider than the limits of the Danish Church. Jacob A. Riis may be a better-known Danish-American among Americans in general. But among Danish-Americans there have been few leaders remembered with more gratitude than Frederik Lange Grundtvig.

BUFFALO BILL'S BIRTH DATE

In the ANNALS OF IOWA July 1929 there was published a very interesting article about the "The Codys in Le Claire," written by Prof. F. M. Fryxell, of Augustana college, Rock Island, in large part an interview with Col. J. D. Barnes, a pioneer of Le Claire. In this it was stated that Col. William Frederick Cody was born at Le Claire, Iowa, February 26, 1845. He was born in the modest old home of Isaac Cody, at Le Claire, which home has since been moved by the Burlington railroad to Cody, Wyoming. Some discussion has arisen as to the correctness of the birth date of the colonel. In writings by Col. Cody's two sisters the date is given as 1846, though on the tombstone it is given as 1845. At the request of H. S. Cody of Winston-Salem, N. C. and at the suggestion of Prof. Fryxell, the census of 1850, which is a part of the Iowa archives, has been consulted and it is there set down that in 1850, the age of William F. was 4 years, which would make the 1846 date correct. It is stated that the family bible record confirms this also. The date of 1845 given in the ANNALS OF IOWA fourteen years ago was from the recollection of Colonel Barnes, who could easily have been in error.

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