

GRUNDTVIG IN ENGLISH SERIES: VOLUME ONE



N.F.S. GRUNDTVIG A LIFE RECALLED



An Anthology of
Biographical Source-Texts
Translated from the Danish and Edited by
S.A.J. Bradley

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

N. F. S. Grundtvig

A life recalled

Grundtvig in English is a series commissioned by the Centre for Grundtvig Studies, University of Aarhus, Denmark; this volume in collaboration with the Department of English & Related Literature, University of York, England

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Grundtvig in English Series: Volume I
General Editor : S. A. J. Bradley

Aarhus University Press 

Dedication

To the memory of N. F. S. Grundtvig and to Jens Holger Schjørring and Donald (A. M.) Allchin for their enduring commitment to the advancement of Grundtvig studies in Danish and in English and for their collaboration, warm friendship and inspiration over nearly two decades.

Hvad er en Dag? Et Øieblik
Vi neppe Tid at skue fik
Og dog af lutter slige Dage
Vor Levetid bestaar.
Hvo er vel den som fræk tør klage
Han ikke nok af Dage faar
Lad han dem sammen regne!
Og ved enhver antegne
Hvad han paa dem har gjort.
Da skal han see hvis Skyld det er
Hans Levetid var kort.

Grundtvig, Dagbog begyndt i København
Den XXVIII^{de} November MDCCCII

What is a day? A moment's span
we hardly had the time to scan.
Yet of such days, and such days purely,
our living-time is wrought.
Whoever dares bemoan, so surly,
his sum of days as all too short,
let him but count their tally
and for each one tell fully
what from those days he won.
Then he shall see whose blame it is
his time so soon seemed done.

Verse prefacing Grundtvig's diary
begun in Copenhagen, 28 November 1802



Kimer, I Klokker! nu sluktes en Sol over Mulde,
længe den kæmped mod Mørket med Straalerne fulde;
sildig den sank,
stor i sin Nedgang og blank.
Æren er Guds i det høje.

Ring out, O bells! now a sun over earth is grown darkling,
long though it fought with the murk, in full radiance sparkling;
late sunk in night,
grand was its setting, and bright!
God's upon high is the glory!

Jens Christian Hostrup (1818-92), Ved N. F. S. Grundtvigs Jordefærd [At N.F.S.G.s Funeral] (1872)

N.F.S Grundtvig: A life recalled

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Foreword

The projected series of English translations of writings of N. F. S. Grundtvig, of which this is the first volume, was devised as an essential corollary to the work of the Centre for Grundtvig Studies in the University of Aarhus, Denmark, which in 1990 committed itself to a reassessment of the Grundtvig legacy on the threshold of a new millennium and in an international perspective. As the Centre developed its programme of research, publications and conferences and seminars in venues as diverse as Aarhus and Copenhagen, Chicago, Kolkata and Darjeeling, Durham and York, it became ever more apparent that the Centre itself would have to take an initiative in supplying the acutely felt want of English translations of the works of Grundtvig in those parts of the world where there was an expressed interest in Grundtvig but little knowledge of the Danish language. Accordingly, with the generous support of grant-awarding bodies an English Translation Project was established. While work on this first volume was in progress, indications came from among its potential readership that there was also a greater need of supporting apparatus – in particular, contextual information in the English language – than it had originally been the intention to provide. It had indeed been planned from the outset that the first volume should be biographical in order to establish the figure of Grundtvig for such readers as could not access Danish sources, but it was decided in the light of this intimated need to augment very considerably the Index, in such a way as to furnish a reasonably broad sketch of the contemporary background of institutions, events, circumstances, personalities and ideas against which Grundtvig lived out his life and pursued his various causes and interests, great and small. Consequently, the completion of the work was protracted; but it is hoped that the resulting volume will therefore prove not only to be sufficiently informative for the general reader but also serviceable for use in university programmes and schools curricula; and that it will also serve to supplement future volumes published in this series.

During frequent research visits to Denmark in the course of this task I have received a great deal of hospitality. In Vartov, that priceless asset of Kirkeligt Samfund, Hans and Kirsten Grishauge and the staff who there give such practical daily meaning to the Grundtvigian concept of *det folkelige* have virtually become a surrogate family to me in my many stays and visits. Kurt Johannes Dokkedahl and Birgitte Amdisen have been extraordinarily generous in opening their home to me as often as I needed to be in Copenhagen, even to the extent of providing me with a book-lined study, where much of this volume was drafted. My good friends Theodor and Lise Jørgensen and Eyvin (K. E.) and Ilse Bugge have also extended warm hospitality and the encouragement of their interest in the ongoing project.

For the collaborative agreement whereby I was seconded for a period from my post at the University of York to join the Centre for Grundtvig Studies in Aarhus University, I warmly thank my former Department and the University authorities at York. My adoptive colleagues in Aarhus could not have been more unstinting in their readiness to help an English Anglo-Saxonist learn more about Grundtvig, theology and the

nineteenth century. I must especially name Kim Arne Pedersen than whom few people, if any, know more about Grundtvig and none could be more altruistic in sharing that knowledge with others; but I am also greatly indebted for the privilege of the wise conversations and hospitality of Jakob Balling and Christian Thodberg. To Jette Holm and her colleagues in the Grundtvig Sermons project, I am grateful for permission to make use of the transcription of Grundtvig's sermon of 1 May 1844 that is used in item 53. To the younger generation in the Centre I am also indebted. Anja Stokholm most generously found time amid a busy professional and domestic life to draft the selection of significant dates. From conversations with Anders Eskedal, Anders Holm and Ulrik Overgaard I have gleaned more than they may have been aware of. It goes without saying that the way has many a time been smoothed by the admirable competence of the secretaries at the hub of the organisation: Birgit Winther-Hansen and her successor Anne-Grethe Dion Jørgensen. When the day's work was done, I was often revived by the warmth of hospitality offered in the charming home of Jette and Jens Holger Schjørring: they know how much their friendship has meant to me.

There are many others to whom I am indebted for something gleaned from discussions: I am grateful to them all. Those to whom I owe sincere thanks for help with particular aspects of the book include Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, K. E. Bugge, Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen and Benedict Bradley.

It is right to recall and record what a privilege it is in Denmark and in England to have access to so many fine libraries and to be assisted by sufficient trained and dedicated staff – a hallmark, one might say, of a humane modern society, expensive though these resources are to maintain. Thanks be for the Royal Library in Copenhagen and the British Library in London. At the Grundtvig Bibliotek in Vartov, Liselotte Larsen, its librarian, has all along been a valued source of ever ready help both for on the spot searches and through email enquiries: I thank her for her good-humoured efficiency and encouragement. The Danish online Biblioteksvagt has never let me down: long may this excellent service be allowed to continue. In particular I have to thank Birgitte Langkilde of the Statsbibliotek in Aarhus in whose mailbox my enquiries tended to land and who answered them all with exemplary promptness and thoroughness.

At Aarhus University Press Pernille Pennington was my first, ever encouraging editor and valued sounding-board for ideas in progress: I am grateful to her – as I am also to her successor, Mary Waters Lund, for her adoptive enthusiasm for the project.

There will be errors, perhaps many of them, in so fact-fraught a book. To those people who have so charitably helped me avoid a number of them in the course of writing I owe much, especially to Mette Windfeld Bradley for discussing early stages of the translations, to Jakob Balling for patiently sampling their penultimate draft and making various suggestions for their improvement, and to Søren Jensen and Susanne Gregersen who heroically scanned an earlier draft of the Index with an impressive *falkeblik* and spared me various embarrassments. For surviving errors I alone am to be reproached.

There are three names I reserve for especially grateful mention. The first is that of Kurt Dokkedahl, whose voluntary and enthusiastic role as research assistant has been of the greatest practical benefit to me throughout. For his command of our materials, to which I could appeal when I needed to clarify my own mind, and for his

assiduous labours which have spared me hours of toil, I am enormously grateful. The other two are those of Jens Holger Schjørring and Donald (A. M.) Allchin. My deep indebtedness to these two finest of colleagues and friends is indicated in the dedication of this book.

*S.A.J. Bradley,
February 2008*

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The young curate from Udby poetically admonishes a captive audience of clergy and attempts conversion of a friend to belief in Scripture as “dictated by the Holy Spirit” – a belief he soon himself abandoned.

The “seven lean years” 1813-1820

72. *Carl Otto* 196
Engagement and marriage and the problems of absorbing Grundtvig into the family: “In general he already possessed a name as a poet, historian and theologian – and therefore the family naturally regarded it as an honour to be able to count him as one of their own. But at that time too he was just as peculiar in his ways as he has later shown himself to be.”

Priest in Præstø with Skibbinge 1821-1822

73. *Nicolai William Theodorus [N. W. T.] Bondesen* 198
Bondesen, appointed parish priest in Præstø 1872, records anecdotes still current there, ostensibly from the time of Grundtvig’s incumbency half a century earlier.

Curate at Vor Frelser Kirke Copenhagen 1822-1826

74. *Christian Sigfred [Chr. S.] Ley* 200
“‘Yes’ said Grundtvig, ‘I can well believe that it must pain you that he wants to make you a pillar of his rotten church.’ ‘Yes indeed’ said the bishop.” In the Clausen case, Bishop Münter speaks (alleges Ley) with forked tongue.
75. *Hans [H.] Brun* 200
“There circulated among theological students a declaration of gratitude to Clausen”
76. *Jakob Christian [J. C.] Lindberg* 201
“He came in to us and told us that he had today tendered his resignation”

Public and private life 1826-1832

77. *Hans [H.] Brun* 203
“Grundtvig took him to be a priest of Moravian tendency”
78. *Frederik Ludvig Bang [F. L. B.] Zeuthen* 203
“I should hardly have dwelt upon this saying of Grundtvig, if a deficiency did not express itself therein which seems to me characteristic of Grundtvig and his followers.”

79. *Christian Sigfred [Chr. S.] Ley* 206
"This asserts Beda, that right honest man." Johan fails a test of learning by heart.
80. *Marie Blom* 206
A child's-eye view of life in the Grundtvig household in Strandgade, Christianshavn (1829-40) – recalled from fifty years on.
81. *Lavra Grundtvig* 215
"To work and to be obedient. This Svend and Johan learned in their father's school, whatever else could be said about it."
82. *Christian Sigfred [Chr. S.] Ley* 219
The 25-year-old Ley, in the privacy of his diary, reveals something of the emotional religiosity which was often focused by his followers upon Grundtvig the man.
83. *Christian Sigfred [Chr. S.]Ley* 220
1832: The struggle to have authorised a free congregation at Frederiks Kirke. "The fact that it was Frederiks Kirke we received, both Grundtvig and Lindberg attribute, after God, to our kindly King."

Evensong preacher at Frederiks kirke 1832-1839

84. *Christian Sigfred [Chr. S.] Ley* 226
"Grundtvig sits himself down in a corner of the sofa and composes and Hagen writes it down. It is indeed remarkable that one can sit down in this way and dictate lovely new verses from out of one's head."
85. *Frederik Ludvig Bang [F. L. B.] Zeuthen* 226
"The day after hearing this sermon I again visited him (after several years' interval) and thanked him for the sermon. Despite the unconstrained opinion I had publicly expressed about and against Grundtvig, and for which I had had to listen to very ugly things from his friends, yet in this case I was conscious of no ill-will and could approach him with a clear brow and an open countenance." Zeuthen continues his analytic criticism of Grundtvig and Grundtvigianism. See also Item 78.
86. *Povl Frederik [Frederik] Barfod* 230
Frederik Barfod (1811-96) wrote down his reminiscences in the last two years of his life, in a series of letters to his grandson from which this survey of his long involvement with Grundtvig is drawn. Few others of his generation were as engaged as he with such vigour over such a critical span of time in Denmark's modern history and in such a range of more or less national political and social (rather than religious-ecclesial) causes; some of which were also dear to Grundtvig's heart and entailed direct and practical collaboration between them; and indeed the two families were linked in friendship. Barfod's relationship with Grundtvig, steadfast from his side over most of four decades, also had its periods of turbulence, for Barfod was no less a man of principle than Grundtvig. His writings have a primary importance among biographical materials for a life of Grundtvig.

87. *Hans [H.] Brun* 247
 “He could be somewhat curt when someone he did not know came and interrupted him.”
88. *Hans [H.] Brun* 247
 The double jeopardy of one of Grundtvig’s visitors: “I don’t talk with people whose breath reeks of akvavit”
89. *Peter [Frederik] Adolph Hammerich* 247
 “Andersen could never forgive him for this, and called him ‘a rude old man.’”
90. *Hans Lassen [H. L.] Martensen* 248
 Martensen, Bishop of Sjælland and theologian of international standing, writes with characteristically generous acknowledgment of what he found attractive and admirable in Grundtvig, particularly in the years of their earlier friendship; but also makes clear his reasoned grounds for rejecting Grundtvig’s “so-called peerless discovery [hans saakaldte mageløse Opdagelse].”
91. *Carl Joakim [C. J.] Brandt* 252
 The birth-pangs of Christian Molbech’s Danish Historical Association (1839): Grundtvig fails to win a commitment to a ‘universal’ approach to history.

Priest at Vartov 1839-1872

92. *Hans [H.] Brun* 255
 From the year following Grundtvig’s ‘Mands Minde’ lectures, a glimpse of the centrality of Grundtvig the persona in winning new adherents to his cause. The young Peter Rasmussen Andresen (1814-53), visiting Copenhagen from Norway, “had heard so much about him that he wanted to go to Vartov” and, having listened to Grundtvig preaching there, “on Monday morning he goes to call on Grundtvig who then still lived out in Christianshavn. He rings the bell, and Grundtvig himself comes out in his shirtsleeves. ‘Thank you for the sermon yesterday!’ says Andresen. ‘Oh, so you were in church. Please come in!’”
93. *Schøller Parelius [Vilhelm] Birkedal* 256
 From 1839 Grundtvig acquired a new follower in the 30-year-old Vilhelm Birkedal (1809-92), won over by a combination of esteem for Grundtvig and profound disappointment at the attacks made upon Grundtvig by Bishop Mynster. As this lengthy excerpt from his reminiscences well documents, Birkedal was to prove uniquely important as one who both advocated and, sometimes at much risk to his career, put into practice Grundtvig’s ideas, and thus contributed crucially to the definition of Grundtvigianism. Like others in Grundtvig’s circle, he was devoted and loyal but always his own man.
94. (a-c). [Søren] Aabye Kierkegaard 272
 (a) “As a thinker, Grundtvig is a Genius; but ...” 273

- (b) “Nor, the more’s the pity, is the neo-Platonic-gnosticising mish-mash unparalleled [mageløst].” 274
- (c) “Every calmer anxiety over the religious, every more inward understanding which in fear and trembling is kept under restraint by anxiety over the self, easily feels itself painfully affected by that absence of restraint which heedlessly busies itself only with grand visions and matchless discoveries [mageløse Opdagelser]. One can be a Genius and become a geriatric without learning the least thing from life, existentially.” 275
95. Richard [Rich.] Petersen 276
 “Grundtvig and Steffens had much to debate between them. Especially the relationship between Danish and German, which had started to become a burning issue [...] and it is easy to understand that they must have a different perception of this. They could both become heated, especially Grundtvig.”
96. Johan Borup 276
 “‘Rubbish?’ Øhlenschläger exclaimed. ‘Perhaps you, Grundtvig, have never written any rubbish?’”
97. Peter [Frederik] Adolph Hammerich 277
 “One cannot be surprised that especially lay-folk should be a little afraid when they had to visit such a man, for whom they nurtured so deep an awe.”
98. Hans Lassen [H. L.] Martensen 277
 “He is a far greater poet than both Kingo and Brorson; but as a hymn-writer he will never be able to gain access to the people in the manner of these two.” Bishop H. L. Martensen’s judgment upon Grundtvig’s hymns, and an account of his experience of working with Grundtvig in the (ultimately aborted) task of preparing a new hymnal for the Danish Church (1844-46).
99. Hans Lassen [H. L.] Martensen 279
 “It was found that Grundtvig’s individuality, even when it showed itself with genius, was far too one-sidedly obtrusive, not only in his own hymns but in particular in the reworking of those of other writers, whose individuality he to some extent obliterated in order to impose his own instead.” The verdict upon the draft for a new hymnal (for which Grundtvig had borne the burden of “the real work”) is reflected upon by Martensen who also recalls the “captivating” and “edifying” experience of working alongside Grundtvig.
100. Hans [H.] Brun 282
 “They very likely also talked much about the education system.”
101. Carl Joakim [C. J.] Brandt 283
 “In the open door stood the hostess, simply dressed in black, like a knight’s wife from bygone days, with waxen candles in a silver candelabrum to receive her guests. She looked like a Fru Inge, and Fjennesløv never offered greater hospitality, piety and good cheer than that manor; there was an overabundance of everything, both spiritual and material.” Brandt the medievalist vividly characterises the lady of Rønnebæksholm, Marie Toft.

102. *Carl Koch* 285
“Kierkegaard bowed deeply and removed his hat with great reverence.”
103. *Hans [H.] Brun* 285
Grundtvig on soldiers (“One should treat soldiers more as dead things than as living persons”) and on a young man who makes much of Søren Kierkegaard (“Good Lord! does he really!”).
104. *Hans [H.] Brun* 286
The 28-year-old Brun’s first visit on his own to Grundtvig’s home in Vimmelskaftet, Copenhagen. It is 1848 and the eve of elections to The National Constituent Assembly. Invited to dine with various other guests at Grundtvig’s home, he notes the wide range of conversational topics and Grundtvig’s pronouncements upon each. “‘That is a man who can talk,’ said his son-in-law to me when we had got up from the table, and I could not then and cannot now at this moment help thinking: Should there not also be written down ‘Table-discourses’ or more properly ‘Domestic-discourses’ from the Church-chieftain of the North [=Grundtvig], just as from his closest predecessor in church history – the Chieftain [=Luther] in Saxony?”
105. *[Sofus] Magdalous Høgsbro* 291
“For the physical sciences he had on the whole no regard. The life of the spirit was everything to him.”
106. *Alvilda Andersen* 292
A Copenhageners’s 86-year-old memory of Grundtvig on Constitution Day.
107. *[Christen] Mikkelsen Kold* 293
“I answered that I already knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to set up a so-called Higher Bondeskole, to which they answered that in that case I could count upon their subsidy.” Christen Kold recalls negotiations (1849) with the Grundtvigians, establishing him as founder of the free school at Ryslinge which opened on 1 November 1850.
108. *Hans [H.] Brun* 295
“When somebody present attacked the establishment of a new Norwegian written language as proof of an almost total insanity, Grundtvig asked simply: ‘Why?’”
109. *Olaus [O.] Arvesen* 295
The young Norwegian Arvesen, later to become a founder of the first Grundtvigian folk-highschool in Norway, sets a seal on his elated participation in a Scandinavian student gathering in Copenhagen (June 1855) by attending Sunday service at Vartov Church to hear Grundtvig preach and to join in “Vartov’s famous hymn-singing.”
110. *Hans [H.] Brun* 299
Grundtvig’s third marriage: “Naturally, there were at that time too [1857] those who disapproved of the engagement, and those who sneered at it.”

111. *Morten Eskesen* 300
Grundtvig at Marielyst: "Gripping the edge of the table with his hands, he would stand and talk simply and yet so profoundly about the mysteries of human life, for he much dressed his speech in the old Nordic metaphorical language. Individual points took particular hold on me."
112. *Peter Rørdam* 301
"When Grundtvig and Rasmus Nielsen clashed together over Mathematics which R. N. thought was of great use with respect to 'the Eternal!'"
113. *Olaus [O.] Arvesen* 301
"The old man has grown accustomed to stating his opinion, and he has doubtless also brought up his sons to state theirs."
114. *[Ernst] Johannes Trier* 302
"Often on a visit to him, even after his grievous illness in 1867, I have been astonished at how remarkably well-informed he was about everything that was going on round about the country, how attentively he followed it in detail, how often he had the opportunity to have an influence upon what happened."
115. *Olaus [O.] Arvesen* 306
"The lectures gave a survey over the life of the Church from the first ardent days in the Hebrew congregation, from the strongly religious-philosophical days in the Greek congregation, from the centuries of powerful administration in the Church of Rome, etc. He pointed to the kind of folk and the folk-character which lay behind the reception which Christianity got and was bound to get in the seven different congregational circles through which, on its triumphant journey through the national churches, it had progressed." The genesis of Kirke-Speil eller Udsigt over den kristne Menigheds Levnedsløb [The mirror of the Church or Survey of the life-history of the Christian congregation].
116. *Jakob Holm* 308
"I dare to say that I believe everything that is written in this book."

Crisis of Palm Sunday 1867

117. *Peter [Frederik] Adolph Hammerich* 309
"At this time Grundtvig himself was stricken by a severe vicissitude." The events of Palm Sunday 1867 narrated by one who was directly involved.
118. *Hans Peter Gote Birkedal [H. P. B.] Barfod* 314
"In a letter to my betrothed, I tried to describe the incident according as I saw and experienced it. Although my account largely coincides with what is already available, there are nonetheless some divergences, and what happened has so much significance that I want to give my description here, in the letter alluded to. One ought to bear in mind that it is written by a young person under the overwhelming impression of that moving incident." Another account of the events on Palm Sunday 1867.

119. *Thomas Skat Rørdam* 320
"I had completely made up my mind that it was not God's Spirit but insanity which was driving Grundtvig and I decided not to go to the altar and I left the church immediately after the sermon."

The last years 1868-1872

120. *Hans [H.] Brun* 323
"If you want to know our highschoools then you must visit Kold's and Schröder's."
121. *Hans [H.] Brun* 324
"Do you fear death?"
122. *Louise Skrike* 324
Along with many others in Denmark, Grundtvig hoped for a French victory in the war with Germany (1870-71), but this was not to be.
123. *Evald Tang Kristensen* 325
"Not only were all the walls filled with bookshelves but here and there bookcases stood out at right angles into the floorspace. It was indeed a really memorable afternoon."
124. *Johan Borup* 325
"But then it was not what he said, but it was the sublimity and certainty that emanated from his person when he stood up there, old and white-haired, and bore witness to the same he had borne witness to against opposition and with self-sacrifice over sixty years – it was this which made an impression."
125. *Edmund Gosse* 327
"I said at breakfast this morning, 'How I wish I had come to Denmark during the lifetime of Grundtvig!' There was a shout from every one, 'But he is alive, and he still preaches every Sunday morning in the Workhouse Church!' 'This is Sunday morning – I must listen to a poet who was born five years before Byron, and who recollects the execution of Louis XVI. Where is this Workhouse Church?'"
126. *[Ernst] Johannes Trier* 331
"When I had read this for him he said at once: 'If I now gave you four more lines then it would be a song with three eight-lines verses.' I had to read the four last lines aloud for him again. For a little while he sat and gazed out through the open garden door. I shall never forget what a beautiful expression there was upon his face, and what deep emotion there was in his voice when he said: 'Write on.'"
127. *Hans [H.] Brun* 333
"'Yes,' replied Grundtvig, 'But I have written much that is no good.'"

128. *Peter [Frederik] Adolph Hammerich* 333
 “‘Yes,’ said Grundtvig, ‘There is something of the monumental here, in which the English have always had their strength. On hearing this, one cannot help but think of the whole of Anglo-Saxon literature: for it is itself a truly proud ruin and therefore it can well be likened to the city in ruins of which the ancient poet has sung.’ We talked a little more about the Anglo-Saxons and he gave me the poem to take home with me. So I left him – and little suspected that this would be the last time I should see him in this life.”
129. *Hans [H.] Brun* 335
 “On the same day there was a dinner-party at the Grundtvigs where several rigsdagsmænd were present.” Twenty-four hours before his death, Grundtvig discusses current politics with leading parliamentarians.
130. *Louise Skrike* 337
 “And so the day came when we lost Grundtvig.”
131. *Hans [H.] Brun* 338
 “On 2 September, a little after 5 in the afternoon, without any perceptible death-struggle, the course of his rich life was completed.”

Obsequies 1872

132. *Jens Kristian [J. Kristian] Madsen* 339
 Grundtvig’s funeral, 11 September 1872: ceremonies in Copenhagen (“such a multitude of hymn-singing people has probably not walked through the streets of Copenhagen for many centuries”) and at Gammel Køgegaard (“In the cemetery itself, which is a prettily-lying little spot and enclosed by a ring-wall, only a small part of the people could be accommodated”).

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Introduction

“The writings of Grundtvig, whether in prose or verse, have never been attractive to me. They are so exclusively national as to be scarcely intelligible to a foreigner; they lie, if I may say so, outside the European tradition. But as a human being, as a documentary figure in the history of his country, no one could be more fascinating.”

Since Edmund Gosse (*Two Visits to Denmark 1872, 1874*, London 1911) presented this view of Grundtvig to his English-speaking readership at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, fascination with Grundtvig “as a human being” has continued to endure undiminished for nigh on a hundred years more, and it is likely to continue as long as human beings feel drawn in that universal human manner to experience vicariously, through reading of it, the drama, great or small, of another human being’s life.

Grundtvig’s long life incorporated drama on a large scale. At a personal level, its peaks and troughs were determined in part by his vulnerability to a manic-depressive disorder which three times brought him into serious crisis; but the age through which he lived was itself as dramatically turbulent for the Danes as for others across Europe. Grundtvig’s adult life covered three-quarters of the nineteenth century, and it was hardly possible that anyone so seriously engaged in the issues of those decades – determined to play his part in his country’s destiny under God and the worldly powers, willing to accept the burdens of responsibility, to face the exposure, the opposition, the penalties, the defeats, in the hope of also sharing in the victories great and small – could have a life that was anything other than dramatic.

It is a life abundantly documented. As well as writing books in prose and in verse, most of which have considerable personal and autobiographical content (though he never wrote a full formal autobiography), Grundtvig published periodicals of his own and contributed frequently to others. Sermons from almost every Sunday of his pastoral life and a great number of hymns help chart the course of his spiritual development and furnish a record of his pastoral teaching. The huge archive of personal papers in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, contains everything from his passport with its details of height and eye colour, through diaries and notebooks, teaching materials, texts of speeches and lectures, letters received, copies of his correspondence with others, and progressive drafts of subsequently published works, to the voluminous raw materials of works which did not reach publication. There are also, of course, the many published memoirs by people upon whose life his life impinged.

In Gosse’s day, as he rightly observes, Grundtvig had significance “as a documentary figure in the history of his country” by virtue of his struggle to reawaken the Danish national congregation, to revitalise the Danish Church, to establish principles of individual liberty of conscience and of speech, to redefine the goals of education and give a hitherto disempowered majority access to an appropriate education, and to promote – through poetry and song as well as through more direct polemic and action – a historically-rooted idea of nationhood and community that was inclusive and faced outwards to the world