

# "ONE OF THE GREAT ANN

I WELCOME with very great pleasure this opportunity to say something to you about what seems to me to be one of the great anniversaries of the world. It is not an anniversary of a battle or a treaty; it is one of those anniversaries we are inclined to overlook because it was one of the quiet victories of peace. On the seventh of November next, it will be just a hundred years since the first folk-school opened in Denmark. I believe that this folk-movement may yet have most important lessons for the whole world in the days to come.

Let me hasten to give you a picture of a typical folk-school. I was able to visit about a dozen of the 57 schools in operation when I was in Denmark in 1936, and the memory of it is still vividly clear. I am thinking of one school I visited. Like all folk-schools it was situated out in the country. Imagine a spacious old country house built of mellow brick covered with creepers, set in a garden of fine trees. Think of cool lawns, shady walks, bright flower beds. This is the home of the *forstander*, or principal, his staff and large family of students. Inside we find the house simply and sensibly furnished. There is an atmosphere of peaceful refinement. I used to think that here was life in the country raised to its highest power—all the beauty of growing things added to the charm of good books, music, friendship and conversation. Here are excellent pictures, a fine old grand piano, a lute hanging on the wall, piles of music, little tables covered with magazines from London, New York, Paris.

Situated here and there in the garden are the homes of the permanent staff. Students also live in these homes: there are no large dormitories; they live in rooms, usually two to a room. In the garden, too, are to be found the gymnasium, the library, classrooms and study-rooms. In nearly every classroom there is a piano, for there is much music and singing in a folk-school.

At meal times the students eat together with the staff and principal in the dining hall, just as they do in Oxford. But the students are not the sons of a privileged class as many are at Oxford; they are the sons or daughters of small farmers. The fees they pay are small, usually about a pound a week, which covers board and tuition. How long do they spend in a folk-school? Usually men come in for five months in winter, women for three months in the summer. What are their ages? From 18 to 30. Students are not admitted before the age of 18. They are people who leave school at the end of the primary or secondary stage and go to work on farms. When they come to adult years, they spend at least one session in an adult residential high school. What do they study during those months in the folk-schools? Not, as you would perhaps think, the things relating to practical agriculture. For those who wish to extend their knowledge of farming, there are schools similar to our agricultural colleges, but the men and women students come to the folk-schools to learn how to live a life, not how to earn a living. The usual subjects of study in these Danish schools are the cultural

ones; history, music, art, literature, the Danish language, physical culture, comparative religion, craftwork, economics. An English authority has said that nothing the students learn in these schools would be considered in England to be any good to them in their trade or calling. They come because they find it good to leave farm work to fill their minds and their hearts with the spirit of the folk-schools. There is hardly a farm in the whole country that has not been profoundly influenced by the teaching of these schools. More than half of the members of the Cabinet in the Danish Parliament were ex-folk-school men, when I visited the country in 1936. In the opinion of those who have observed affairs in Denmark over a long period, it is the folk-schools that have made Denmark a country that has carried the principles of democracy and co-operation farther than any other. And these people's universities—for that is what folk-schools are—have done this not by setting out to teach subjects, but by showing men and women how to live more abundantly.

## The Man Behind it All

And all this began a hundred years ago. The man who thought out the principles of this unique form of rural education was the poet-pastor-teacher-historian Nicolai Frederick Severin Grundtvig, a man who has been justly called the great prophet of the north. Grundtvig was born in 1783, and was the son of a country parson. Destined for the Church himself, he passed through the Latin School at Aarhus, in Jutland, as a preparation for the university. While there Grundtvig developed a deep hatred of the monotonous and unimaginative routine of the Latin schools. Like many another student of active mind and body, he soon learned that the type of education the school was supplying was not suited to the needs of the people. He wanted to liberalise education. In place of the Latin classics, which were entirely foreign to the whole spirit of the men of the north, he wanted to substitute the Norse tales, with their gods and heroes. So he took the old Norse mythology and turned it into verse. This established him as a poet. In 1811 Grundtvig was ordained into the Church. But just as he had rebelled against the narrowness of the Latin schools, he now rebelled against the formal dogmatism of the Church of his day. He advocated a happier, more vital Christianity. It is no wonder that he met with continual opposition both from men of the school and men of the Church. Often he was without a pulpit. After 17 years he gave up the ministry and devoted himself wholly to poetry and history.

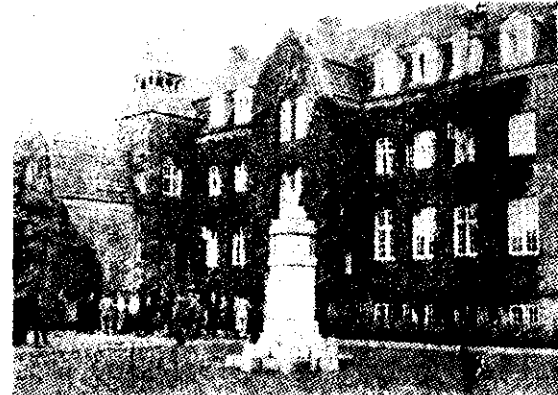
Four years later, after a trip to England, he expressed the idea that had long been forming in his mind, that of a people's university or folk-school. He

## A Hundred Years of L

(From two talks by H. C. D. SOM)



Left: N. F. S. Grundtvig, the man behind it all. Right: Folk-school building.



had come to have a profound faith in the ordinary, patient, hard-working man. He believed that if the Danish peasants could be inspired by what he called "the living word," they would re-make the Danish nation. He had in mind for the working of this miracle a new type of organisation—a school where there would be taught a living religion, where the Danish language as a means of expression would be studied, where the old Norse folk tales would be kept alive and where the virile poetry of his race would be lived. At first his ideas met with little support. Few would believe that the rough, uncouth peasant lads still in the feudal age could profit

Above (left): New "labour school" at Grundtvig's. (Right): Kold, the who gave Grundtvig's.

Below (left): Interior at E. (Right): Young men at a folk-school. (Right): Folk-school building.

