

ANNIVERSARIES OF HISTORY

Years of Danish Folk-Schools

(Talks by H. C. D. SOMERSET, broadcast by 2YA)



Left: N. F. S. Grundtvig, the man behind it all. Above: The farmstead at which Rødding Folk-school began in 1844.



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Above (left): The new "labour folk-school" at Esbjerg. The principles are Grundtvig's, the outlook is modern. (Right): Kristen Kold, the disciple who gave form to Grundtvig's ideas.

Below (left): An interior at Esbjerg. A winter course for young men is in session. (Right): The folk-school at Frederiksborg.



responsibility. He had lived through troubled times in a rapidly-changing Europe; times remarkably like our own. He was 10 years old when news of the terror of the French Revolution came through to Denmark. There followed the Napoleonic wars, culminating for Denmark in a humiliating peace with the loss of Norway. Now there came a new fear, the fear of German pressure from the south through Schleswig and Holstein. Later events showed him to be a true prophet.

At last when Grundtvig was 61 years of age, the first folk-school was opened, at Rødding, in Northern Schleswig, on November 7, 1844. It opened with 20 pupils. The Rødding School owed its establishment to a small group of people who agreed with Grundtvig about the need for defending the Danish language and culture against German encroachment. The chief supporter of the new school was Christian Flor, a professor of Danish at the University of Kiel. An outline plan of the new school submitted to the King for approval described something entirely new, a school for the sons of small farmers and middle classes, controlled by a board of directors consisting of seven persons, three of them farmers. The curriculum was to include the Danish language and literature, history, civics, Swedish, natural sciences, singing and gymnastics, drawing and surveying. For the next 20 years the school encountered all the difficulties of a pioneer. It was near to closing entirely at the end of its first year; but Christian Flor resigned his professorship and took charge for two years.

For Practical Living

In 1850, Sofus Høgsbro, a man imbued with Grundtvig's philosophy, took charge of the school, and guided it through the next 12 difficult years. His work was important in that he established some principles that have guided the folk-schools ever since. There were those who wanted to introduce purely vocational studies; others wanted examinations and diplomas; others wanted to design courses leading to the university. Høgsbro resisted all these. "This institution," he wrote, "has no desire to under-estimate the importance of technical knowledge nor the developing of a clear and incisive mind. Its aim, however, is essentially to educate for practical living. We deem the development of the will and the emotions more important than the exercising of the memory and the intellect." How magnificently this accords with modern educational theory!

A Disciple Carries On

The tale of the folk-school at Rødding is, however, only half the story of the origin of these schools. The other half belongs to a disciple of Grundtvig, who did more than anyone else to put the schools on a sound footing. He was

Kristen Kold, a man of tremendous vigour and originality. The son of a Jutland shoemaker, he refused to follow his father's trade, and elected to become a teacher. His career promised to be short-lived, however, for he had all Grundtvig's contempt of the narrow academic work of the schools of his day. He consequently gave up his teaching and went on a five years' trip to Turkey, as assistant to a missionary. On his return to Denmark he bought a piece of land, collected a small sum of money from friends, and with the help of some lads from nearby farms, set out to build a folk-school. It was ready in 1851, and Kold issued a prospectus from which I shall quote a few paragraphs.

"The school session will run from November first to April first.

"Twenty pupils will be accepted; of these 10 can be lodged in the school; the rest will be accommodated in the village and surrounding country. The tuition fee has been fixed at 20 kroner and the cost of food and lodging at 40 kroner.

"Two teachers will be appointed if the Minister of Education will contribute to their salaries.

"The course has been arranged to occupy two winter sessions.

"The studies will comprise universal history, the Bible story, church history, the history of Denmark and Norse mythology, geography in broad outline, selected writings from Danish authors, singing with special reference to the old lays of the heroes.

"Finally, instruction in the usual school studies will be continued in a way to teach students their practical use, where in most other schools these studies are simply memorised mechanically.

"The cost of tuition and maintenance for five months will be 60 kroner. While this charge is as low as it is possible to make it, it is higher than many people who would like to give their children a thorough education, can afford. We have, therefore, arranged to distribute the payments over a number of years. For instance, a man who wishes to send his son at once need pay only 20 kroner the first and second winter and the remainder of the cost, if necessary, may be extended over the following five, 10, 15 or 20 years. On the other hand, some other man whose son has not yet reached the required age, may begin his yearly payments at once, which will be placed to his credit, to be drawn upon later."

I have no means of estimating the value of 60 kroner in the Denmark of 1851 in terms of New Zealand currency to-day, but it could not have been more than £10 to £15 for the five months' board and tuition. Kold's method of distributing the cost over a number of years gives us some idea of the poverty of the people on the land at that time. His method of finance has remained to this day. The folk-schools are privately owned. Often the principal owns the land and buildings; sometimes they are owned by small groups of people or by some society.

"Rouse Them And Teach Them"

I can best sum up Kold's philosophy by quoting his own words: "I do not believe," he wrote, "that I can do as much to instruct as to inspire my students. I want first to rouse them and then to give them instruction, or at least to stimulate and to teach them at the same time. This seems to me the right way, because stimulation is essential at the beginning. If one asks how I, who am no prophet and really never had any schooling, should have attempted to inspire and teach the people, my answer is that when I began I found that not until the enthusiasm of my students was aroused were they ready for any instruction. They were simple folk, who had never been taught, and whose minds had first to be awakened."