John Kemble's curious acquaintance: N. F. S. Grundtvig and his remarkable reception of Anglo-Saxondom

S. A. J. Bradley

One afternoon in late July 1831, the 24-year-old John Kemble was working in the gloomy reading room of the British Museum in London.[1] He noticed there a reader whom he had observed in the Library on previous occasions: a foreigner with a thick Germanic accent, a tall and sturdy balding man with a lofty brow, about 50 years old, who was evidently reading and transcribing Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. Kemble seated himself at the same table and offered the man a few small courtesies, speaking considerately in German. The man, however, was not German, but a Dane by the name of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. This Kemble probably knew already for reasons I shall soon discuss; and for the same reasons he was, no doubt, curious to meet and talk with Pastor Grundtvig from Copenhagen.

In that year of 1831 Grundtvig, like John Kemble himself, was on his way to becoming one of the pioneers of Anglo-Saxon linguistic and literary studies. Already his encounter with Anglo-Saxon culture, which began in 1815 when he taught himself the language in order to study editorial problems in the text of *Beowulf*, had yielded insights recognized for their value by other scholars working in the field; but one may justly claim that these insights had far greater significance for their bearing upon his own life and the life of his country than they had upon the course of Anglo-Saxon scholarship more narrowly defined. It is chiefly the remarkable impact of Grundtvig's studies in Anglo-Saxondom upon himself and through him upon his country's emergence into modernity that I want to outline in what follows. In this view, it comprises one of the most striking cases of the reception, or the appropriation, of Anglo-Saxon culture in the nineteenth century.

[1] Kemble had recently graduated as a Cambridge BA, had previously spent time in Heidelberg and Munich, during which period he had begun to study 'Teutonic

N. F. S. Grundtvig was born in 1783 and died in 1872. He was a pastor in the Danish Lutheran State Church. He married three times – which some of his fellow clergy regarded as taking the pursuit of connubial bliss to unseemly lengths. His last child, a daughter, was begotten when he was 77 – the practical implications of which similarly scandalized some of the less libidinous Danish clergy. For most of his life he lived in Copenhagen in whose streets, still enclosed by the medieval ramparts and gates the keys of which (so the story goes) were delivered every night to the king, he could daily bump into (or, in some cases, avoid) such fellow citizens as Søren Kierkegaard the philosopher. Kierkegaard was arguably the most damaging critic of Grundtvig's theology, preaching, and personality: Grundtvig, he wrote in 1845, had demonstrated that one can be a genius and become a geriatric without learning the least thing from life, existentially.[2] Never a man to leave an insult unreturned, Grundtvig characterized Kierkegaard (albeit implicitly rather than explicitly) as one of 'de iiskolde Spottere, der altid hænge som Iistapper under Kirketaget'.[3] Another contemporary in Copenhagen was Hans Christian Andersen the author, whose shameless self promotion irritated Grundtvig and who, in return, declared Grundtvig 'en uartig gammel mand' (a rude old man) whose Edda-Christianity (a swipe at Grundtvig's endeavours to promote a Christian-consistent reading of Norse mythology) was as uncongenial to him as the cold, dank stalactite cave of Kierkegaard's cleverness. Another was Hans

[2] S. A. Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift til de philosophiske Smuler af Johannes Climacus* (1846); extract in S. A. J. Bradley, *N. F. S. Grundtvig, A Life recalled: an Anthology of Biographical Source-Texts* (Århus, 2008), p. 275. Where *Grundtvig Life* is hereafter cited, a translation of the wider context of the Danish quotation can be found, together with notes concerning sources and chronology.

[3] 'those ice-cold detractors who always hang like icicles under the roof of the church'. From a speech by Grundtvig in the Folketing [Parliament] reported in *Rigsdagstidende* 1855. Forhandlingerne paa Folketinget, cols. 3243-3244. Cited by Anders Holm, *To Samtidige: Kierkegaards og Grundtvigs kritik af hinanden* (Copenhagen, 2009), p. 206. Grundtvig was castigating those who opposed abolition of laws by which the state church restricted the freedom of congregations and pastors. Grundtvig's cause won the day, significantly advancing the emergence of the Folkekirke which superseded the state church of the days of the absolute monarchy. See also *Grundtvig Life*, p. 473 ('Kierkegaard') and p. 555 ('Sognebaandsløsning'). H. C. Andersen's fluctuating acquaintance with Grundtvig is recalled in the memoirs of Frederik Hammerich, *Frederik Hammerich: Et Levnetsløb*, ed. Angul Hammerich, (Copenhagen, 1882), I, pp. 271-2; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 248.

Christian Ørsted, the discoverer of electromagnetism who helped Grundtvig with letters of introduction to eminent academics in England; and another was Rasmus Rask, one of the most distinguished philologists of the nineteenth century, who helped Grundtvig – and Benjamin Thorpe, who would later emerge as Grundtvig's rival in Anglo-Saxon research and publication – to learn Anglo-Saxon: all friends, acquaintances and adversaries of Grundtvig, among the galaxy of remarkable personalities living in little Copenhagen during what is called the Danish Golden Age.

For much of his life, Grundtvig was seldom free from more or less scandalized disapproval from one coterie or another. It was also a life marred (and yet, one might almost say, in some senses enriched) by the eruptions of a bipolar disorder.[4] By the end of his life, however, he had achieved an absolutely pre-eminent status among those who had contributed to leading Denmark out of royal absolutism into parliamentary democracy, who had helped to secure a range of essential freedoms for all citizens and to embed in Danish consciousness a distinctive ideology of social cohesion and national identity. He had also defined a certain conception of the Danish Lutheran Church so distinctive that it was in his own lifetime named Grundtvigianism – and the Grundtvigians still remain a major and influential group within the Danish Church.

When Kemble met Grundtvig in the British Museum, gossip was already circulating among London's academics and scholars – for example, within the Society of Antiquaries – which would have made Kemble aware that this was a man with a rather colourful history.

A couple of decades previously, in 1810, having read Theology in the University of Copenhagen, Grundtvig preached his *dimisprædike* – the probational sermon required to secure him his licence to serve as a Lutheran pastor in the Danish State Church. He chose to preach on the question: 'Why has the Word of the Lord disappeared from His House?'. It was an attack on Rationalism in the Danish Church – and it gave deep offence to certain Copenhagen clergy who declared themselves outrageously defamed, and complained to the bishop. Denmark was at that time an absolute monarchy and it was a risky business, criticising the Establishment. Others had been sentenced to lifelong censorship for their pains; some had been expelled from the country into lifelong exile. Grundtvig got away on this occasion with a light reprimand, and was granted his licence; but he found himself unable thereafter to secure

[4] For fuller accounts, see *Grundtvig Life*, p. 520 ('Palm Sunday 1867').

nomination to a pastoral appointment, and partly as a consequence of this head-on collision with the Establishment he suffered the first of several severe and high profile attacks of his lifelong bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder – the most dramatic and public of which occurred in his church at Vartov on Palm Sunday 1867 in the midst of morning Communion attended by the Queen Mother and a packed congregation.

The years 1813-20 were for Grundtvig what he came to call his 'seven lean years' – lean, because he was silently bypassed for appointment to a pastoral incumbency and so on top of profound frustration he also suffered financial hardship, but they were far from lean in terms of his authorial productivity. During these years he translated into Danish, and published, three of the great 'folk-books' (*folkebøger*) of the North-western European Middle Ages: the Latin *Gesta Danorum* (The deeds of the Danes) of Saxo Grammaticus, the Old Norse *Heimskringla* (The world-circle; sagas of the Norse kings) of Snorri Sturluson, and the Old English *Beowulf* (which opens, of course, with the resounding promise to tell the heroic deeds of the Danes in antiquity). This was the first translation of *Beowulf* into a modern language; and Grundtvig also appended to it an interesting essay to which I shall refer again shortly.

However, his work on *Beowulf* also led him into further conflict with the Danish Establishment. It was in 1815, the year in which the State Archivist of Denmark, Professor G. J. Thorkelin (1752-1829), published in Copenhagen the long promised and first ever full edition of the poem. Excited by what he glimpsed there, Grundtvig taught himself enough Old English to be able, within weeks, to enter into a headstrong and, it must be said, ill-mannered attack on Thorkelin's scholarship. This was conducted in the pages of a twice-weekly magazine called *Nyeste Skilderie af Kjøbenhavn* [Latest sketches from Copenhagen].[5] As a matter of rather remarkable fact, Grundtvig, who was not only a novice

[5] See N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Bjowulfs Drape. Et gothisk Helte-digt fra forrige Aartusinde af Angel-Saxisk paa danske Riim* (Copenhagen, 1820, 'Indledning og Fortale, XXIII-LXXIV, at p. XXXI: 'Angel-Sachsisk havde jeg aldrig læst, da Bjowulfs Drapen udkom, men begeistret for at kjende den, og temmelig fortroelig med Edda, faldt det mig ikke vanskeligt, snart at opdage en Deel af Udgavens Brøst, som jeg, vel med for liden Skaansel, strax aabenbarede i Kjøbenhavns Skilderie.' 'Anglo-Saxon I had never read when *Beowulf* came out, but enthusiastic to know it, and quite familiar with the *Edda*, it did not prove difficult for me soon to discover a quantity of the edition's defects, which, probably with too little leniency, I revealed in *Kjøbenhavns Skilderie*' [Grundtvig's footnote: 'No. 60 og 63-65. 1815'].

in the Anglo-Saxon language but had as yet never seen the *Beowulf* manuscript, was nevertheless correct in many of the textual conjectures he made in his criticism of Thorkelin's mistakes which were indeed many and sometimes serious.[6] It was a help that he had already previously learned to read Old Icelandic poetry. As a schoolboy desperately bored with the teaching of the classical curriculum at Aarhus Cathedral School, he had discovered a pleasure and an escape in reading Norse mythology; and later, as a resident private tutor in the throes of an unrequited love for his pupil's mother,[7] he found a distraction in devoting himself to the study of Icelandic Edda-poetry. He therefore already had a good idea of the way in which the Germanic alliterative mode of poetry worked. He was also able to familiarize himself with Old English poetic idiom by studying the edition of the so-called Cædmonian poetry published by Franciscus Junius in 1655,[8] of which a copy was available in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

Regrettably, his manner of engaging in scholarly debate over the 1815 edition of *Beowulf* was so abrasive that it lost him an audience, earned him rebuke even from those who were his friends, and confirmed his reputation within the Establishment as a trouble-maker. Nevertheless, his conjectures upon the transcription of the manuscript text and its meaning constitute some of the earliest serious and informed interpretation of the poem in the nineteenth century.[9] Emendations first proposed by him are still routinely acknowledged in editions of the poem. Furthermore, he was the first scholar to attempt a comprehensive

---

[6] As well as correcting Thorkelin's readings of the manuscript of *Beowulf*, Grundtvig corrected errors in the text of the Finnsburh Fragment published by George Hickes, *Linguarum veterum septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archæologicus*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1703-1705) vol. I, p. 192 – again (since the vellum transcribed by Hickes disappeared before it could be reconsulted) without having seen the manuscript.

[7] The Lady of the manor-house of Egeløkke on the island of Langeland, Constance Leth. Passages from Grundtvig's diary for this period (1805-08) are translated in *Grundtvig Life*, pp. 92-98.

[8] Incidentally, a codex whose history is linked with Trinity College Dublin through Archbishop Usher.

[9] For annotated translations of Grundtvig's critical articles in the weekly journal *Nyeste Skilderie af Kjøbenhavn* in September 1815 see M. B. Busbee, 'A few words about the recently published Anglo-Saxon poem, the first edition of *Beowulf* (*Et Par Ord om det nys angelsaxisk Digt*)' in *Grundtvig Studier 2015* (Copenhagen, 2016), pp. 1-55; and M. B. Busbee, 'A Few More Words about *Beowulf*' in *Grundtvig Studier 2016*, pp. 25-46 (Copenhagen, 2016).

interpretation of the poet's world view, as it was articulated through the retelling of ancient legend and myth.

In 1818, Grundtvig managed to secure himself a modest pension from the king – the absolute monarch Frederik VI – for his work on the three 'folk-books', so that now he could afford to marry the first of his three successive wives, Elise.[10] In 1820 he published his metrical translation of *Beowulf* into Danish. Thorkelin's edition had included a translation but it was in Latin, and so Grundtvig's *Bjowulfs Drape* is sometimes honoured by being named as the first full translation of the poem into a modern language. It might be better called a paraphrase. It is also written in a variety of metrical forms rather than systematically attempting to emulate the alliterative style of the original. Accompanying the main text was a poem in a pastiche of Danish and Anglo-Saxon dedicating the work to his patron, Privy Councillor Johan Bülow, and a prose introduction discussing the text and its interpretation. I shall need to come back to this work shortly.

In 1822, Grundtvig at last received a pastoral appointment to the prominence of a city pulpit, for which he had so long been by-passed. But then in 1825 his uneasy rehabilitation was calamitously shattered when he published a pamphlet bluntly accusing Copenhagen University's Professor of Theology, Henrik Nicolai Clausen, of false teaching concerning the history and the authority of the Church, and declaring that the professor should recant or resign. Since every such high appointment was made in the name of the king, Frederik VI, this was clearly another imprudent confrontation with the Establishment – which now quite lost patience with him. The professor sued him for libel, and in 1826 he was found guilty. He was heavily fined and placed under lifelong censorship, under the terms of which everything he wished to publish had to be submitted for approval by the chief of police in Copenhagen. He resigned his curacy, and was once again jobless. The censorship was in fact subsequently lifted, though not until 1837.

However, in 1828 came a barely expected breakthrough. In Grundtvig's own words:

> Det var i Aaret 1828, da jeg, saa at sige, stod ledig paa Torvet, Kong Frederik den Sjette engang spurgde mig, hvad

[10] Grundtvig, born in 1783, entered into his third marriage in 1858, in his seventy-fifth year, and fathered his fifth and last child, a second daughter, two years later, in 1860. This daughter, Asta, died in 1939.

> jeg bestilde, og jeg svarede: ingen Ting, Deres Majestæt! og jeg veed heller ikke noget at giøre for Øieblikket, med mindre det maatte behage Majestæten at lade mig reise til England, og nærmere undersøge de Angel-Sachsiske Haandskrifter, som er af megen Vigtighed ogsaa for Oplysningen af Danmarks Oldtid, men er aldeles foragtede i deres Hjemstavn.[11]

In fairness to John Kemble and others, it has to be acknowledged that here Grundtvig was guilty of a somewhat disingenuous misrepresentation in informing his king that English scholars showed no interest in or esteem for surviving Anglo-Saxon literature. It was probably a handy opinion he had picked up from the brilliant but partisan Danish linguistic scholar Rasmus Rask (1787-1832). The actuality was that, as early as 1814, the year before Grundtvig launched himself into Anglo-Saxondom, John Josias Conybeare (1779-1824), Professor of Anglo-Saxon and Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford, had communicated papers to the Society of Antiquaries of London, calling for the publication and study of the legacy of Anglo-Saxon poetry. He drew attention to the Exeter Book and to the *Beowulf* codex, which he illustrated with transcriptions and with analyses of the alliterative mode of composition. As the Antiquaries' Minutes books for the period show, there was considerable ongoing interest in the Anglo-Saxon cultural legacy. The Antiquaries duly published Conybeare's papers in their journal *Archæologia* (vol. xvii) which was fairly certainly acquired at the time by the Royal Library in Copenhagen, probably at the behest of State Archivist G. J. Thorkelin, and which was therefore available to Grundtvig to read.

Conybeare's papers were also republished posthumously by his brother William Daniel Conybeare (1787-1857) as *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1826). This book too was purchased by

[11] It was in the year 1828, when I was standing, so to speak, idle in the market-place, that King Frederik the Sixth on one occasion asked me what I was working upon and I answered: Nothing, your Majesty! and I really do not know what to do at the moment, unless it might please his Majesty to let me travel to England and examine the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts more closely, which are also of great importance for the illumination of Denmark's antiquity, but which are entirely disregarded in their homeland. (N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Phenix-Fuglen. Et angelsachsisk Kvad. Førstegang udgivet med Indledning, Fordanskning og Efterklang* (Copenhagen. 1840), Indledning p. 10; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 133).

the Royal Library in Copenhagen and was freely used by Grundtvig in preparing for his visits to England, as is evidenced among the huge surviving archive of his papers now in the Royal Library, Copenhagen.[12] Moreover, exactly at the time Grundtvig was negotiating his visits to England, the young scholar Benjamin Thorpe (1782-1870) – soon to become one of the leading London Anglo-Saxonists – had come over from England to Copenhagen to study Anglo-Saxon with Rasmus Rask. Grundtvig and Rask were by then old acquaintances in little Copenhagen: indeed, they had discussed the possibility of doing collaborative work on *Beowulf*. Grundtvig could not have been unaware of Thorpe's presence in the city or of his work and ambitions in the domain of Anglo-Saxon studies.

Nevertheless, it was a good story to put to the king, and it worked. Grundtvig recorded for posterity that 'Det Ord greb Kongen med levende Deeltagelse, og Følgen deraf blev mine Engelske Reiser 1829-31'.[13] The myth of English antiquarian ignorance and negligence and of the scope for a Danish antiquarian to come once again to their enlightenment was well set up by Grundtvig and long endured as an issue of nationalistic pride within Denmark.[14] This fact demonstrates what is often overlooked in historical narrative: that a people's literary-cultural heritage is perceived as one of the most valuable markers of cultural identity when that identity comes under threat – valuable, not only as evidence of what that society was once capable of achieving but as a repository of traditional identifying values of that society by which it had historically lived, and which could be quarried again and brought into renewed currency at a time of need. Grundtvig taught the Danes their proprietary stake in Anglo-Saxondom, and his well-told account of little Denmark startling Great Britain into taking responsibility for its

[12] For details of the Grundtvig Archive (Grundtvig Arkivet), see the invaluable *Grundtvig Registrant* 1957-64 and the Supplement on Grundtvig's transcriptions of the Exeter Book in *Grundtvig Life*.

[13] 'The king received this speech with lively interest and the consequence of it was my English journeys 1829-31' (*Phenix-Fuglen*, Indledning p. 10; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 133).

[14] Interestingly, Kemble himself, in a review of Benjamin Thorpe's *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica*, published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (New series 1834, i. 391-3), could write disparagingly of the unsatisfactory state of Anglo-Saxon studies in England at the time. His challengers retorted that the Danes and the Germans, and especially Rasmus Rask, were leading him by the nose (*DNB* X, 1258).

custodianship of such a shared treasury has absolutely permissibly served Danish self-esteem ever since.

The 'lively interest' shown by the king revealingly hints, in fact, at the wider cultural-political context within which the study of Germanic writings of the early Middle Ages were typically approached, in Denmark as elsewhere, in these early decades of the nineteenth century. Thorkelin, in whose trail Grundtvig was following, and Thorkelin's predecessor Peter Frederik Suhm (1728-1798) whose study *Om Odin og den hedniske Gudelære og Gudstieneste udi Norden* [On Óðinn and the heathen lore and worship of gods in the North] (Copenhagen, 1771) had fired the bored grammar school boy Grundtvig to enthusiasm for ancient Northern culture, and Suhm's predecessor Jacob Langebek (1710-1775) who founded Det kongelige danske Selskab for Fædrelandets Historie og Sprog [The Royal Danish Society for the History and Language of the Fatherland], these were all historians and archivists dedicated to documenting and celebrating the national characteristics and the historical achievements of the people of the north (*Norden*), especially of the Danes. In part, they and their fellows were proudly sustaining a tradition of scholarly Danish historiography reaching back to Saxo in the twelfth century. In part, and particularly from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, they were responding to the writings of the Prussian philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) on the emerging concept of the *Volk* and of nationhood and its essential hallmarks and guarantees.

In the decades following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark stood in need of some restoration of morale and international standing and some redefinition of national identity. Grundtvig had already established himself as a historian of Denmark and the North, notably through his translation of Saxo Grammaticus. He had gained a certain amount of international scholarly attention from his proposed corrections and clarifications of the Thorkelin *Beowulf*. He had also taken opportunities (in his published work on *Beowulf*) to link the legendary Danish kings of Beowulf's North, and the poem's promotion of a cult of God-favoured kingship, to the reigning king, Frederik VI (1768-1839). But Grundtvig's distinctive contribution to *Beowulf* studies had already gone further than this in a way which must have broadly commanded the king's approval. In a short series of articles in *Danne-Virke* – a periodical which he himself wrote and published between 1816 and 1819 – he offered an account of *Beowulf* which pioneeringly approached the poem in literary and philosophical terms. The poet was perceived to have used the ancient Northern story to convey what one

might call a Christian-compatible philosophical understanding of the universal human condition and of human heroism. Beowulf the man (so Grundtvig wrote in 1820) is to be seen as 'humankind's Nordic hero'. That the language of *Beowulf* was English and the poet an Anglo-Saxon did not diminish the credit for such a vision which Grundtvig found encashable on Denmark's account. Did the Angles not come from Angeln in the Duchy of Slesvig which was incorporate in the Kingdom of Denmark? Corrupted though their language and culture had become (in Grundtvig's view) through their subsequent prodigal entanglement with Norman French, Latin and classical culture, they remained a people of the High North who might one day even be persuaded to return, culturally and spiritually, economically and politically, to their fathers' house.[15] Such considerations as these, reaching well beyond strictly objective historical or literary scholarship, were in a proper sense kingly ones; and Grundtvig was able to inform the king that besides the *Beowulf* codex there were many ancient manuscripts lying neglected in English libraries, waiting to be brought into the light of day and placed at the disposal of modernity.

So it was that Frederik VI found himself disposed to award Grundtvig a grant from the fund *Ad usos publicos* – a State budget often used to assist distinguished Danes to travel abroad, enabling Grundtvig to make prolonged visits to England in those three successive summers, 1829, 1830 and 1831.

In 1829 Grundtvig landed, bewildered and naively unprepared, in London. There he found that to a limited degree his reputation had preceded him. His rather remarkable published corrections to some of the profusion of errors and inaccuracies in Thorkelin's *editio princeps* of *Beowulf* meant that as often as Thorkelin was under discussion, so Grundtvig's conjectural emendations and his interpretations would also come under discussion. He arrived, as it were riding on the back of Thorkelin's heroic but flawed work: but otherwise, it was a shaky start he experienced in the world's biggest metropolis. He found lodgings by the Thames and later in Bloomsbury, close to the British Library. The sexual charisma which he seems to have exuded through most of his life worked upon his landlady who was soon offering the intimacy of darning his woollen socks. Conscientiously, Grundtvig reported this in

[15] These ideas were not all fully-fledged or definitively expressed at this point in Grundtvig's life but were certainly nascent and came to full maturity in due course: they are further commented on below.

his next letter home to Elise, his wife. His English was not easily understood, partly because of his manner of speaking (the Cambridge dons he later guested with said he spoke as through a brick wall), partly because he had prepared himself rhetorically by reading and transcribing passages from the best English prose writers – of the preceding century. However, after various disappointments and mishaps he began to build a modest network of both social and scholarly contacts and triumphantly secured a Reader's Ticket to the British Museum. Among the rest, he particularly looked forward to reading and transcribing the Exeter Book, of which he knew something from Conybeare's *Illustrations*. To his dismay, however, he found not only that this manuscript was not held by the Museum but that the Library possessed no transcription of it: '… noget af det første, jeg spurgte om i det britiske Museum, var naturligvis, om man ikke dér havde en tro Afskrift af den mærkværdige Bog; men med et fornemt Smil svarede man mig, at saadant noget brød man sig ikke om.' [16]
However, he had plenty to do with *Beowulf* and other manuscripts of which, prior to his visit to England, he had read scholarly profiles in Hickes's *Thesaurus*.[17]

Back for his second visit, in the summer of 1830, he resolved to take the overnight stagecoach from London to Exeter, armed with a letter he had solicited from the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. There, admitted to the Cathedral Library with no trouble whatsoever and left alone with the Exeter Book, he transcribed much of the poetic contents of the manuscript. By the end of his stay in England that year he had made such headway with his studies and his connections that with the encouragement of several distinguished London antiquarians he was able to persuade the publishing firm of Black, Young and Young

[16] 'One of the first things I enquired about in the British Museum was naturally whether there they did not have an accurate transcription of the remarkable book; but with a condescending smile they answered me that one did not bother with that sort of thing.' N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Mands Minde 1788-1838: Foredrag Over Det Sidste Halve Aarhundredes Historie*, ed. Svend Grundtvig (Copenhagen, 1877), pp. 460-61. The lectures were delivered by Grundtvig in 1838 but first edited 'Efter Forfatterens Haandskrift' [From the author's manuscript] and published 1877. Excerpt in *Grundtvig Life*, pp. 130-31.

[17] Protocols in the Royal Library Copenhagen show that the library's copy was used by Grundtvig for the study of Anglo-Saxon from 1815 onwards.

('Booksellers to the King') to publish his *Bibliotheca Anglo-Saxonica* (Grundtvig 1830).

However, when he returned to London in the summer of 1831 and hurried along to the printers to hear how his Prospectus was doing, he discovered that in his absence the London Antiquaries had set up a Saxon Committee and his publisher had prepared another Prospectus for a rival scheme, led by – Benjamin Thorpe. 'Boghandleren var nær ved reent ud at sige, han ikke turde befatte sig mere med mig, for ikke at stemples til en Landsforræder', wrote Grundtvig later.[18] Ruefully, he conceded that he had been outflanked by the courteous but perfidious gentlemen-antiquaries of London. He subsequently consoled himself that he had been received with much esteem and warm hospitality during a stay, that same summer, in Trinity College Cambridge – whence, as shall shortly be explained, he took home ideas which would later bear much fruit.

He subsequently wrote:

> Man misforstaae mig imidlertid ikke, som om jeg vilde beklage mig over mit forulykkede Tog 1831, thi jeg regner de Sommer-Maaneder, jeg da tilbragde i London og Cambridge, til de behageligste saavelsom de lærerigste i mit Liv, og personlig mødte jeg al den Agtelse og Forekommenhed, jeg kunde ønske, men Sagen, Udgivelsen af de vigtige og dyrebare Levninger af den første nyeuropæiske Literatur, det var nu blevet en Æres-Sag for England, man umuelig af Føielighed mod en Fremmed kunde opgive.[19]

It was, however, his uncircumspectly esteemed acquaintance John Kemble who recorded a somewhat different account of the situation. In a

---

[18] 'The publisher was on the brink of saying straight out that he did not dare to have anything more to do with me, so as not to be branded a traitor to his country.' (*Phenix-Fuglen*, Introduction p. 11; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 134).

[19] **'**Let me not be misunderstood, as though I meant to complain over my shipwrecked expedition, for I count those summer months I spent in London and Cambridge as the most agreeable as well as the most educative in my life, and personally I met with all the respect and courtesy I could wish for; but the cause, the publication of the important and precious remnants of the first new-European literature, this had now become an issue of honour for England which could not possibly be given up out of acquiescence to a foreigner.' *Phenix-Fuglen*, Fortale, pp. 11-12; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 134.

letter to his friend Jakob Grimm, the distinguished German philologist, in 1833, Kemble wrote:

> Grundtvig has behaved ill, & we owe him no mercy: a committee met in London whose object was to publish the great A.S. works: Grundtvig was one of the party, and would beyond a doubt have had an important share assigned to him: but he went secretly to a bookseller, published his own very arrogant prospectus, & took the whole thing upon his own shoulders, without our knowledge. After this, you cannot be surprised if [Benjamin] Thorpe has published his Cædmon, and I my Bëówulf without waiting to ask Dr. Grundtvig's leave. Still, if he can do them better (as he rather coolly says in his prospectus that there is no Englishman who can do them), let him![20]

A decade later, there are further accusations in another letter to Jakob Grimm:

> With regard to Grundtvig: I dare say he is a man of knowledge, but he is a great rogue. The coolness with which he abuses us for taking his work out of his hands is exemplary. I beg for your information to tell you that Grundtvig stole the plan & even the name of his undertaking from *Thorpe*, who mentioned it in Copenhagen to G[rundtvig] two years before he came to England, and mentioned it to many other persons besides.[21]

Kemble, it must be acknowledged, was a man quick to change his opinion of folk and himself something of a seasoned back-stabber;[22] but

---

[20] Kemble to Grimm Item 4, from Trinity College Cambridge, 12 October 1833, in *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm. A Correspondence 1832-1852*, ed. by R. A. Wiley (Leiden, 1971), pp. 39-46, at p. 41.

[21] Kemble to Grimm Item 26, in *Correspondence*, ed. Wiley, pp. 210-228 at 220-21.

[22] Various stories could be told. One brief example is his attitude to Frederick Madden (1801-73), Assistant Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum. In June 1832 he reported in a letter to Grimm (*Correspondence*, ed. Wiley, p. 21): 'Mr Madden (a good scholar) is soon supposed to publish Cædmon'. By October 1833, Madden had been knighted. In that same month, Kemble jubilantly wrote to Grimm that in a recent article he had exposed Madden for his poor scholarship: 'You will see that I have given Sir Frederick Madden a sharp blow

the allegation that Grundtvig purloined both the *Prospectus* plan and its title from Benjamin Thorpe had evidently been in circulation for some time and – by Grundtvig's own testimony – appears to have originated (as one might have expected) with Thorpe himself. By the time Kemble wrote these allegations to Grimm, Grundtvig had already (half in amusement) rebutted them, at least to his own satisfaction. This, at any rate, is the version of the publication saga which Grundtvig committed to posterity in the preface to his *Phenix-Fuglen* (1840)*:*

> Da nu dette netop var, hvad jeg fra Begyndelsen havde önsket, blev jeg ikke vanskelig at tröste, (skiöndt det var lidt nærgaaende af en vis Mand [viz. Thorpe] at fortælle, at Udgivelsen af et Angelsachsisk Bibliothek var hans dybe Idee, som jeg tilfældigviis havde opsnappet og vilde nu ödelægge ham ved at udföre) og jeg har derfor siddet meget taalmodig og seet paa, hvordan man udgiver den ene Deel efter den anden af Værket, jeg bebudede.[23]

Be all that as it may, Grundtvig's work on *Beowulf* and his catalysing effect upon Anglo-Saxon Studies in the 1830s has earned him tributes from a string of scholars ranging from John Earle through J. R. R. Tolkien to Kemp Malone, Eric Stanley and beyond.

Grundtvig never lost his interest in Anglo-Saxondom.[24] He continued to work on his transcription of the Exeter Book. He also

---

over his fingers: he is utterly abominable: conceited, jealous, backbiting & ignorant. Would you believe it that this person is appointed to edit Layamon by the Saxon Committee? [...] However, so the world wags in England; it was not a month after I made this awful exposure of Sir Fred. Madden, that the King knighted him for his Teutonic learning! This is so comical that one can hardly help laughing aloud when one thinks of it.' (*Correspondence*, ed. Wiley, pp. 41-2).

[23] Now since this was precisely what I had desired from the outset, I was not hard to console (although it was a little impertinent of a certain man [Thorpe] to declare that the publication of an Anglo-Saxon library was *his* profound idea which I had opportunistically snapped up and now wished to ruin him by implementing), and I have therefore sat very patiently and watched how they publish one portion after another of the work of which I was the herald. (*Phenix-Fuglen*, Fortale, p.12; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 134).

[24] Grundtvig's papers preserved in the Grundtvig Arkiv in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, indicate the scope of his interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose writings. They include transcriptions from all four major codices of Anglo-Saxon poetry: The Exeter Book and Oxford Bodleian Library MS Junius 11

worked on a transcription of the Bodleian MS Junius 11 – the so-called Cædmon Manuscript (which, incidentally, was formerly owned by Archbishop Usher, the founder of Trinity College Library). He never brought this work to publication; but inspired by the account of the Harrowing of Hell in the poem *Christ & Satan* he composed two hymns *I Kvæld blev der banket paa Helvedes Port* [This night came a knocking at Hell's fortress-gate] and *Kommer, Sjæle, dyrekiøbte* [Come, you souls so dearly purchased] which he published in 1837 in his *Sang-Værk til den danske Kirke* where he attributes their source to Cynewulf.[25] They are still there to be sung (Nos. 213 and 250) in the official Danish Hymnal, *Den Danske Salmebog* (2002).

When in 1840 Grundtvig published his edition of *The Phoenix* from the Exeter Book[26] he characteristically used it as a vehicle for metaphorically expressing optimism at the accession of King Christian VIII who was widely expected to preside as a liberal monarch over a reborn Danish nation. For this edition, Grundtvig composed a verse introduction, partly in fairly competent Old English, as he had already done for *Bjowulfs Drape* in 1820.

Likewise in 1861, at a time when the rising military power of Prussia was threatening Denmark's integrity in the disputed dukedoms of Slesvig-Holsten, he published an edition of *Beowulf*, celebrating the antiquity and nobility of the Danish people and their kings.[27] This too

---

(both in full transcription), London British Library MS Cotton Vitellius Axv (*Beowulf*) and Vercelli Biblioteca Capitolare CXVII (The Vercelli Book). Other texts excerpted (usually from printed editions) include: *The Finnesburh Fragment*, *Waldhere*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *Judgement Day, Salomon and Saturn*, *The Letter of Alexander*, *Apollonius of Tyre*, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *Maxims*, extracts from Bede and Alcuin, *De xii Abusis*, Alfred's Preface to *The Pastoral Care* and *Boethius*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Ælfric's Old Testament translations and prefatory letters, his Grammar and homilies, Vespasian Psalter psalms and historical extracts relating to Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the Continent. Scholars whose work he used include: Junius, Rawlinson, Hickes, Wanley, Hearne, Warton, Thorkelin, Rask, Lye, Ingram, Conybeare, Price, Thorpe, Kemble, Grein, Grimm, Wright, Halliwell, Stephens, Leo and Ettmüller

[25] T. Balslev, E. J. Borup, U. Hansen, E. Skovrup, M. Stevns (eds), *Grundtvigs Sang-Værk*, 6 vols. (Copenhagen, 1948–64).

[26] *Phenix-Fuglen. Et angelsachsisk Kvad. Førstegang udgivet med Indledning, Fordanskning og Efterklang* (Copenhagen, 1840).

[27] *Beowulfes Beorh eller Bjovulfs-Drapen, det Old-Angelske Heltedigt, paa Grund-Sproget ved Nik. Fred. Sev. Grundtvig* (Copenhagen and London, 1861).

was furnished with a verse introduction, partly composed in Anglo-Saxon. In both cases he was harnessing the venerable authority of a heroic, godly and Northern poesy to the contemporary polemic of nationhood, in times of hope and of fear for the future of the nation.

As scholarly editions began to issue forth from England and from Germany, however, Grundtvig's early vision of comprehensive publication of his Anglo-Saxon work became steadily more unrealistic. In any case, other matters of great import – in which his encounter with Anglo-Saxondom still had a significant part to play – began to absorb his huge intellectual energy and his untiring industriousness, which were to leave such an imprint upon the Danish Church, the Danish State and the Danish people as they moved onwards into and through the twentieth century.

It was only a few weeks after the shock over his Prospectus in 1831 that Grundtvig met Kemble in the British Museum. Of that meeting, he wrote home to his wife Elise, on Tuesday 26 July 1831:

> In recent days I have made my first acquaintance in the Museum... It is a handsome young man whom I seem to have seen here in the previous years. Last week he took a place at the same table as I and showed me little courtesies, addressing me in German. Since he also expressed an interest in Anglo-Saxon, I entered a little into conversation with him – and then heard that he was no German but an idle [167] young Englishman (as he himself said),[28] who had studied in Cambridge and had recently returned from travels in

---

Online facsimile of the 1861 edition:
https://archive.org/stream/beowulfesbeorhe01grungoog.

[28] Kemble's 'idleness' lay partly in an enthusiasm for sporting diversions, partly in unstable health. A rather poignant letter (Trinity College Cambridge Library Add. Ms. c. 89/74) from him to William Whewell, a fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, undated but after 1834, requests the loan of a book, with the explanation: 'I have been confined to my room for a long time, with the exception of one or two rare, and as it appears, foolish days of indulgence without; but a man whose whole life has been spent in boating, fencing and playing at cricket hates to be shut up like a MS, or an edition before 1500, and loves the sunshine too much for his health....If they do not pronounce me decidedly consumptive, a point I mean to ascertain by a speedy journey to London (that is so soon as my strength will allow it) I shall I hope once again show myself among my friends: [verso] if matters are decided otherwise, and the die is against me, I hope I shall not altogether be forgot.'

> Germany. We have since talked together a little more, and today he gave me his card...I then gave him my card and said to him that if, in the afternoon, he felt like taking a walk, it would be a pleasure to me to keep him company, then we could chat together a little more closely.[29]

On Thursday 28 July, he could report to Elise that he had just returned from a long and very pleasant walk in The Regent's Park with 'Mr Kemble (the young Englander from the Museum)'.

> He seems to be a delightful and intelligent young person, of whom I predict not only some pleasure to myself but benefit to his fatherland... After the turn around Regent's Park... I accompanied him home to beautiful empty rooms where an old housekeeper [168] served us with coffee and tea.[30]

In the animated conversation which engaged them in their walk, Grundtvig no doubt picked up on Kemble's mention of studying in Cambridge. Kemble was in fact an alumnus of Trinity College Cambridge – where, as it happened, Grundtvig had been staying only a few weeks previously (June 1831), as guest of Professor William Whewell (1794-1866), while he studied Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the University and college libraries. Grundtvig's experience of a Cambridge college in fact proved unexpectedly though somewhat obliquely

---

[29] *N. F. S. Grundtvigs Englandsbreve til hans Hustru. Udgivne af deres børnebørn,* eds. S. Grundtvig and V. Grundtvig (Copenhagen, 1920), pp. 166-7: 'Ogsaa har jeg i disse Dage gjort mit første Bekiendtskab i Museet. ... Det er en smuk ung Mand, som jeg synes, jeg ogsaa har seet der de forrige Aar. Han tog sidste Uge Plads ved samme Bord som jeg, og viiste mig smaae Høfligheder, tiltalende mig paa Tydsk. Da han tillige ytrede Interesse for Angelsachsisk, indlod jeg mig lidt med ham, og hørde da, han var ingen Tydsker, men en ørkes-[167]løs ung Engelskmand (som han selv sagde) der havde studeret i Cambridge, og var nyelig kommet hjem fra en Reise i Tydskland. Siden har vi talt lidt mere sammen, og idag gav han mig sit Kort …Jeg gav ham mit Kort og sagde ham, at naar han om Eftermiddagen havde Lyst til at spadsere, skulde det være mig en Fornøielse at giøre Selskab, saa kunde vi snakke nærmere sammen.'

[30] *Englandsbreve*, pp. 167-8: 'Mr. Kemble (den unge Engellænder fra Museet). Det lader til et herligt og opvakt ungt Menneske , som jeg ikke blot lover mig nogen Fornøielse, men hans Fæderneland Gavn af.... Efter Turen rundt om Regents Park…fulgde jeg hjem med ham til tomme prægtige Værelser, hvor en gammel Husholderske [168] skiænkede Kaffe og Thee til os.'

consequential. He was hugely impressed by the community of a residential college in which tutors and students lived alongside each other and dined together in the great hall, where there prevailed 'so truly free, cheerful and serious a tone' that Grundtvig found himself at home as never would have been the case in the University back there in Copenhagen, as he reported to Elise.[31] This idealized impression of an academic community he took home with him, and in the course of time it contributed to his renowned conceptualisation of the 'folkhighschool' in Denmark.[32] The folkhighschool was originally envisaged as a way of educating the largely rural population of Denmark to stake its claim in the emergent constitutional democracy of the 1840s, and to instil in them a sense of social cohesion, mutual responsibility and national cultural identity. There, in the folkhighschools, they could hear tell of Saxo Grammaticus, the Norse myths, the Icelandic sagas – and Anglo-Saxon historiography[33] and poetry. The Danish Grundtvigian folkhighschool movement became – and still today remains – a major alternative to the State-run education system, and it is one of Denmark's most significant exports to the developing world.

That, then, was one of the more oblique consequences of Grundtvig's quest for Anglo-Saxondom. A revealing clue to the stirring of more direct consequences is perhaps Grundtvig's immediate assessment of Kemble was that he would be of 'benefit to his fatherland'. Grundtvig was there judging Kemble, the Anglo-Saxon scholar, according to the criteria governing his own mission in coming to England. The recovery – and the recirculation – of the ancient records of one's national culture were, Grundtvig firmly believed, a means of re-delineating a faded or even lost national identity.

During his undergraduate years, Denmark had come close to deletion from the political map of Europe. He himself had helped organize a student militia when the British fleet attacked Copenhagen in 1801, as an episode in the Napoleonic Wars. In 1807 a British fleet returned and firebombed Copenhagen, destroying the ancient cathedral, large areas of the city and many of Denmark's medieval treasures. The

---

[31] *Englandsbreve*, pp. 145-7.

[32] Grundtvig popularized the concept and lent the weight of his status and polemic to the idea. Others, notably Christen Kold (1816-70), pioneered the actual setting-up of such schools.

[33] For example, when the new Grundtvigian folkhighschool at Rødding in Danish Slesvig was established in 1844, the reception of Christianity by the Anglo-Saxons was on the syllabus, and it was lectured upon by the Principal (Frederik Helveg) himself.

printing press where Thorkelin's edition of *Beowulf* was in production burnt down, and work had to begin anew on the setting up of the edition. Most of the Danish fleet was destroyed or appropriated and towed away by the British. As a result, Denmark could no longer maintain trade routes to her colonies. State bankruptcy followed in 1814. The same year, by the Treaty of Kiel, formally ending hostilities between Denmark and Sweden within the framework of the Napoleonic wars, Denmark was compelled to relinquish sovereignty of Norway to Sweden, and at the Congress of Vienna reordering Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, King Frederik was a powerless and humiliated observer. Denmark lost status and dignity in all these settlements and gained little more than the obligation to pay a lifelong pension to the young Viennese woman whom Frederik took on as his mistress for the duration of the Vienna conference.

Grundtvig was as worried as any other Dane – more worried, probably, than most – at the threat all this represented to the political and cultural integrity of the kingdom. He reflected upon the then-prevailing educational system which might be assumed to have a crucial role to play in strengthening in the rising generations an awareness of the values at stake. The system was based upon the grammar school or Latin school, of the kind through which he had himself passed on his way into the university, and through which the civil service running the absolute monarchy was trained and recruited. Grundtvig detested and scorned it. He called it 'den sorte Skole' [the black school][34] and his label is still current in Denmark for a certain kind of education based upon strict prescription of curriculum, learning by rote, and frequent assessment and examination. There the syllabus prioritised classical languages and classical culture and largely ignored the native culture of the North.

[34] In his *Mands Minde* lectures (1838), Grundtvig spoke of: 'dem af os, der, om vi end ingenlunde gik gjennem Helvede ubrændte, gjennem den sorte Skole uskadte, dog ikke dér aldeles glemte Dansken over Latinen, Fædernelandet over den klassiske Jordbund, Danmark, vor søde Moder, over *alma mater* [...], eller med ét Ord : glemte Mennesket over Bøgerne og Livet over Døden.' ['those of us who, even if we by no means passed through Hell unburnt, through "the black school" undamaged, nevertheless did not altogether forget Danish in preference to Latin, the land of our fathers in preference to classical soil, Denmark, our sweet mother, in preference to "alma mater" […] or, in a word, forget the human being in preference to books, and life in preference to death.']. (*Mands Minde,* IV, p. 46. Grundtvig regretted that in England such sterile education was still the norm.

Grundtvig's 'discovery' of the extensive and ancient treasury of Anglo-Saxon written culture was therefore a kind of godsend to him, for it took little manipulation of history to incorporate the Anglo-Saxons into his cherished concept of 'den Høje Nord', the High North. As he saw it, the Anglo-Saxon written culture constituted family records for Denmark too – reaching much further back than the comparable records of Denmark or Norway-Iceland. He recalled the legend recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, that the Danish and English folk sprang from two brothers called Dan and Angul; and in his verse preface to his edition of *Beowulf* (1861) he envisaged the day when, after all the historical conflicts and aberrations, 'Dan og Angul midt paa Hav / Trykke Broder-Hænde'.[35] Here in Anglo-Saxon culture, he believed, there was hope of finding testimonies of a kindred antiquity which, duly set before the Danish people, could help to re-delineate a true and proud Danish identity against all the demoralising threats that beset it – some of which threats had come, historically and quite recently, from England (Britain).

Of course, he saw that enlightenment and change were required on the English side too. Among the rest, he prayed that the latter-day English folk might eventually rediscover for themselves their true Northern roots and throw off the thraldom of classical culture and Latinate language – and in fact it was the opinion of John Earle, the distinguished Anglo-Saxonist who wrote a lengthy appreciation of Grundtvig in his *The Deeds of Beowulf* (1892), that Grundtvig's work on *Beowulf* had had the effect 'of making scholars, who had been nurtured upon foreign classics, begin to wonder whether there might not be more in the treasury of their own mother tongue than they had hitherto apprehended'.[36]

---

[35] 'Dan and Angul in mid-ocean [the North Sea, presumably] shall shake their brother-hands'. (*Beowulfes Beorh*, p. xi).

[36] J. Earle, *The Deeds of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1892), Introduction, p. xvi. Following Grundtvig's fourth visit to England in 1843, Earle entered into correspondence with him (correspondence in the Grundtvig Arkiv, Royal Library Copenhagen, Fascicule 448.10 a-e). He also sent Grundtvig a copy of his edition of *The Ruin* in 1872 which Grundtvig arranged to have read to him, and discussed with a professorial friend, Frederik Hammerich, a few days before his death in September that year, on the brink of his eighty ninth birthday. 'Grundtvig,' wrote Hammerich, 'as is well known, had a long-standing love for the Anglo-Saxons. Right from the start he was at home in their writings.' This anecdote, centred upon the text of *The Ruin*, brings the long story of Grundtvig's engagement with Anglo-Saxondom to a movingly elegiac conclusion. See *Grundtvig Life*, Item 128, pp. 333-35.

Grundtvig's engagement with *Beowulf* in 1815 led him immediately into the study of Anglo-Saxon literature more widely. As already mentioned, the contemporary loan protocols of the Royal Library in Copenhagen show, for example, that he was making use of the great two-volume *Thesaurus* of the heroic George Hickes (Hickes 1703-5). The second volume comprised a survey of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in British libraries, compiled by Humphrey Wanley, Bodley's Librarian in Oxford, and generously illustrated with incipits and explicits and other quoted passages, in the original language.

The same protocols also show that at this period Grundtvig read Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in its Latin version, in the edition of Abraham Wheloc (Cambridge, 1644). In this work, he seems to have found dramatic endorsement of his own belief in 'universal' history, world history as the ongoing record of divine Providence in God's dealings with his created world. Bede's was the earliest historical record known to Grundtvig of the Christian settlement of the North, and of the Anglo-Saxon Church which paved the way for the eventual conversion of the Danes by Ansgar. He knew of the great commendation of Bede written by Saxo Grammaticus in Book I of his *Gesta Danorum*: where Saxo declares that to bring into the light the ancient records of one's fatherland is as grand a duty as that of making known the Scriptural word of God itself. Grundtvig translated – and by implication roundly endorsed – Saxo's remarks on Bede thus:

> Beda...var selv en Engelskmand, og velberømt for sine gudelige Skrifter, thi han indlemmede med Flid sit Fædrenelands Krønike i sine dyrebare Bøger om Troen og Lærdommen, fordi han tænkde, som sandt var, at det er ligesaavel en Kiærligheds-Gierning at tænde Lys i sit Fædrenelands Krønike, som at udlægge Guds Ord; det Ene skal giøres, og det Andet ikke forsømmes. [37]

[37] N. F. S. Grundtvig, *Danmarks Krønike af Saxo Grammaticus fordansket ved N. F. S. Grundtvig, Første Deel* (Copenhagen, 1818), p. 14: 'Bede...was himself an Englishman and famed for his religious writings, for he assiduously incorporated his fatherland's chronicles in his valuable books on the faith and on scholarship, because he believed, which was right, that it is as much a work of love to give light to his fatherland's chronicle as to set forth the word of God. The one must be done, the other must not be neglected.' On the title-page of his translation of Saxo, Grundtvig placed six verse lines invoking the authority of Bede: 'Det siger Beda, den ærlige Mand, / Det er vel-gjort, af hvem der kan, / At skrive Forældres Gierninger alle; / Ere de onde, man maa dem flye, / Ere de

Grundtvig's adoption of this particular philosophy of 'universal' history stemmed, like much else in nineteenth-century Danish culture, from German philosophers, notably Schiller and Hegel.[38] But characteristically Grundtvig gave it a cast and an application distinctively his own. From 1815 onwards, throughout his life, this philosophy of history was central to his conceptualisation of the Church and Christendom and of the Godward destiny of the North in general and of Denmark in particular.

Noteworthily, his tracking of the hand of Providence in history led him to identify the Anglo-Saxon Church as one of the seven churches mystically spoken of in The Book of Revelation. First came the Hebrew Church, then the Greek Church, then the Latin Church. Then, just as the Latin Church was about to become corrupt (that is, in a Lutheran perception, with the rise of medieval papacy), Christianity was *providentially* carried across to the Anglo-Saxons by Augustine of Canterbury. The Anglo-Saxon Church nurtured the Faith and sent forth missionaries (including such as Willibrord and Boniface, whom Grundtvig celebrated in songs he wrote for use in Danish schools and homes) into the continent. Thus providentially came about the emergence of the German Church and Lutheranism, and from the German Church Denmark was evangelized and the Nordic Church came into being. The seventh Church was still to come, Grundtvig believed. He seems to have thought it might appear in India.[39]

---

gode, dem giøre paa Nye, / Og dem ingenlunde frafalde!' 'Thus says Bede, that honest man, that it is well done, by whomsoever can, to write down all the deeds of their forebears. If they be wicked, then one must shun them. If they be good, repeat them and in no wise lapse from them.' Grundtvig took the lines from *Riim-Krøniken* (*Den danske Rimkrønike*), published as Denmark's earliest printed book in the Danish language (Copenhagen, 1495). They are based on Bede's own Preface. Grundtvig required his own sons to learn them by heart. For an anecdote recording this fact, see *Grundtvig Life*, p. 206.

[38] Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), part of whose inaugural lecture as professor at Jena University (1789), entitled *Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?* [What is the meaning of, and to what end does one study universal history?], Grundtvig translated and wrote into his notebooks; and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), author of *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* [Lectures on the philosophy of world history], first delivered as lectures in the University of Berlin, posthumously published 1837.

[39] In a lengthy poetic work in which he set forth this view of universal history, *Christenhedens Syvstjerne* [The seven stars (or the Pleiades) of Christendom],

Briefly, one last testimony to the status accorded to Bede by Grundtvig and his followers, in terms of the abiding currency of Bede's testimonies and in particular their timely relevance to the folk of the High North in a period of grave danger. In 1864, as Denmark geared up for war with Prussia over Slesvig-Holsten, one of Grundtvig's supporters, working with Grundtvig's active encouragement, finally provided Denmark with a modern translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. This was Christian Malta Kragballe (1824-97), who commended this Anglo-Saxon work to his Danish fellow-countrymen because it charted the highway, the *Kongevej*, the king's road, by which Christianity had been providentially delivered into the North. In his Foreword, Kragballe lamented the fact that some Lutherans – those in Germany, in fact – had become 'so arch-Lutheran and so un-ecclesial' ('saa ærke-luthersk og saa ukirkelig') that they had forgotten the Hebrew, Greek and Latin Fathers: but also, 'and this above all' ('og det allermeest'), they had forgotten the witness of the Anglo-Saxon Church. Kragballe evidently believed that such 'arch-Lutherans' had abandoned their awareness of the historical place – the universal-historical location – of true Lutheranism within the continuous existence of the universal – catholic – Church. The study of Bede, he asserted, was the remedy: Bede could offer them 'enlightenment and edification' ('oplysning og opbyggelse').[40]

In the five years following his first encounter with the text of *Beowulf*, Grundtvig published two significant analyses of the poem's meaning – pioneering excursions into the literary, rather than the solely textual-linguistic mediation of the poet's achievement. One was in his essays in his own periodical *Danne-Virke* (1816-19) and the other in his *Indledning og Fortale* (Introduction and Preface) to his translation of the poem, which he entitled *Bjowulfs Drape* (1820).[41] This was truly pioneering work. When J. R. R. Tolkien wrote his more or less seismic lecture *Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics* in 1936, there were many previous studies known to him, which could help him to determine the thrust and the parameters of his own reading of the poem.

---

published 1854-55, he devoted a narrative section to each of the Churches. The Anglo-Saxon section is naturally much indebted to Grundtvig's reading in Bede.

[40] Christian Kragballe, *Angler Folkets Kirkehistorie af Beda den Ærværdige* (Copenhagen, 1864), pp. 1-2.

[41] Grundtvig's term *Drape* was a Danicised borrowing from the Old Norse genre-title (*drápa*) which became popular among Danish poets in the nineteenth century. It was applied to poems singing the praises of great heroes.

Following Michael Drout's published study[42] of Tolkien's drafts of the British Academy Lecture of 1936, donated to the Bodleian Library in 1985 by Christopher Tolkien, there has been some attempt to demonstrate that Grundtvig's interpretation of the poem, as summarized in the Introduction to his *Bjowulfs Drape*, lies influentially, but unacknowledged, behind Tolkien's interpretation. It is certainly true that references to 'Pastor Grundtvig' appear in the drafts but are not carried over into the finalized and published Lecture. There, in the preliminary draftings of his topic, Tolkien acknowledges Grundtvig as belonging to 'the first stage of *Beowulf* criticism' and acknowledges him as 'one of the greatest single names in the history of *Beowulf* criticism' (Drout 2002, p. 43). He also includes a lengthy footnote appreciating the quality of Grundtvig's dedicatory verse (in Anglo-Saxon pastiche) to his patron Johan Bülow; expresses admiration of Grundtvig's competence in emending Thorkelin's text without ever having seen the *Beowulf* manuscript; and commends him for his identification of Sigemund the Volsung and his recognition of Chochilaicus in Gregory of Tours as Hygelac in *Beowulf*.[43] However, much, perhaps all, of this Tolkien could have gleaned from Earle's commendation of Grundtvig in the Introduction to his *The Deeds of Beowulf*. Attempts to identify ideas originated by Grundtvig in the interpretation of the poem offered by Tolkien are by no means overwhelmingly persuasive; and for some of us there seems to be a fundamental difference between the philosophical stance adopted towards his material by Grundtvig, and that adopted by Tolkien – a fact which may seem further to reduce the likelihood of any direct indebtedness. At any rate, back in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, struggling to make worthwhile sense of the poem, Grundtvig had no such eminent predecessors whom he might challenge and correct – other than Thorkelin and Thorkelin's supporter, P. E. Müller.[44] Grundtvig was out there on his own, and his achievement is all the more impressive for that.

---

[42] M. D. C. Drout, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Beowulf and the Critics*, Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Tempe, Arizona, 2002).

[43] T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (New York, 2003), p. 347, notes: 'Grundtvig was the "Beowulfian" whom Tolkien admired most.'

[44] Peter Erasmus Müller (1776-1834), a leading Danish scholar in the field of early Scandinavian literature and editor (1805-30) of the leading journal *Dansk Litteratur-Tidende*, wrote a favourable review of Thorkelin's *editio princeps* of *Beowulf* and thus provoked Grundtvig's attacks on the work in the series of articles in *Nyeste Skilderie af Kiøbenhavn* (1815) mentioned above.

What immediately spoke to him from the poem was evidently the poet's *Christian* perspective of history, constructed from the heathen tales which were his raw material. Beowulf's adversaries were God's adversaries. The Dragon who dealt out death to Beowulf, the Grendel-kin and those who brought harm upon Heorot and the stability of Hrothgar's kingdom, the giants of old who long strove against God, and Cain, the archetype of them all, the figure whose reflex was manifest in all the others, all were engaged in a struggle through worldly time against the creator God, his creation and his creatures.

Grundtvig spoke of it as the still ongoing struggle between Truth and the Lie ('Kamp mellem Sandhed og Løgn'),[45] with its battle ground located in Nature (the material world including the heroic life) and History (Time). There can be no doubt about the eventual outcome, in Grundtvig's Christian universal-historical view. Truth will prevail. There will be temporary defeats, often almost unbearably costly defeats as when a great champion dies in the cause. But the ultimate victory will be God's, who providentially oversees all events within worldly time, as indeed many references in the poem assert.[46]

It is in his response to the fact of Beowulf's death itself, that Grundtvig, in the Introduction to *Bjowulfs Drape,* comes to what I regard as his most remarkable and penetrating judgement. Here he expresses an insight into the poem which is far removed from Tolkien's conclusion – that romantic-heroic-tragic conclusion, as the lamentations of Beowulf's people foreshadow the obliteration of the nation Beowulf had so long protected, that the wages of heroism is death. For his part, Grundtvig asserts:

> Jeg finder...at Bjowulf er med et dybt poetisk Blik betragtet og levende fremstilt som *Menneske-Slægtens* Nordiske Helt, der, tilsidst paa sit eget Livs Bekostning, afvæbner Mørkets Magt og redder med Kraft det døende Folke-Liv, og har jeg Ret, da er Digtet ogsaa unægtelig højt...hvortil selv ei Island kan opvise Mage.[47]

---

[45] *Danne-Virke II,* p. 278. See further S. A. J. Bradley, 'Grundtvig, Anglo-Saxon Literature, and "Ordets Kamp til Seier"' *Grundtvig Studier 1989* (Grundtvig-Selskabet, Copenhagen, 1989), pp. 216-45.

[46] 'Metod eallum weold gumena cynnes / swa he nu git deð' (*Beowulf* 1057-58); see also among other references lines 381-84, 440-41, 665-70, 685-87, 700-02, 705-07, 930-31, 977-79.

[47] 'I find...that Beowulf is perceived with a deeply poetic eye, and vividly portrayed as humankind's Nordic hero who, finally at the cost of his own life,

The poet's vision, then, is 'deeply poetic': the *form* of this Anglo-Saxon *drape* might have its shortcomings, but the *vision* it expresses is deeply poetic. Beowulf is a northern hero but the poet so universalizes both the character and the story that Beowulf comes to represent the human struggle through all the ages – achieving what Grundtvig elsewhere calls 'a universal-historical perception of human life' ('en universal-historiske Anskuelse af Menneske-Livet').[48] Beowulf pays for his people's salvation with his life: but in dying he *defeats* the evil power that was destroying his people; and by his strength he *saves* the threatened existence and thriving of the community of his people – the *Folke-Liv*.

This must surely seem an impressive insight into the substance and the stature of the poem by someone who had no pre-existing *Beowulf* debate to build on or quarrel with. Later scholars would try to argue or edit away the Christian references. They would deplore the poet's habit of lapsing into 'digressions'. They would compare the poem with Greek and Latin epic and find it more or less barbarous – a patchwork of childish or primitive tales. To Grundtvig it appeared a deeply poetic study in universal history, using Northern history and legend to define a heroic position for the North in the world-wide and time-long struggle between Truth and Lie, reaching back through the age of legend-history into the antiquity of Scripture – reaching back, as we might add, to the Book of Genesis, where Creation, Fall, and the First Murder and the primal breach of the bond of kinship and of the social unit of family are all narrated, just as they are mirrored in various episodes and themes of the poem.[49] Some of us may think that in this analysis, Grundtvig was as near to the poet's own mind as it is given a modern reader to approach.

---

disarms the power of darkness and by his strength saves the dying life of the nation [*Folke-Liv*], and if I am right, then the poem is also undeniably lofty, ...one of which not even Iceland can show the like.' (*Bjowulfs Drape*, p. L).

[48] *Bjowulfs Drape*, p. LV, with reference to the 'Gothisk' (Gothic) branch of 'the North's historical triangle' ('Nordens historiske Trekant', p. LIV), to which he regards *Beowulf* as belonging.

[49] Grundtvig was far from uncritical of the poet's taste; he anticipated those later critics who found the two major episodes too discrete from each other, and found the various minor episodes irregularly proportioned. J. R. R. Tolkien's great contribution to *Beowulf* criticism, more than a hundred years on from Grundtvig, was, of course, to convince the critics that it was fruitless to bring classical criteria of epic composition to bear on a poet who never aspired to meet them but shared with his age and his audience his own imperatives and his own integrity.

By his strength Beowulf saves the dying *Folke-Liv*, says Grundtvig. There is a whole set of *folc*- words in *Beowulf*: *folc* (*passim*) 'people, nation'; *folc-agend* (3113) 'one who rules a people'; *folc-cwen* (641) 'queen of a people, people's queen'; *folc-cyning* 2733, 2873) 'king of a people, people's king'; *folc-red* (3006) 'counsel or policy in aid of the people'; *folc-riht* (2608) 'the rights of the people held in common'; *folc-scaru* (73) 'that in which the people have a share by right'; *folc-stede* (76) 'the people's gathering place, the hall'; *folc-toga* (839) 'leader of the people'.

This is the Anglo-Saxon lexis which gives Grundtvig the terminology and the morphology of that key concept-word in his interpretation of the poem: the *Folke-Liv*, which was dying under the ravages of the Dragon, but by Beowulf's death was saved.

Now, if there is one concept which the average Dane or Danish observer will associate with the name of Grundtvig – and even with the definition of Danishness – it is the concept of *Folkelighed* – the quality of a style of living in cohesive community whose members acknowledge reciprocal responsibility for each other and for the community, both past and present, as an entirety. The stem of this word – *folke* 'folk' – was a key concept-word in nineteenth-century European National-Romanticism. It was influentially promoted by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) who wrote on the ideas of 'nationality' and 'patriotism'. Herder chose to define the *Volk* in terms of shared language and shared cultural tradition. The *Volk*, he asserted, was the one and only class in a state, and it included all, from peasant to king, who shared the language and ascribed to the common cultural tradition, whether this was folklore, legend, music or art.

Grundtvig knew Herder's writings well. Indeed, as one distinguished Danish critic has declared, 'In Denmark it is none other than Grundtvig who mediates Herder's ideas and changes them into genuine politics of culture' (Lundgreen-Nielsen 1983, p. 35).

During his 'lean years'(1813-20) Grundtvig took the term *folkelighed* into regular use; and when he came to write his critical appraisal of *Beowulf* he perceived the poet's great testimony concerning human heroism to be this: that the hero was one who 'saved the dying life of the *Folk* – the *Folke-Liv*'.[50] Beowulf was thus presented to the Danish public as a hero for their own times.

---

[50] By way of defining Grundtvig's idea of *Folkelighed* and *Folke-Aanden* [the folk-spirit], Borup and Schrøder say: 'Det betyder ikke blot det populære, det demokratiske, eller det nationale. Det betyder et Folks bevidste Fælleskab om sine historiske og aandelige Værdier; og Folkeaanden er den samlende kraft' ('It

Grundtvig saw – could hardly fail to see – that *Beowulf* was also about kingship, of which the poet sets forth good and bad examples. Here was more grist to his mill. The good kings, such as Hrothgar, set an example of what Grundtvig would wish to call 'Folkelighed'. Hrothgar conceived the idea of building a *folcstede* – a people's place – where he could share out to all, young and old, such as God had granted him, except for *folc-scaru* (the folk-share, what the people already held in common and by right) – and human lives. The whole context suggests that we are to believe that such benevolent exercise of royal authority is sanctioned by God. 'Þæt wæs god cyning!' exclaims the poet of *Beowulf* – and Grundtvig takes over this laudatory sentence and, in his Old English verse introduction to *Bjowulfs Drape* (the pastiche composition which Tolkien admired), applies it to his own king, Frederik VI. Frederik is a good king, says Grundtvig. To Frederik, by the same token as favoured his legendary forbears, it will be granted to end the evil of the Grendel-kin who beset the *folc-stede* of the Danes and mar their happiness:

> Freodoric siteþ
> On fæder-stole
> Gumena baldor.
> Þæt is god cyning.
> Swylcum gifeþe biþ
> Þæt he Grendles cynn
> Denum to dreame
> Dæda getwæfe.[51]

This is one example out of many, here and in his introductions to *Phenix-Fuglen* and *Beowulfes Beorh*, where Grundtvig takes terminology and phrases from the Anglo-Saxon, ready-charged with historical cultural and spiritual values, and incorporates them into the cultural context of his own day. Thus he enriches with poetic idiom the current definition of (for example) *Folkelighed* or royal absolutism, and

---

means not only the popular, the democratic, or the national. It means a folk's conscious solidarity over its historical and spiritual values; and the folk-spirit is the unifying force'). (*Haandbog i N. F. S. Grundtvigs Skrifter. II: Folkelige Grundtanker,* E. J. Borup, F. Schrøder (eds), H. Hagerup, Copenhagen, 1930, p. X).

[51] Frederik sits on his fathers' throne, the ruler of men. He is a good king. To such it shall be granted that he cuts off the Grendel-kin from their deeds, to the joy of the Danes (*Bjowulfs Drape*, Old English preface, lines 15-22).

at the same time authorizes it from the annals of Northern antiquity as an *ancient* cultural value or tradition.

Grundtvig sincerely believed that royal absolutism was a better form of government than democracy. 'Konge-Haand og Folke-Stemme / Begge stærke, begge fri' [Kingly hand and people's voice, / each one strong and each one free] was his poetic formulation of the ideal in a poem he published in 1839. As one Danish historian has written:

> Grundtvig beskriver her Danmark som det land, hvor pagten mellem konge og folk, "kongehånd og folkestemme, begge stærke, begge fri" har haft hjemme siden tidernes morgen. Den frie stærke konge, der lytter til den fri stærke folkestemme og derudfra tolker det almene bedste hævet over særinteresserne, er det grundtvigske politiske ideal.[52]

One must, however, add, as all Danish political historians do, that when in 1849 the Danish people peacefully and freely chose democracy, Grundtvig threw himself into the securing of liberties and the education of the electorate in *folkelige*, non-sectarian, non-partisan values. One must not rashly overclaim the significance of Grundtvig's debt to Anglo-Saxondom at every turn – but it does seem a tenable conclusion that both in his trust in royal governance *and* in his commitment to true *folkelighed* Grundtvig derived *something* from the thought he had expended on his interpretation of *Beowulf* and the testimony of Danish antiquity.

So to a final set of claims about Grundtvig's appropriation of Anglo-Saxondom; and an opportune way in is to mark the curious coincidence that both John Kemble and Grundtvig were likened to Martin Luther. Kemble's university friend, Alfred Tennyson, wrote a sonnet about Kemble (*To J. M. K.*)[53] probably about the time that Grundtvig met him:

---

[52] Tina Damsholt, 'Fædrelandskærlighed og Borgerånd', *Uddannelse. Undervisningsministeriets tidsskrift*, Nr. 7, September 1997 (Copenhagen), pp. 65-71. 'Grundtvig here describes Denmark as a land where the pact between King and Folk, 'Kingly hand and people's voice, Each one strong and each one free', has found a home since the morning of time. The free and strong King who listens to the free and strong voice of the Folk, and from this construes the common good, raised above partisan interests, this is Grundtvig's political ideal.' .

[53] Alfred Tennyson, *Poems, chiefly lyrical* (London, 1830).

My hope and heart is with thee – thou wilt be
A latter Luther, and a soldier-priest
To scare church-harpies from the master's feast;
Our dusted velvets have much need of thee:
Thou art no Sabbath-drawler of old saws,
Distill'd from some worm-canker'd homily;
But spurr'd at heart with fieriest energy
To embattail and to wall about thy cause
With iron-worded proof, hating to hark
The humming of the drowsy pulpit-drone
Half God's good sabbath, while the worn-out clerk
Brow-beats his desk below. Thou from a throne
Mounted in heaven wilt shoot into the dark
Arrows of lightnings. I will stand and mark.

Kemble did not fulfil Tennyson's prophecies; but Grundtvig, for his part, was regarded by many, already in his own lifetime, as a second Luther, a continuator of the reform of the Church.[54] Point by point, Tennyson's poetical appraisal of Kemble would fit Grundtvig rather well. But curiously enough, Grundtvig is distinguished in his very instincts by a gravitation *not* towards that 'arch-Lutheranism' scorned by Christian Kragballe, but towards the *oldkirkelige*, the 'old-churchly', that which pertained to the early Church, the Church as it was for centuries before Luther's reform. This was not by any means to disown the Lutheran Reformation – emphatically not – but rather to rediscover the place of the Lutheran Church within a catholic continuity back to the age of the apostles. Seemingly, some kind of *instinct* helped lead Grundtvig into the early medieval world: we have the witness of a Bishop of Copenhagen, Hans Lassen Martensen, who wrote of Grundtvig, with references to meetings they had in the late 1830s:

> Jeg har med ham samtalet om mange af de meest interessante Gjenstande. […] I Historien vendte vi ofte tilbage til Middelalderen. [...] For Middelalderen havde Grundtvig en særegen Forkjærlighed og yttrede, at der endnu i vore Dage

[54] He was called 'Nordens Kirkehøvding' and compared with 'the *Høvding* of Saxony', Martin Luther. See *Grundtvig Life*, p. 462 ('Høvding'). There is some evidence for concluding that Grundtvig and those immediately around him were disposed to interpret events in his life as analogous to events in Luther's: see *Grundtvig Life*, p. 349 ('anfægtelser'), and p. 313.

> vare Naturer, som i Grunden hørte hjemme i Middelalderen; og jeg fik stundom det Indtryk, at han betragtede sig selv som en middelalderlig Natur.[55]

It is conventional in Grundtvig studies to put the date of 1825 upon Grundtvig's real discovery of the *oldkirkelige*. This was the year in which, browsing in the Royal Library, he came across the writings of the Church Father Irenaeus, a Bishop of Lyons who lived in the second century after Christ.[56] Reading them was for Grundtvig an epiphany – this was his famous *mageløs Opdagelse*, his peerless discovery. Driven almost to despair by the encroachments of Rationalism and modern Biblical textual criticism upon the faith of ordinary people, he found in Irenaeus the basis of an authority for the Church, independent of Scriptural record – but vested in what he called 'The Living Word' [*Det levende Ord*]. This has remained the foundation of Grundtvigianism – that part of the Danish National Church which derives from Grundtvig's *Kirkelig Anskuelse*, concept of The Church.[57]

Certainly 1825 was the year in which Grundtvig discovered Irenaeus: but it was not the year in which he first actively engaged with an *oldkirkelige* culture. That happened when, a decade earlier, from 1815 onwards, he began to read Bede and the poetry of the Exeter Book and of Junius 11 and the homilies of Ælfric.[58]

---

[55] 'I have conversed with him on many of the most interesting subjects. […] In history, we would often return to the Middle Ages [...] Grundtvig had a particular predilection for the Middle Ages, and declared that still in our own days there were characters who fundamentally belonged in the Middle Ages; and I sometimes took the impression that he regarded himself as a medieval character.' H. L. Martensen, *Af mit Levnet*, *Meddelelser*, II (Copenhagen, 1883), p. 51 ; *Grundtvig Life*, p. 250.

[56] Irenaeus' chief work was his refutation of Gnosticism, *Adversus haereses* (in Latin translations *Contra omnes hæreses*). Grundtvig translated Book V of the Latin text and published it in *Theologiske Maanedsskrift* (Copenhagen, 1827) under the title 'Om Kjødets Opstandelse og det evige Liv' [On the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting].

[57] Roughly put, the 'Living Word' was inherent in the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, the words of institution at Holy Communion and certain other formulae spoken within the congregation at Holy Baptism or the Lord's Supper. It was this 'discovery' which fuelled Grundtvig's attack on Professor Clausen and led to his being sentenced to lifelong censorship.

[58] In support of this view, see A. M. Allchin, 'The Holy Spirit in the Teaching of N. F. S. Grundtvig', *Grundtvig Studier 1998* (Copenhagen, 1998), pp. 175-89, at p. 187. Allchin there accepts that Grundtvig's first attraction to the poetry of the

Though there is not opportunity here to develop the point very far, it is worth remembering that Grundtvig, Kemble and the other early Anglo-Saxonists tended to view the documentary legacy of the Anglo-Saxons through the lens provided for them in George Hickes's monumental *Thesaurus*. For two centuries, Hickes's *Thesaurus* was for many Anglo-Saxonists their gateway into the Anglo-Saxon world. Hickes was an unshakeable non-juror;[59] and like the majority of the non-juring clergy, he inclined to the High Church tradition of Anglicanism; and one of the things the *Thesaurus* did was to present afresh a characterisation of the ecclesiastical order, the creed and the spirituality of the Church in England in its foundational centuries – to which High Church Anglicans have always tended to look – as an important part of their ecclesiastical inheritance. This broadly corresponds to what is referenced in the Danish use of the term *det oldkirkelige*.

Merely to read the grand dedication page of the *Thesaurus* must have seemed to Grundtvig one of those epiphanies which he was willing to regard as acts of Providence. Hickes dedicated his work to Prince Georg (George) of Denmark (1653-1708), consort of Queen Anne. He hailed the Danish royal line as descended from Odin, Lord of the Aesir and from Skjold whence they have their name Skjoldings. (In *Beowulf* the king as Scyld and the dynasty are the Scyldings). He refers to the legend of Dan and Angul and recalls that the homelands from which Angles migrated to Britain were the duchies of Slesvig and Holsten. He hailed King Cnut as 'Skioldingorum tunc gloria' – 'at that time, the glory of the Scyldings'. Cnut, he said, 'having acceded to governance by an agreed covenant, enlarged the empire of the Angles, amplified the glory of the name "English" and established excellent laws pertaining to the ecclesiastical as well as to the civil commonweal, which are still extant, in the Anglo-Saxon language'.

Grundtvig the universal-historian was so convinced of the hand of Providence in the pivotal and missionising role assigned to the Anglo-Saxon Church that in 1843 he once more returned to England, on a mission patronized by Queen Caroline Amalie of Denmark (1796-1881)

Anglo-Saxons may have been not only literary and historical 'but also seriously theological'.

[59] That is, he refused to accept that the 'kingship' conferred upon James II at his coronation, to which as a priest in the English Church Hickes had sworn allegiance, could be legally terminated or legally transferred to William of Orange at the time of the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688.

and backed by some leading Danish clergy.[60] Grundtvig and these supporters had been closely following the development of the Oxford Movement and had acquired and studied a copy of the controversial Tract 90.[61] Grundtvig's aim now, in 1843, was to go to Oxford and meet with John Henry Newman and other leaders of the Oxford Tractarians[62] in the hope of diverting them from Roman errors, and of showing them that a universal-historical viewpoint could demonstrate the catholic continuity between the primitive Church, the Anglo-Saxon Church and the Lutheran Churches in Germany and Scandinavia – a continuity which the Tractarians, for their own reasons, also wished to have acknowledged. He hoped to convey to the good folk there 'at least a little more understanding of Church History and of their own watchword: "quod ubique, semper et ab omnibus".'[63]

So it came about that Grundtvig was invited to breakfast at Oriel College – with a very distracted Newman. He was sorely disappointed at the small measure of attention he got from Newman. He quickly came to understand that the English theologians had no time for his universal-historical arguments. But worse was to come. A few days after the unsatisfactory meeting with Newman he was told – not by

---

[60] Incidentally, in this mission he was also backed by a certain non-Danish cleric, chaplain to the English community at Helsingør in Denmark, named Nugent Wade. Nugent Wade was born in Dublin in 1809, and graduated as Bachelor of Arts from Trinity College in 1829. He gained the degree of Doctor of Divinity at Oxford in 1843, the year of Grundtvig's mission there, and was later consecrated Bishop of Bristol, where his grave now is. It was Nugent Wade who sent Grundtvig a copy of the famous Tract 90.

[61] John Henry Newman, *Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles.* Grundtvig's copy (London, 1841) is in the Grundtvig Arkiv in the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

[62] 'The half and whole Papists' ('de halve og hele Papister'), as he called them in a letter to his friend Gunni Busck, quoted from *Gunni Busck. Et Levnetsløb* (Copenhagen, 1869), p. 173, in Grell 1995, p. 22.

[63] 'what everywhere, always, and by all [is believed]' – a variously phrased long-standing definition of catholic faith. Letter to Gunni Busck, quoted from H. Bech, *Gunni Busck. Et Levnedsløb i en Præstegaard* (2nd extended edition, Schønbergs Forlag, Copenhagen, 1878), p. 173, in Helge Grell, *Grundtvig og Oxforderne: Grundtvigs møde med Oxfordbevægelsen og dets betydning for hans forfatterskab* (Århus, 1995), pp. 22-23. Grundtvig's agenda, based in part upon his convictions about the place of the Anglo-Saxon Church in history, is not dissimilar to that of his supporter Kragballe, the translator of Bede, quoted above. He was certain he could offer the Oxford folk 'enlightenment and edification' ('oplysning og opbyggelse').

Newman, but by one close to him[64] – that because the Apostolic Succession in the Danish Church was broken at the Reformation, Grundtvig himself could not be recognized as a priest or pastor in the ecclesiastical and canonical sense of the titles. The Danish clerical orders were invalid. He left Oxford very soon afterwards, despairing of the latter-day Church of the English. The Apostolic Succession and the status and role of bishops have remained fierce issues in the Danish Church ever since.[65]

However, something more lasting and in certain ways more fruitful was mediated by Grundtvig from out of the early Church of the Anglo-Saxons and into Danish religious life and cultural life more widely – in fulfilment of an imperative rather different from his friend John Kemble's. Beyond the exercise in scholarship entailed in editing and publishing ancient texts, Grundtvig was concerned with the application which might be made of the retrieved texts of Northern antiquity to the defining of national identity and the modelling of values which might give articulation to that identity. Herein lay a marked divergence from those parameters of critical interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus, and their placement within the records of the national culture which characterized the work not only of Kemble, but of Benjamin Thorpe, Frederic Madden and the other English antiquarians.

In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (dated 731), as mentioned above, Grundtvig naturally came across the story of Cædmon, the first Christian poet of the English language, whose gift (Bede asserted) came directly from God. This was a dramatic revelation for Grundtvig. Hitherto, he had regarded the Icelandic Edda-poetry, ostensibly deriving from the ninth-century *skjald* Bragi (whose inspiration was attributed to the pre-Christian god also named Bragi), as the oldest poetry of the High North. Now here was an Anglo-Saxon poet from the seventh century, historically verified and quoted in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, whose inspiration was the Christians' God; and in the Royal Library in

---

[64] William Palmer (1803–1885) of Worcester College, an Irish Protestant, author of *Treatise on the Church of Christ* (London, 1838) which argued that inheritance of the Apostolic Succession was essential to the identification of an authentic Christian Church.

[65] In 1992 the Porvoo Communion was established between the Anglican and a majority of Lutheran national Churches. The Danish Folkekirke, after consultation at parochial level in which Grundtvigian communities expressed strong opposition, particularly over the status of bishops, dissented. However, in March 2010 a lengthy period of negotiation achieved reversal of the decision and the Danish Folkekirke signed into the Communion.

Copenhagen Grundtvig found that there was an edition of what its editor, Franciscus Junius, believed was a collection of poems in the Anglo-Saxon language, composed by this Cædmon the codex which Junius viewed as Cædmon's paraphrase of biblical narratives, now known as MS Junius 11 in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Of this miracle of Cædmon, Grundtvig wrote:

> Denne mærkelige Tildragelse, som fandt Sted ved Bedas Fødsels-Tid, (thi Moder Hilde døde 680) er vel ingen Stats-Begivenhed, men det er den Nordiske Poesies Opstandelse i Christen-Tøiet efter dens Begravelse i Daaben, som i alle Retninger var af saa store, uberegnelige Følger for Udviklingen i den ny Folke-Verden, at den ingenlunde kan forbigaaes i den ny Skabelses-Bog, som Middel-Alderens Historie er. Om derimod den saakaldte "Cædmons Paraphras" vi endnu har, er ægte eller uægte, det er selv i Bog-Historien kun en Bisag, da Virkningen blev den samme, og her kan det kun bemærkes i Forbigaaende, at Tiden sikkert har levnet os Brud-Stykker af Kædmunds Høi-Sang [...].[66]

Remarkable viewpoints on the definition of 'the North' and its history and culture are expressed here.

It was a hope nursed by Grundtvig that England would find the way back to the Nordic fold after wandering in error into Greek, Latin and French culture which had corrupted the ancient language and imperilled ancient Northern values. A statement of this vision, characteristically metaphor-laden and laced with allusions to Anglo-

---

[66] *N. F. S. Grundtvig. Haandbog i Verdens-Historie. Anden Deel. Middel-Alderens Historie* (1833-43), ed. Holger Begstrup (Copenhagen, 1908), Vol. 7, p. 16. 'This remarkable occurrence, which occurred about the time of Bede's birth (for Mother Hilda died in 680) is certainly no state event, but it is Northern poesy's resurrection in Christian dress after its burial in baptism, which was in every respect of such great and immeasurable consequences for the development of the world of new nations that in no way can it be passed over in the new Book of Creation which the history of the Middle Ages is. Whether, on the other hand, the so-called "Cædmon's Paraphrase", which we still have, is authentic or not authentic is, of itself, merely a side-issue in literary history, since its influence was just the same, and here it can only be noted in passing that Time has certainly left us fragments of Cædmon's Hymn […].' The short text now commonly called *Cædmon's Hymn* is preserved in a number of manuscript versions of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History.*

Saxon poetic texts and phrases culled from *Beowulf*, occurs in Grundtvig's poetic preface to his edition of *Beowulf*. The return of England to the family of 'the North' would be a glorious feature of the world restored to a Golden Age as in Norse myth.

Give Gud, at Anglers Æt, Nu for Norden fremmed, Mindes maatte Videslet, Mindes Vane-Hjemmet, Bryde af den Grændels-Haand I det Pluddervælske, Som uddrev med Anglers Aand Hjerte-Ordet 'elske'!	God grant that the stock of the Angles, now alienated from the North, might recall the broad plain,[67] might recall the home of the gods,[68] and wrench off that Grendel's-hand in that foreign gibberish[69] which drove out, with the Anglo-Saxons' spirit, the heart-word 'to love'!

Beowulfes Beorh , p. IX. [70]

In visionary vein, Grundtvig makes a prediction of a new era of harmony across the North Sea which seems inspired by the promise of reconciliation and concord pledged by Hrothgar to Beowulf.[71] In this prediction, Grundtvig invokes the legendary brotherhood of the two peoples, the Danes and the English, with a vision of the reunion of the separated brothers, Dan and Angul (sometimes written 'Angel'),[72] who gave their names to the Danes and Angles:

---

[67] Idavoll, the beautiful mead surrounding the home of the Æsir.
[68] The Æsir.
[69] Foreign loan-words and derivations, primarily Latin and Norman French.
[70] Grundtvig regarded the Danes as being characterized by 'the heart' and held the Danish heart to be embodied in the Danish language, especially in that of poetry and song.
[71] *Klaeber's Beowulf, Fourth Edition*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork, J. D. Niles, (Toronto, 2008), lines 1855-65.
[72] *Danmarks Krønike af Saxo Grammaticus fordansket ved N. F. S. Grundtvig, Første Deel* (Copenhagen,1818), Grundtvig's translation of the *Gesta Danorum* of the Danish historiographer Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150 – c. 1220) was completed in 'the seven lean years' (1813-20) during which, though formally qualified, he was by-passed for appointment to a ministry within the Church. He used his time to complete and publish two further translations – Snorri's History of the Norse Kings and *Beowulf* – in a prodigious bid to provide the Danish people with access to three great resources of Northern mythical and legendary matter. The opening words of his translation of Saxo Grammaticus are:

Smelte skal den gamle Snee	The ancient snow shall melt
Selv paa Jøkuls-Fjelde	even upon the jökull-mountains[73]
[...]	[...]
Naar det gamle Broderskab	when that ancient brotherhood,
Rørt sig selv gienkiender,	moved, recognizes itself again,
Dan og Angul midt paa Hav	(and) Dan and Angul, midway on the sea,
Trykke Broder-Hænder.	shake brother-hands.

(*Beowulfes Beorh*, p. XI)

Grundtvig's appropriation (as one might fairly call it), assimilation and integration of the Anglo-Saxon legacy puts that legacy to a use markedly different from the significations Kemble and the English antiquaries were disposed to assign the same legacy; but then, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the cultural and political needs of Denmark, beleaguered as the nation was by (among other issues) the emergence of the Deutscher Bund [German Confederation] after 1815, were markedly different from those of imperial Great Britain. It is particularly notable how much language and poetry – and the language of poetry – mattered to Grundtvig. In the Golden Age of reunion, according the mythic modification he made to tradition, would be rediscovered *not* the ancient golden chess-pieces of the old Norse gods (as Norse myth told, of the world restored after Ragnarok) but 'de gamle, gyldne Ord' [the ancient golden words] of the old poems. In Romantic manner, Grundtvig prioritised poesy as the hallmark of any ancient and noble human community. In the myths and legends of various cultures, poetry is held to be a divinely bestowed gift; and here is Grundtvig, not only rejoicing that *Christian* poesy in the North has its auspicious beginnings in a miraculous gift, but that a new era, mindful of its noble past as it progresses forward, characterized by its poesy, and notably by the gift of Christian poetry miraculously bestowed through

'Dannemarks Krønike begynder med Humbles Sønner: Dan og Angel, som baade vare de første navnkundige Høvdinger i Riget.' [Denmark's Chronicle begins with the sons of Humble, Dan and Angel, both of whom were the first renowned chieftains in the kingdom].

[73] Iceland's highest glaciated peaks, as in Vatnajökull.

Cædmon,[74] begins in the 'Middle Age',[75] so that the historical narrative of that age can fairly be called a 'new Book of Creation'.

In 1832 – that is, in the year following his three consecutive visits to England – Grundtvig published a major work entitled *Nordens Mythologi,* on the mythology or figurative language of the North.[76] In its final paragraphs he finishes his book with a paeon of praise for the role and continuity of *Skjalde-Livet* [the Bardic Life] in the history of the North: and it is in Anglo-Saxon poetry – in *Widsith* – that he finds its most admirable testimonial.

He is no admirer of the poem as poetry; but

> […] the *idea* – to whoever it belongs – which runs through it, *that* is high-poetic; for Widsith is an old bard, who tells of his journeys which, when one looks into it, have brought him into acquaintance with all those peoples under the sun who possessed poesy, right up to the days of Jormunrek and Hrothgar.[77]

Here, in Widsith, he says, we glimpse:

> […] the falcon, which, from the eminence of his resting-place, casts his eye back over his proud track; and even though we see that the singer has the gold in mind, yet we cannot deny that he is right when he concludes:

---

[74] It would go well beyond the permissible scope of this paper to dwell upon the significant inspiration Grundtvig took from particular Old English poetic texts by 'Cædmon' and Cynewulf in his composition of several *new hymns for the Danish Church*. The choice and the ordering of pieces in his *Sang-Værk* (1837) reflected his concept of the catholicity of the Church within the framework of universal history. A recent examination of his Anglo-Saxon inspired hymns relating to Christ's descent into Hell and Ascension can be found in *Grundtvig Life*, pp. 95-106 and 140-181.

[75] Not exactly the same as the modern notion of 'the Middle Ages'. Grundtvig had his own schematized view of world chronology, of the universal history of Divine Providence in human affairs.

[76] *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilledsprog historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*. (Copenhagen, 1832).

[77] '[...] men hvem end Ideen tilhörer, som gaaer igiennem det, saa er den höipoetisk; thi Vid-Sid er en *gammel* Skjald, der fortæller om sine Reiser, som, naar Man seer sig til, har bragt ham i Bekjendtskab med alle de Folk under Solen, der havde Poesi, lige indtil *Jormunreks* og *Hrodgars* Dage [...].' pp. 633-34.

Det har jeg lært,	This I have learned
Paa lange Reiser,	upon long journeys,
At Drot bruger bedst	that a king best uses
Sin Dag i Glands,	his day in glory
Naar dem han mærker,	when he notes those
Som muntre gaae,	who cheerfully go
Gennem Hald og Hytte,	through hall and hut
Med Harpe-Slag,	striking their harp;
Ei gnider paa Guld,	he is not stinting of gold
Men gavmild saaer	but generously sows
Hvad op kan voxe	what can grow
Til Æres-Höst!	into a harvest of honour!
Er Livet svundet,	Though life be vanished
Og Lyset slukt,	and light quenched,
I Sky sig svinger,	aloft there soars
Som Fugl i Skov,	like a bird in the forest
Paa Tone-Vinger,	on wings of music
Hans gode Lov!	his good repute![78]

> Lo, this, as we know, was precisely that worldly wisdom that kings and heroes in the ancient North strove after – and who can deny that the Anglo-Saxon was right! (pp. 634-35).

As far as I know, Grundtvig never met Kemble again, though he followed his scholarly work in the field,[79] and they shared common friends, including the Anglo-Saxonist John Earle who wrote so appreciatively of Grundtvig's pioneering contributions to the modern study of Anglo-Saxon culture, and whose edition of *The Ruin* prompted

[78] Grundtvig is paraphrasing the closing lines of *Widsith*.

[79] For example, Grundtvig owned Kemble's *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, The Traveller's Song and The Battle of Finnesburh*, Second edition (London, 1835) [*Fortegnelse 1873*, Item 4005] and *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of Beowulf* (London, 1837) [*Fortegnelse 1873*, Item 4014]; also *The Poetry of the Codex Vercellensis with an English translation* (London, 1843) [*Fortegnelse 1873*, Item 3972], then only fairly recently discovered, which contains among the rest *The Dream of the Rood*.

the aged Grundtvig to words of deep respect for the Anglo-Saxon roots of English culture.[80]

Over his lifetime Grundtvig's attitude towards England shifted remarkably from outraged hostility in his early years to esteem – though a far from unqualified and uncritical esteem – in his later life. Of course, this evolving attitude was moulded by pragmatic responses to political events and trends, war and peace, economic circumstances, growing ease of travel and social mobility, and an obvious array of other great national and international conditions and events. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the image Grundtvig formed of England and advocated among his followers was also significantly conditioned by the knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the Christian foundations of English culture which he mediated to his contemporaries and melded with the domestic heritage of Danishness.

Today, hardly a week passes in Denmark without Grundtvig being mentioned in the Danish media. Hardly a national cause gets discussed without someone invoking endorsement from Grundtvig. The European Union's programme for the support of adult and continuing education was named for Grundtvig. The Danish Government recently undertook the funding of a major project to digitize Grundtvig's writings as the base for a new phase of scholarly research and publication, parallel to the huge project, now almost completed, on Grundtvig's contemporary (and adversary) Kierkegaard.

John Kemble's curious and maverick acquaintance was in fact a man of vision who well understood that the cultural and humanistic heritage of a people can have an organic connection with the integrity and well-being of the social fabric of that people; a man who, among all the rest, incorporated the cultural treasures of Anglo-Saxondom into that rich mental store out of which he shaped ideas that in turn helped shape his people and his country in a time of dramatic steps towards their modernity.

[80] For a moving account of Grundtvig's response to receiving of a copy of Earle's *The Ruin* a few days before his death, see *Grundtvig Life*, pp. 333-35.

Cite as:
S.A.J. Bradley, ‘John Kemble’s Curious Acquaintance: N.F.S. Grundtvig and his Remarkable Reception of Anglo-Saxondom’, in *The Kemble Lectures in Anglo-Saxon Studies, Volume Two*, ed. Alice Jorgensen with Helen Conrad-O’Briain and John Scattergood (Dublin: School of English, Trinity College Dublin, 2017), pp. 1-41.