



Book Review

Merethe Roos

*Hartvig Nissen: Grundtvigianer,
skandinav, skolemann*

Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk
2019, 282 pp.

Who was Hartvig Nissen? In Norwegian history, he is primarily known as the man behind the school bill of 1860. The law provided purpose-built schoolhouses and educated teachers for the whole country. He was also a pioneer in the field of girls' education, leading a private girls' school in Christiania in the 1850s. From 1865 until his death in 1874, he was head of the Ecclesiastical Department and thus the country's leading school bureaucrat.

Merethe Roos, Professor of History at the University of South-Eastern Norway, challenges the nationally confined understanding of Nissen's life and work. She shows conclusively that he was part of an inter-Scandinavian program of educational reform, which in its turn was one aspect of the greater liberal project of the nineteenth century. By using a microhistorical approach, Roos is able to give detailed and concrete examples of how pedagogical ideas were exchanged between Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

The subtitle – roughly translated, “Grundtvigian, Scandinavian, school leader” – highlights the three main themes of Nissen's professional life. As a student in Copenhagen in the late 1830s, he was deeply impressed by the teachings of N.F.S. Grundtvig. The charismatic Grundtvig, a vicar, writer and educator, is still seen by many as the founder of the Danish national

character. A central point in his thinking was the existence of a “Nordic spirit” on a par with the Holy Spirit. To awaken this “spirit” (*ånd*), the people must be enlightened. Nissen would spend his life trying to operationalize this idea in a Norwegian context – indeed, one of Roos' main findings is that Grundtvig's influence on Norwegian education in the mid-nineteenth century was larger than previously thought.

While Nissen studied in Copenhagen, he was seized by the Scandinavian movement. This northern equivalent of pan-Germanism was embraced especially by liberal writers and students. Some envisioned a single Scandinavian nation state, but most (like Nissen) wanted a federation between autonomous states or even a union of the “spirit” only. Roos shows convincingly that the Scandinavian movement was pivotal for Nissen's career as an educator. He maintained a network of people who like himself had been part of the student movement. In the 1850s, he also got into contact with the Swedish educator Per Adam Siljeström, whose thoughts became important for Nissen's reformation of the Norwegian school system. In earlier studies of Nissen and the Norwegian school policy of the nineteenth century, the importance of personal contacts like these between the Scandinavian countries has not been sufficiently researched, Roos argues.

As a school leader, teacher, and school policymaker (the word *skolemann* can encompass all of these roles) Nissen was at the centre of one of the most important debates in nineteenth-century Norway. The social, religious and economic

changes of the time demanded a reform of the educational system. Roos puts Nissen's standpoints into historical context, showing that when Nissen initiated the Association for the Furthering of Popular Enlightenment in 1850, it was partly as a reaction against the Socialist movement founded by Marcus Thrane in 1848. Popular education was an important part of Thrane's political program. However, while Thrane wanted general male suffrage at once, Nissen believed that enlightenment must come first. In fact, Nissen's definition of democracy had a metaphysical (and Grundtvigian) tinge. In Roos' words, Nissen's so called democrats needed no democratic rights but were democrats "by force of having come to themselves as human beings".

The main result of Nissen's campaigning – the school bill of 1860 – can be seen as a liberal and secular reform. It broke the church's monopoly on education and added secular topics to the curriculum. However, Nissen still wanted the school to be confessional. It should instil the "living faith" taught by Grundtvig into the hearts of the pupils, turning them into good patriots and arming them against false doctrines.

Hartvig Nissen is a very good example of a research-oriented biography. Merethe Roos' focus is on educational history; she is not interested in Nissen's personality or his private life. The reader is mercifully spared from the pseudo-psychological musings littering the biographical genre, but a few more words about Nissen's family and friends might have been useful. The wives of nineteenth-century professionals often played important roles in their husbands' careers. Is Nissen's family really irrelevant if we want to understand his views on education?

Roos has largely avoided another frequent problem among biographers: the tendency to lose his or her critical distance to the subject. However, a couple of nineteenth-century concepts seem to have leaked into her terminology. The first is the word "people" (*folk*), as in the sentence "While Nissen lay the foundation for a draft where *the people itself* governed the school, the proposition had prepared the ground for a school governed by bureaucrats" (p. 30, my italics). Here, it looks as though Roos has taken over Nissen's definition of "the people" – a mysterious organism, which acts as one even though women, children and the landless have no political power.

The second concept is "Norwegian", which Roos uses without further explanation. One of the subjects taught at Nissen's private school in 1843 was indeed "Norwegian". Yet the very same year, he wrote that the "Norwegian nationality" had "not yet, like the Swedish one, distinguished itself in a peculiar language and a peculiar literature". A few years later, he claimed that Swedish might be regarded as a Norwegian dialect.

What I miss here is a discussion of the development of Norwegian written language as distinct from Danish, and of Nissen's attitude to this process. Most of Nissen's contemporaries in Denmark and Sweden would *not* consider Swedish a Norwegian dialect, but Norwegian a Danish dialect. When Nissen wrote in 1843, he did in fact write in Danish.

None of this constitutes any serious criticism. Roos' book is solid work, and I have found only one misunderstanding to correct. On page 97, Roos writes that the only girls' schools that existed in Sweden before 1864 were private. This is a truth with a modification: the Swedish municipal schools were all

co-educational at least since the introduction of the school bill in 1842. The state-funded secondary schools, on the other hand, only started to admit girls after a reform in 1927. The state girls' school that opened in 1864 was a training school where the students at the Royal college for female teachers did their teaching practice.

The only one who deserves some blame in connection with this book is the publisher. The image editing is below criticism. The quotations in Swedish are marred by a large number of printer's errors, and there is no name index.

Professor Roos, to sum up, has written a fine piece of scholarship. The text is well structured, the points well-argued and the use of primary sources to the point.

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