

“Let Us Be Finns”: The Era before Finland’s Independence

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Abstract

In this introduction to the *Journal of Finnish Studies* theme issue entitled *The Making of Finland: The Era of the Grand Duchy*, the editors outline, in broad strokes, the years when Finland was part of Russia. The second part of the chapter consists of a discussion of the eight chapters that make up this article collection. The contributors approach the topic of the Grand Duchy of Finland from multiple—and even surprising—perspectives, showing how, in addition to the important cultural events that contributed to Finland’s quest for independence, ordinary aspects of daily life, such as food culture, were also part of this path, as was hunger, poverty, and illness.

The Time of the Grand Duchy of Finland, 1809–1917

The year 2017 marked one hundred years of Finland’s independence. Now that Finland has entered into its second independent century, the *Journal of Finnish Studies* wishes to acknowledge the occasion with this theme issue, *The Making of Finland: The Era of the Grand Duchy*. In the year 1809, after centuries of shared history with Scandinavia, the governance of Finland was transferred from Sweden to Russia, immediately following the 1808–1809 “Finnish War”—a war between Sweden and Russia (as part of

¹ The authors are listed in alphabetical order. All have contributed equally to the writing of this chapter.

the Napoleonic wars). During the reigns of five czars—Alexander I (1801–25), Nicholas I (1825–55), Alexander II (1855–81), Alexander III (1881–94), and Nicholas II (1894–1917)—Finland remained a part of Russia, though with a unique, autonomous governmental status. These 108 years under Russian rule were formative for Finland. During this time, Finland engaged in the practice of self-government while under the watchful eye of the czars and with various levels of support or suppression from each of these rulers and the governors-general who were assigned to the Grand Duchy.²

Over the course of Russian rule, Finns maintained several aspects of their traditional social structure, including the Lutheran church as the state church, the Swedish legal system, and the social and governmental structure provided by the Estates (Meinander 2011, 76). During the decades of the Grand Duchy, Finland established its own bank in 1811, collected and managed its own taxes, and in 1860 developed its own currency (Lavery 2006, 62; see also Kuusterä and Tarkka 2011). Initially, Finns were not conscripted into the Russian military, first paying a tax to cover Russian protection, then maintaining their own localized military after 1878 (Meinander 2011, 83, 99; Laitinen 2005). The city of Helsinki was established as the new capital city because of the presence of its harbor, its proximity to the Sveaborg fortress, and its lack of ties to Sweden (Schoolfield 1996, 8–9). Helsinki was designed to resemble a “miniature St. Petersburg” (Meinander 2011, 80). In 1828, following the devastating 1827 Great Fire of Turku (Swe. Åbo), Helsinki became the home of the nation’s only university when the Royal Academy of Åbo relocated to Helsinki and received its own building in 1832 on the Senate Square (Lavery 2006, 54). Established as a royal Swedish university in 1640, the university became the Imperial Alexander University, named after Czar Alexander I, who was instrumental in funding research carried out in this institution.³

During the time of the Grand Duchy, ideas of independence were hatched and nourished as part of Finland’s National Romantic movement. These ideas were largely kindled by academics, who sought to define a unique Finnish cultural identity that could be

2 For key documents relating to Finland’s path to independence, translated into English, see Kirby 1975. For a concise history of Finland in English, see, for example, Kirby 2006; also Lavery 2006 and Meinander 2011.

3 For the University of Helsinki’s history, see, for example, <http://www.helsinki.fi/yliopistonhistoria/english/index.htm>.

found in Finland’s native folklore and language. Inspired by the German philosophers Herder and Hegel, these scholars also built on the works of earlier writers in Finland. Sixteenth-century religious reformer Mikael Agricola and scholars Henrik Gabriel Porthan and Cristfried Ganander were among those who had collected and documented aspects of Finnish folk culture.⁴ At first, the collection of folklore was a purely academic pursuit, but, early in the Grand Duchy period, it came to have deeper political importance, and language was a key aspect of its new significance (Lavery 2006, 56).

With the establishment of the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura) in 1831, a formal platform for Finnish literature and folklore was created. With support for research, Lönnrot and his contemporaries conducted fieldwork that led to the publication of the two best-known editions of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala* (the *Old Kalevala* in 1835 and the finalized *Kalevala* in 1849). This work also led to the discovery by Castrén that Finnish was a part of a “great language family” (Uralic languages) that extended into Russia (Wilson 1976, 43) and nurtured the belief that a country with stories worthy of those by Homer and Virgil deserved its independence and deserved that the language of its people should be recognized as a national language. Language, however, was a sensitive subject among the Swedish-speaking elite in Finland. The language question divided Finland’s educated elite into Fennomans, the promoters of Finnish culture, language, and nation—and Svecomans, the often noble and mostly wealthy Swedish-speakers (Goss 2009, 135). However, the Fennomans (often of Swedish backgrounds and always literate in Swedish, as well as in other languages) fought harder for the Finnish cause the more oppressive the Russian czar’s grip on Finland became.

Socially, Finland underwent many changes beyond the language question during the Grand Duchy period. The Estate system, initially preserved after the transfer from Swedish to Russian rule, proved incompatible with the development of the industrial working class, a group that did not fit neatly into the categories defined in this old system (see, e.g., Gluschkoff 2008). The breakdown of the traditional class structure was accelerated by many factors,

4 Of course, in the case of Agricola, some aspects of collecting were more respectful of Finnish traditions than others. Proverbs, for instance, were useful in creating rapport between the church and the folk, while Finnish non-Christian folk beliefs were useful to understand in order to destroy them (cf. Wilson 1976, 6–7).

including population growth and the resultant landlessness of rural peasants, famines that were especially deadly between 1866 and 1868 (see Häkkinen's chapter in this volume), and the movement of people from their traditional communities to urban centers for industrial jobs. Social movements (including religious and nationalistic movements) and mass emigration between 1880 and 1914 had their effects on the Estates system as well (Lavery 2006, 61, 66). The traditional organization of society was transformed through the growth of civil society and the disassociation with ancestral regions and deep social ties.

Because of an increasing number of czarist violations against the autonomous Grand Duchy, the independence movement strengthened, and a relative consensus developed among Finns that an independent Finland should become a reality. Already beginning in the reign of Alexander III, Finnish autonomy came into question, with attempts being made from St. Petersburg to incorporate Finnish financial, legislative, and military institutions into the Russian empire. Nicholas II attempted several times to incorporate Finland more strongly into the empire. Perhaps his most famous failure in this regard was the 1901 Conscription Law, according to which Finns were made to serve in the Russian Army with the possibility of being stationed anywhere in the empire. When the conscripted Finns were required to report for duty the following year, only about half did so (Meinander 2011, 119). Finns were not the only dissatisfied group in the empire, and they wholeheartedly participated in the empire-wide 1905 General Strike, which forced Nicholas II to make a number of concessions and resulted in the creation of Finland's single-chamber Parliament, as well as universal suffrage and the ability of women to stand for office in the parliament. As Europe drifted into World War I and Finland continued to recognize the potential for national independence, Russia's continued internal problems, leading to revolution, provided Finland with the chance to break free (Lavery 2006, 76–77, 82–84).

The events associated with the Bolshevik coup in October 1917 provided a context in which, with the leadership of Pehr Edwin Svinhufvud, Finland's declaration of independence was presented to the Parliament. The approval date by the Parliament, December 6th, 1917, marks the beginning of the independent nation. Finland's birth as an independent nation resulted in the bloody and divisive Civil War—an event still difficult to discuss today—but its 100 years on training wheels provided by the Russian Empire had provided

Finland with enough of an infrastructure to maintain independence to the present day.

This Theme Issue

The present collection includes recent, previously unpublished scholarship that asks questions related to events during the time of the Grand Duchy and leading to Finland’s declaration of independence. In our call for papers, we asked the contributors to consider a wide range of topics typically associated with the time of Finland’s autonomy. The topics we had in mind included the following:

- Finland Swedes and other minorities in Finland during the time of the Russian rule;
- the language question;
- Russification efforts and the years of oppression;
- the relations of Russian czars to Finland;
- the rise of socialism;
- women’s voting rights and women’s status in general;
- Finland’s army and military history;
- National Romanticism in music, literature, the *Kalevala*, art, and architecture;
- political history and politics;
- church history;
- personal history;
- social issues;
- famine;
- geography; and
- learned societies and cultural institutions.

For the coherence of the volume, we asked that all the contributors remain focused on how the particular topic they chose to address contributes to answering the following question: how does this work amplify our understanding of some of the factors that led to Finland’s independence?

The response to our call for papers, distributed during the fall of 2016, surprised us. We were expecting a strong focus on traditional themes; however, the contributors showed us that themes such as poverty (Häkkinen), hunger (Seppä), and illness (Hakosalo) were also a significant part of Finland’s road to independence. Thus, in this celebratory collection, the authors do not approach Finland’s quest for independence from the usual, conventional points of view. The perspectives on the time of the Grand Duchy of Finland that the authors offer are fresh and unconventional. Topics that seem to concern the merely trivial necessities of people’s daily lives—such

as food (Kylli)—are shown to be integral parts of the economic, environmental, and historical development of an emerging nation. The time of autonomy is looked at from startling perspectives, and the focus is removed from the typical milestones such as Finland's issuing its own currency and postage stamps, and the great politicians behind Finland's achievements. But even in a non-traditional collection about Finland's road to its independence, you will find the Järnefelts (Hong), and you will find Kivi (Nummi). And with surprises and twists to the traditional interpretations, you will still find the *Kalevala* (Tarkka, Stepanova, and Haapoja-Mäkelä; and Lehtonen).

Introducing the Chapters

This collection consists of the introduction by the editors and eight chapters. Some surprising, some more predictable themes arise.

The first cluster of three articles includes "The *Kalevala*'s Languages: Receptions, Myths, and Ideologies," by Tarkka, Stepanova, and Haapoja-Mäkelä; Lehtonen's "*Kalevala* Ecology: Bioregional Aesthetics and Sámi Environmental Autonomy"; and Seppä's "'Lest They Go Hungry': Negotiations on Money and Survival." At first sight it seems that two of these chapters address highly traditional topics: the *Kalevala* and Lönnrot. However, the approaches that the authors take are novel and fresh.

Elias Lönnrot's work as the collector of oral folk poetry and the compiler of Finland's national epic was instrumental for Finland's national awakening. In their lead article, Lotte Tarkka, Eila Stepanova, and Heidi Haapoja-Mäkelä acknowledge Lönnrot's significance in the process of making an independent Finland; however, the authors direct attention to the language issues surrounding his work and how it was initially viewed in both Swedish- and Russian-speaking circles. Grounding their research in nineteenth-century Finnish, Swedish, and Russian sources, the authors discuss the reception of the *Kalevala* not only by the proponents of Finnishness (whose positive reception of Lönnrot's work was to be expected), but also by Swedish-speaking Finns, and, most interestingly, by the Russian-speaking intelligentsia. Jakov Grot's efforts as the promoter of the *Kalevala*—the national epic of a Grand Duchy—in Russia were important, especially since Grot became the vice president of the Russian Academy of Science in St. Petersburg. An interesting tidbit is that L. P. Belsky, the Russian translator of the *Kalevala*, had to learn Finnish in order to translate it. An important contribution of this chapter is the discussion of Russian-language sources, which

the authors have translated into English for the benefit of our readership. The authors also discuss the language of the *Kalevala* in the light of standard Finnish versus regional dialects, and they address the nationally sensitive issue of the *Kalevala*’s authenticity. They point to Lönnrot’s honest admission of his poetic license, and what ultimately crystallizes from this chapter is Lönnrot’s vision in his editorial decisions and the *Kalevala*’s positive impact on the development of a standard Finnish language and on the status of Finnish in general. Importantly, in the *Kalevala*, Lönnrot provided the budding nation with a bridge to a mythical past from which to draw strength and inspiration for the building of an independent future.

In “*Kalevala* Ecology: Bioregional Aesthetics and Sámi Environmental Autonomy,” Jonathan Lehtonen continues the *Kalevala* theme from an ecocritical angle. Lehtonen starts by juxtaposing expressions of Finnish National Romanticism (often materializing in celebrations of the *Kalevala* as Finland’s national epic) with its negative flipside, the advertent or inadvertent dismissal of the rich Sámi folklore tradition. Adding to this criticism, Lehtonen also lists the implied North versus South conflict and a negative portrayal of, for instance, Louhi, the mistress of the North Farm—as possibly a representative of the Sámi people. Lehtonen, however, quickly turns these criticisms around by showing how they may be based on rigid categorizations and dichotomies that the *Kalevala*’s text and spirit do not support. Introducing the notions of “human-animality intertwining” and “bioregionalism,” Lehtonen underscores how the *Kalevala*’s impressive, forested nature offers a home for people of all ethnicities, for animals, waters, plants, and supernatural powers—all of which are ecologically interdependent on one another. When felling a forest to create a cultivated field, Väinämöinen leaves one birch tree for birds to nest; his thoughtfulness is later paid back when a bird comes to save Väinämöinen’s life.

In the *Kalevala*, Lehtonen sees the merger of conservation efforts of both cultural and environmental resources. In Finnish folk poetry, natural resources, humans, and animals interact with one another, and humans appreciate and preserve the flora and fauna that engulf them. Folklore collectors—Lönnrot and many others—can be seen in a similar fluid relationship to the Finnish cultural resources that they painstakingly commenced to preserve during the period of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Tiina Seppä’s article takes the reader to the lives of the collectors—the preservers of Finland’s cultural riches. After its founding

in 1831, the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura) became instrumental in initiating the systematic collection of Finnish literature and literary artifacts for future generations. The many people who contributed to these collection efforts were sometimes volunteers and sometimes semi-professional writers who, for a small fee, provided SKS with donations of writings. In her article entitled “‘Lest They Go Hungry’: Negotiations on Money and Survival,” Tiina Seppä shows how the ordinary may become extraordinary: the collectors’ ordinary lives were full of economic worries, yet they helped to accomplish invaluable services through the drudgery of their work. Through citations of the collectors’ letters to the Finnish Literature Society, Seppä shows brilliantly how the collectors struggled economically while helping to preserve and create Finland’s literary riches. Without these people who sacrificed their time for small and often uncertain remunerations, we would not have the rich collections we have today. A quick allusion to today’s short-term academic jobs is also refreshing: many of those who today benefit from the folklore collections and use them for their research may find themselves in similarly uncertain economic situations as the people who helped to collect the materials during the decades of the Grand Duchy of Finland. The three chapters by Tarkka, Stepanova, and Haapoja-Mäkelä, Lehtonen, and Seppä remind twenty-first-century readers of nineteenth-century folklore collectors’ vision and determination—and also their daily struggles.

From the world of the ordinary collectors, Barbara Hong takes us to the world of the nobility in her overview article, “The Järnefelt, Finnish National Romanticism, and Sibelius.” Hong’s chapter may very well seem the most predictable topic in a collection about Finland’s road to independence: we have a key Fennoman character, Alexander Järnefelt, and his wife, Elisabeth, whose literary circles incubated prominent cultural figures, such as Juhani Aho. We have the extraordinarily gifted Järnefelt children, including Arvid, the author, Eero, the painter, Armas, the composer, and Kasper, the educator and translator. And we have Aino, who dedicated her life to cultivating the circumstances in which the composer of *Finlandia*, Jean Sibelius, could produce his great music and lead Finland into international cultural consciousness.

But the Järnefelt family is not merely an extraordinary family in Finland at the time when the country was going through its birthing pains. The matrimony of Alexander Järnefelt, a Finland Swede, and his wife, Elisabeth, née Clodt von Jürgensburg, a Russian noblewoman, invites an interpretation as an allegory of the birth

of Finland, with Father Sweden and Mother Russia, who through their union engendered the independent nation of Finland and equipped it with rich cultural gifts: literature, fine arts, and music.⁵

Another cultural treasure given to the Grand Duchy by one of its young talents, Aleksis Kivi, was the novel *Seven Brothers* (Fin. *Seitsemän veljestä*). This was the first major Finnish novel written by a Finn, and it was published in 1870. While the Järnefelt family can be seen as an allegory for the birth of Finland, Jyrki Nummi, in his article “Shipwreck in the Sea of Life: Sea Voyage in Aleksis Kivi’s *Seven Brothers*,” introduces a number of parallels between Kivi’s book and classic (and classical) literary motifs. A powerful sea voyage motif runs through the novel as the brothers embark on their adventures and slowly mature toward a responsible state of respectable citizenship. With the incubated independent state of Finland as a reference point, Nummi draws further parallels to Plato’s parable of the state as a ship. Another comparison between the Fennoman movement and the seven brothers emerges with the brothers’ power struggles during their time of exile and immaturity. Kivi leaves his rowdy bunch in an established state of peace, looking into the future with contentment. The ordinary brothers complete an extraordinary “sea voyage” and land in a serene harbor. Kivi himself died in 1872 and was not able to see the independent Finland which he must have envisioned.

The collection ends with a cluster consisting of three articles: Antti Häkkinen’s “The Great Famine of the 1860s in Finland: An Important Turning Point or Setback?”; Ritva Kylli’s “National Identity and the Shaping of Finnish Food Taste”; and Heini Hakosalo’s “A Twin Grip on ‘The National Disease’: Finnish Anti-Tuberculosis Associations and Their Contribution to Nation-Formation (1907–17).” These articles amplify our understanding of the era of the Grand Duchy from below and lead the reader very close to the ordinary people of the country that we now know as Finland. What role did hunger, changing food tastes, and fatal diseases have in Finland’s national formation? As Heini Hakosalo argues in her chapter, the term *nation-formation* refers to the broad and often entangled processes through which a nation—as distinct from the state and ethnic community—comes into being.

In his chapter, Antti Häkkinen gives a broad and theoretically solid view on the great famine years of Finland in the 1860s.

5 For more on the Järnefelt family (written in Finnish), see, for instance, Arvid Järnefeldt’s autobiographical *Vanhempieni romaani* ([1928, 1929, 1930] 1976); also Talas (1999).

About 270,000 people died of hunger within three years. Because Finland's population in 1868 was only 1.8 million, the mortality rate was thus enormous. At the same time, another 100,000 made the decision to leave their rural villages to move to neighboring areas within Finland, or even further: to Ruija in northern Norway or to Russian towns outside the Grand Duchy. Of those who left for Russia, many returned after the situation became better; of the ones who moved to Ruija, many continued their journey to North America. As Häkkinen points out, there were several areas in Finland that met the criteria for extreme famine conditions. Hunger, mortality, and long-distance migration are well illustrated in the article. At the beginning of 1868, 58 percent of the total population in Oulu province, 56 percent in Kuopio, and 41 percent in Mikkeli were in acute need of help. In many cases, however, the authorities were totally helpless. The country roads were filled with men, women, children, and the elderly who were actually beyond hope because the situation was not easy for those more fortunate either. For those people who lived by lakes, rivers, and the ocean, the situation was better because of their access to fish. However, access to fishing equipment was also a question of wealth.

People had different coping strategies: some begged even though begging was illegal; some chose to migrate far away. Those who stayed in their home regions used substitutes such as bark, lichen, straw, husk, arum, birch, common reed, and grass to make bread, but bread made with these substitutes hardly gave enough calories to support survival.

Weather conditions and crop failure are often blamed as the causes of the famine, but Häkkinen shows convincingly how another culprit was the rigid, almost feudal social system: some members of the population, the poor, were in a much more vulnerable position than those who had some wealth. This was a situation where food security was not available throughout society. Häkkinen's use of oral history material collected by the Finnish Literature Society illustrates the fate of the hungry in an exceptional way.

Ritva Kylli's article shifts the focus from famine to food. Through a discussion of Finnish dishes, both age-old and those introduced later, Kylli illustrates how vague and difficult the concept of "Finnish" is (cf. also Häkli 2005). Even though there are some traditional menu items which have been typical of Finland for centuries, food choices have always been influenced by other areas and other groups of people that have come into contact with Finland through travel, migration, or other cultural exchange (see also Raento 2005; Snellman

2016). Diet choices do not necessarily migrate independently; they are often introduced to new geographic areas by people who work on food and through contacts between these people. Immigrants from Central Europe started new businesses in Finland, which resulted in national icons such as the Fazer blue chocolate.

Already in the 1860s, Finnish newspapers mentioned some foodstuffs as “national dishes.” Some of the dishes, for example *talkkuna*, had a long history in Finland and had been used by hunters in the woods, by fishermen on lakes and rivers, and by agricultural laborers making hay in the meadows. These dishes were light to carry, and they lasted weeks in the knapsack of birch bark. But some of the foodstuffs, as Kylli points out, were newcomers to the Finnish diet. By the beginning of the twentieth century, certain imported foods had become a part of the national food identity.

In the Finnish countryside, the daily diet was mostly a result of ecological conditions. Vernacular architecture also resulted in different food traditions in different regions of Finland. Some of the commodities, such as salt, were not naturally available in Finland and had to be imported. Along came herring, which soon became a national fish even though it had to be fished in waters further away. Rice and coffee are examples of imported foodstuffs which were first adopted by the members of the upper class and only later could be found in the cupboards of people with fewer resources. Nineteenth-century inventions, from tin cans to railroads, gradually started to break down the constraints of the environment as the principal factor determining food and consumption habits.

Kylli argues that food was one of the national symbols that Finnish national identity was built on before Finland gained its independence in 1917. Thus, the great narrative of a nation does not consist only of landscapes, historical events, national symbols, and rituals. Kylli’s article shows how flexible that narrative is.

In the final article in this collection, Heini Hakosalo asks how the two Finnish anti-tuberculosis associations, founded a decade before Finland’s independence, both contributed to the nation-formation of Finland. The decade around the turn of the century saw the launching of high-profile public campaigns against tuberculosis, in practically all industrialized countries. In Finland the work was done by two non-governmental anti-tuberculosis associations founded in the same year, in 1907: *Keräystoimikunta Vähävaraisten Keuhkotautisten Avustamiseksi* (The Collection Commission for the Benefit of Impecunious Consumptives) and *Tuberkulosin Vastustamisyhdistys* (Anti-Tuberculosis Association).

Hakosalo argues that the associations made a significant contribution to nation formation. Fighting against the major cause of death—in 1900, pulmonary tuberculosis accounted for about 14 percent of general mortality—was both ideological and practical. This common enemy, albeit invisible, united people. The language question was crucial at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the associations were not divided particularly along the language lines between Finnish and Swedish. However, when the two associations agreed on a division of labor, it was self-evident that one association would concentrate on the eastern part of the country, with a mainly Finnish-speaking population, and the other on the western part, with a larger Swedish-speaking population. Both associations founded, supported, or ran a variety of institutions: dispensaries, sanatoria, preventoria, and children’s summer colonies. They also contributed to popular health education and even conducted epidemiological studies, thus defining the common enemy and identifying different ways in which to fight this enemy. As a result of the work done by these two associations and because of their “tuberculosis propaganda,” the patterns of people’s daily lives changed and important healthy habits were established. Washing hands side by side made people realize that they were responsible not only for their own but also for their fellow citizens’ health. Without explicit knowledge about what the future was to bring for Finland, these anti-tuberculosis associations thus prepared the citizens of the Grand Duchy of Finland for a responsible, healthier future as an independent nation.



These eight articles delve into the time of the Grand Duchy of Finland from different scholarly angles and through traditional themes with unanticipated twists. As this collection celebrates the entry of Finland into its second independent century, it also marks the beginning of the third decade for the *Journal of Finnish Studies*. We hope you enjoy this theme issue.

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