

JOURNAL
OF THE
ROYAL AUSTRALIAN
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

C O N T E N T S

	<i>Page</i>
J. C. GARRAN: William Wright Bampton and the Australian Merino	1
PHILIP M. COWBURN: Commodore Goodenough and the Annexation of Fiji	13
GRETA GERATHY: Sydney Municipality in the 1880s	23
OLAVI KOIVUKANGAS: An Attempted Finnish Utopian Settlement in Queensland	55
BOOK REVIEWS	64

Vol. 58 Pt 1

March 1972

PRICE TO MEMBERS : \$1.00

PRICE TO NON-MEMBERS : \$1.75

Registered for posting as a periodical—Category B.

An Attempted Finnish Utopian Settlement in Queensland

OLAVI KOIVUKANGAS

At the turn of the century, Russian oppression in Finland made many a Finn seek political freedom and better economic opportunities in overseas countries. Among these were early supporters of the rising movement of socialism, who found it difficult to pursue their ideas in Russian occupied Finland. Of the several ideological branches of early Finnish socialism, utopian socialism was extolled by Matti Kurikka, an author, editor, and, above all, a utopian political leader.

Matti Kurikka (1863-1915) was born of fairly well-to-do Finnish parents in Ingria, near St Petersburg, Russia.¹ He studied at the University of Helsinki and became intensely interested in socialism. He published a few books, visited Denmark and Germany and became editor of a Finnish newspaper in Viipuri. Being impractical in matters of finance he soon went bankrupt and in 1896 he moved over to the *Työmies* (The Worker), the leading Finnish labour newspaper. In the following year he was appointed the editor of the paper and became the recognized leader of the labour movement. The newspaper which took a strong nationalistic bias prospered, which naturally incurred the displeasure of the authorities. Because the Marxian wing of the socialist movement also fought his position and influence, the celebrated leader soon found himself pushed out of the leadership of the labour movement. Disappointed, but still able to rally a number of faithful supporters, Kurikka decided to go overseas to found a miniature model of his utopian community.

The first problem was to find a suitable place for the venture. Ultimately the choice narrowed down to Canada or Australia, and in the spring of 1899 Matti Kurikka decided to go to Australia to investigate the possibilities there. His information about Queensland came mainly from a Swedish pamphlet circulated by the Queensland Agent-General and from German newspapers, both of which made him aware of the free passages offered by the Queensland government. His further reasons Kurikka summarized on his arrival in an interview:

*...your country in points of climate, soil, and circumstances generally seems to offer more substantial and pleasing prospects. Canada, in many of its features is too like our own country, part of which is within the Polar circle: we want something more genial in climate and generous in soil.*²

Although dropped from the leadership of the socialist movement, Kurikka still had considerable influence in Finland. A letter written by the Queensland immigration agent, August Larsen, who visited Finland at the time of Kurikka's departure, dated from Helsingfors (Helsinki) on 16 September 1899, ran as follows:

I learn that several hundred people here are ready to emigrate to Queensland if the report of the country which now is awaited from Mr Matti Kurikka, who left by the Orient steamer August 11 for Brisbane is a favourable one. The labour party here seems to have great confidence in him and what he writes to the Press here will have great consequences. I should therefore propose that a telegram was sent at once to the Immigration Agent at Brisbane or some other person to meet Mr Kurikka and give him every assistance to see the country...At my hotel there is a large number of persons calling for information, but the Finns are very suspicious, and they nearly all say: 'We shall wait now and see what Mr Kurikka writes'.³

Taking up Larsen's suggestion the Queensland Government Office in London sent the following telegram to Brisbane:

Larsen reports passenger Kurikka in Oroya due 30th September influential person in Finland. Render every assistance in order to enable him to inspect and report on Colony.⁴

Kurikka was well received in Brisbane and in the interview he gave the following account of his mission to Queensland: *I have come to this country partly on my own account and partly as the agent of a body of Finnish farmers who are desirous of learning the conditions of land settlement in Queensland with a view to establishing a system of cooperative farming.*

Kurikka also intended to act as a correspondent for some Finnish newspapers and to write a book, for which he should be allowed £120 according to an agreement with Larsen.⁵ He was full of hope and faith in the future.

Finnish emigration in the middle of the nineteenth century was directed overwhelmingly to the United States. In the 1870s the free passage offered by the Queensland government did not attract many Finns. Until the close of the century only a few dozen Finns, mainly seamen, came to settle in Queensland.

Availing themselves of the free passage, some Finns had come to Queensland already in August 1899, being apparently independent of Matti Kurikka, and soon Kurikka's supporters began to disembark. Later he complained that they turned up too quickly, before proper arrangements were made.⁶ Altogether, 175 Finns were landed in Queensland during the ten months while the assisted passages for Finns were granted.⁷ How many of these were the followers of Matti Kurikka is difficult to estimate. In a letter written about the end of the year 1919 or the beginning of 1920 an immigrant gave their number as 78.⁸ Probably their number would have been larger, had not the following telegram been sent from Brisbane to London early in 1900:

*Suspend emigration Finns until further orders, result of experience so far unsatisfactory owing to intractability of.*⁹

Obviously there had been some difficulties in finding employment for Finns because on 29 December 1899 the Immigration Agent in Brisbane asked the Assistant Agent in Bundaberg to report what objection employers had to the Finns. The answer, dated 6 January 1900, was as follows:

*The opinion of all these Employers who have engaged any of the above is to the effect that they are a very undesirable class, being a discontented, lazy, and impudent lot; nothing will induce them to try any more, and those who had not tried them, on being told that some were open to engagement declined having anything to do with them stating that they had heard such bad accounts of them. The last lot of six (6) that came up under your advice dated 8th ult although receiving every consideration at the Depot gave the Wardsman more than once cause to tell them that he would have to send for the police if they continued to threaten him by their manner (and once by action on the part of one) as they did. I think that William Rajaniemi was the cause of all this trouble, he being evidently an agitator. It will be no use sending any more of this class up here. Whilst the last six were in the Depot you will remember that I placed very nearly 30 Danes at work.*¹⁰

Because employers would not take on Finns, the Immigration Agent suggested that Finnish immigration be suspended at once until such time as those already here or on the way had proved themselves desirable colonists.¹¹ In his annual report the Immigration Agent explained the suspension of Finnish immigration in the following way:

*The difficulty with Finns seems to be their slowness in adapting themselves to colonial conditions. In special instances their knowledge of farming, coupled with much steadiness of character and conduct, have earned them golden opinions with employers, but certain peculiarities of temperament and temper, added to a singular inability to acquire even the most rudimentary knowledge of English, have made many employers cautious about entering into engagements with them.*¹²

The Melbourne based Scandinavian newspaper *Norden* commented on the discontinuation of Finnish immigration to Queensland saying that though the paper had representatives all over Queensland it had heard no complaints against the Finns. The *Norden* suggested political pressures behind the move, recalling that England had recently disallowed her consuls in Finland, although they were Finnish nationals, any participation in agitation against Russia. In conclusion the *Norden* expressed its view that more than was believed took place behind the scenes.¹³

On their arrival the Finns found temporary accommodation in the immigration depots, and with Matti Kurikka as their spokesman and leader they were given railway passes to various parts of the country. For most Finns employment was found in mining, railway construction, or growing sugar in Northern Queensland. Kurikka himself worked near Chillagoe with a group of some twenty men cutting sleepers for the railway. The work was conducted on a co-operative basis, and all mutual matters were discussed in weekly meetings presided over by Kurikka. In the beginning everything seemed to go well; Kurikka was especially delighted with the freedom of the country. His intention was to save some ten pounds per man, and then taking the best men to buy a block of land by the sea to establish there his utopian community.¹⁴

In Queensland there still live a couple of old Finnish migrants who arrived in the Kurikka group as children. Mrs Hirmukallio, née Kotkamaa, was five years old when her family arrived on 23 January 1900. Consequently most of what she knew she heard from her mother. Her Father, Frans Johan Kotkamaa, from Haapavesi, Finland, was an eager follower of Matti Kurikka. Other families, for instance, the Hannus and Vuolle families, the latter later known as Anderson, stopped at Nambour, where they obtained cheap land. But Kotkamaa went on to Townsville and from there still further on with a banana ship either to Cairns or Cooktown, where Kurikka was waiting with horses. Through forests they went to Kurikka's canvas camp between Cooktown and Normanton (probably further south near Chillagoe), where Finns were cutting sleepers for the railway. Matti Kurikka had named the camp, consisting of some half a dozen big tents, *El Dorado*.¹⁵

Soon difficulties began to arise. The work on the railway line proved to be extremely heavy in heat. Kurikka made some poor contracts and by error soft wood was cut instead of hard wood. The radical Sydney Bulletin accused the Queensland government of employing Finns in cutting sleepers at a rate which local labourers would not accept. The Finns were said to earn not even Chinamen's wages-2/6 per man per day. The newspaper further quoted Kurikka as having said that a number of sleepers were condemned without cause and afterwards used without payment.¹⁶ After reading this, editors of the *Norden* in Melbourne began asking the Queensland government about the fate of the Finns. The Queensland Immigration Department gave assurance that the Finns were well received and treated. Concerning the *Bulletin's* allegation that Finns could earn only 2/6 per day contract work cutting sleepers near Chillagoe, a letter from a Swede from the same district was quoted asserting that 'Nobody works here for less than 10/- a day, all piecework.' A gentleman at Chillagoe had also stated that 'Finns have been unable to keep stroke alongside other workers at railway building and kindred [sic] occupations'.¹⁷ According to Mrs Hirmukallio, Kurikka's contracts were so bad that only 5/- per day for each family was received. Life was by no means easy, but they were not starving. When Kurikka was short of money he used to play the piano in the pubs, a hat going around for money. The group consisted mainly of young people, many of whom were not accustomed to heavy toil, so Kurikka tried to find easier work at Cooktown and Cairns.¹⁸

Although available resources were now scarce, it seems that Matti Kurikka and his group made an attempt to establish a settlement somewhere at the Gulf of Carpentaria.¹⁹ From the very beginning their task proved to be extremely difficult. The journey out. was long and laborious, the grass being taller than man and unsuitable for animals. Not accustomed to these circumstances and the heat, the Finns probably did not get very far with their farming. They lived in tents with a termite heap as an oven. Soon they were starving and began collecting honey to keep themselves somehow alive. When they shot a wild pig, they were fined by the authorities. Chinamen gave them fruit, but of the Australians, only the wife of a 'pub' keeper helped. Kurikka himself was starving, and some women gave him food. Dissatisfaction grew among the group, the leader was blamed, and many left the community cursing Kurikka and his scheme. The hitherto optimistic Matti Kurikka then fell into despair, as his letter published in an Australian newspaper reveals:

I have been here now eight months. What did I find here? Disappointments-only disappointments! All the prospects of possibility for the immigrants to gain money in a short time and get their own land which the Government of Queensland had represented in their pamphlets have vanished as soap-bubbles. All my essays to open the eyes of the Government to comprehend the great advantage to this indebted country of the bending of the large Finnish emigration from America to Queensland, got lost. My task for the Huguenots of Finland was impossible to realise in that way.

Alright, did I think, I will try the other, although harder way. I will become an ordinary worker, become a good member of the Labor Party, win in that way an influence in the party, and begin then anew the realisation of my great idea. But, after the experience I got in Brisbane, in some other places, and at last by the Chillagoe railway, I have already given up this programme, too. Meanwhile, I collected some experiences of a worker. I learnt to know that the labourers in Queensland-there are, of course, exceptions-are too drunk, too vulgar, and too hateful against all foreigners that are sober, friendly, and honest as the Finns, to think that they could become equals with them striving for the same holy ideals... But that has not pulled me apart from Queensland and abolished all the dreams of an active future in this society. Called lately by many Finns to America to order there a Finn-colony, I say as a real representative for the Labor party of Finland my farewell to the brothers of Queensland. I and my fellows after me truly all Finns will leave this beautiful country-will in future still meet together under the English flag. In the present age it is better than all others, assuring freedom and higher evolution to humanity, and I will be one true defender of it.

My friendly hope is only that the people of Queensland as soon as possible will rise to the same level of civilisation as the other cultured peoples of the world.

Matti Kurikka

Australia, after a promising beginning, had proved to be 'a lovely country of rascals',²¹ and Kurikka decided to go to Canada where the government gave more assistance to the immigrants.²² Between 1880 and 1900 a considerable number of Finnish immigrants had settled in the mining communities on the western shores of British Columbia. The heavy work of coalmining with its attendant accidents and inadequate wages became disliked by many. At the same time socialistic ideas especially utopian variants-were spreading among the Finnish miners, making them yearn for 'a new communal home apart from the capitalist world, where man would not exploit man, all would labour for the common good, and life would be co-operative, just, and harmonious.'²³ One of the first tasks was to find a forceful and gifted leader. The best man equal to the mission appeared to be Matti Kurikka, then in Australia. Early in 1900 three Finns had left Queensland for the Extension Mines on the island of Vancouver. They had with them some booklets written by Matti Kurikka. These booklets were given to one of the local Finnish leaders for reading.²⁴ On 8 April 1900 they sent a letter to Kurikka, requesting him 'to lead his Canadian brethren into the promised land.'²⁵

The letter came as a godsend to the disappointed dreamer. In his answer of acceptance, dated at Mareeba on 7 June 1900, he complained of the impossibility of building a utopian community in Queensland for the few Finns who were either too busy struggling against great poverty, or did not understand the importance of the matter. He was ready to leave Australia, but being as poor as a church mouse he asked for the necessary funds. After receiving the requested funds Kurikka set sail for the new continent, arriving in Nanaimo, Vancouver, Later in August 1900 with the idea of founding a more successful utopian settlement. Finally a longer lasting community was established on Malcolm Island, called *Harmony Island*.²⁶ Mrs Hirmukallio recalled that nine young men and three families sailed with Kurikka, but her own family was too poor to buy tickets as many of the children would have had to pay the full fare.²⁷ More Finns left Australia later to join Kurikka and his group.

The Queensland government viewed Kurikka's attempt as only one of the many co-operative attempts to fail. Kurikka himself was considered 'an honest well-meaning theorist and enthusiast; in short, as far as the matter in hand goes, a hopelessly unpractical faddist'. The government was also reluctant to give assistance 'for the purpose of providing socialistic or other experimentalities at the nation's expense'.²⁸

Although one reason for the failure was insufficient government assistance, the main causes can, however, be found in Matti Kurikka himself and in his group. Writing about the similar attempt in Canada., Professor Kolehmainen gives the following account of the personality of. Matti Kurikka:

*...he was a gifted leader, possessing remarkable powers of persuasion, and a keen intellect. But overbalancing these attributes were serious shortcomings. Kurikka was obstinate and headstrong, impatient and restless. He loved to write, speculate, and argue, but he was sadly lacking in practical ability to translate his ideas into action. He was inept and clumsy as an organizer and administrator. It was easy for Kurikka to make enemies, difficult for him to hold friends. Irreconcilable differences of opinion over questions of policy, the constitution of the colony, the status of private property, the position of women, the education of children, and other questions divided the leader from many in his flock.*²⁹

One of the reasons for the failure of Kurikka's Australian attempt was, according to' Mrs Hirmukallio, his attitude to women. Kurikka liked women-and women liked him-but their husbands had different ideas about it, and the confused love affairs caused much friction.³⁰

Matti Kurikka's group was heterogeneous, coming from all walks of life. Many of his followers were young men of urban background, who did not take life too seriously, being adventurers and political refugees, and who were not used to hard toil; consequently they soon became disillusioned at the Gulf of Carpentaria. They were unable to speak English-even Kurikka's English was poor although he spoke many other European languages.³¹ This obviously was one of the reasons for the employers' dislike of his group.

Though Kurikka and many of his supporters left for Canada, the remainder of his group later became successful settlers, boosting the number of Finns in Queensland in the Census of 1901 to 152 males and forty-five females, from the eighty males and one female shown by an earlier Census of 1886. Many of the Finns, including several of Kurikka's group, took up farming in the Nambour district, where their close settlement was called Finnbour. Already by September 1900 a group of eleven Finns had taken up cane growing allotments and were anxious to apply for the government nominated system of immigration to get their relatives there.³² This agglomeration became the principal Finnish settlement in Queensland. Chainmigration brought there new blood decades later. Even to-day descendants of Matti Kurikka's contemporaries can be found at Nambour, some fifty miles north of Brisbane.

This was the story of Matti Kurikka and his group. All that they left for posterity was a song, recalled by one of the youngest members of the group some seventy years later.³³

THE SONG OF MATTI KURIKKA:

*We went to Australia
Went to Australia –
We went to Australia
To be treated as slaves.*

*We had to fight –
With all our might,
For the right –
To be their equal and brothers.*

*When Aussies saw
We were no longer their slaves,
They helped us if we were –
Their long lost brothers.*

*We came to Australia,
Came to Australia;
We came to Australia,
The land of gold and riches.*

*We found no gold,
We found no riches,
Only dried up rivers
And dried up ditches.*

*We left Australia,
Left Australia,
We left Australia
And your God forsaken riches.*

G*oodbye Australia –
Goodbye Australia –
Goodbye Australia –
You land of hell.*

REFERENCES

1. South-East of the Finnish border, near Saint Petersburg, in the Ingria area there are still living descendants of an ancient Finno-Ugrian tribe, who inhabited the area over a thousand years ago. Later some Finns settled among them; Matti Kurikka's parents apparently were such Finns.
2. Department of Immigration to the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department (now Premier's Department), Brisbane, 3.10.1899, 'Emigration from Finland to Queensland', Archives Section, Public Library of Queensland, from this onwards abbreviated QA, No. 8344, in-letter 9063/1899, PRE/A 37.
3. August Larsen to the Agent General for Queensland from Helsingfors, 16.9.1899, QA, No. 9063/1899, PRE/A 37.
4. Queensland Government Office, London, to the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 22.9.1899, 'Confirming telegram re Mr Kurikka', QA, No. 9063/1899, PRE/A 37.
5. Department of Immigration to the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 3.10.1899, 'Emigration from Finland to Queensland', QA, No. 8344, in-letter 9063/1899, PRE/A 37.
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7. The Immigration Agent's Report for the Year 1899, *Votes and Proceedings, Queensland, 1900*, Vol. V, p. 676; in the *Register of migrants arriving on immigrant ships entering Queensland, 5 January 1899-30 March 1906*, QA, No. 46/16, during the period discussed 174 Finns were found plus one unspecified name, typically Finnish, thus giving the total number of 175.
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10. Department of Immigration, Brisbane, to the Assistant Immigration Agent in Bundaberg, 29.12.1899; and consequently Assistant Immigration Agent, Bundaberg, to the Immigration Agent, Brisbane, 6.1.1900, 're dislike to engage Finns', QA, No. 464, in-letter 2214/1900, PRE/A 48.
11. Department of Immigration to the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 8.1.1900, QA, No. 364, in-letter 2214/1900, PRE/A 48.
12. The Immigration Agent's Report for the Year 1899, V. & P., *Queensland, 1900*, Vol. V, p. 676.
13. 'Fra vor egen midte (Among ourselves)', *Norden*, 101, 7.4.1900, p. 6. Some reasons for the failure of the Finnish immigrants are given at the end of this paper.

14. A. Linnoila, op. cit., pp. 121–122.
15. The interview of Mrs Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970, Brisbane. Being an important source of information she was interviewed twice to give her time to recall old things after the first visit of the author.
16. 'Finland- Queensland-Canada', the *Sydney Bulletin*, 21 July 1900, p. 6.
17. Jens Lyng's enquiry No. 11279 and consequently Department of Immigration to Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 24.9.1900, 'Re Finnish Immigration', QA, No. 10134, both in-letter of 11278/1900, PRE/A 73. The letter was published in *Norden*, 116, 3.11.1900, p.1.
18. Mrs. Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970.
19. Mrs Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970; her husband, Leo Hirmukallio, 'Pienta pakinaa Suomen siirtolaisuudesta Australiaan (Short stories about Finnish emigration to Australia)', *Suomen Silta (The Bridge of Finland)* (a Finnish journal), No. 2, 1945, pp. 63-64. The interview and the article give the impression that there was an attempt for an agricultural settlement, but further research may reveal that the 'settlement' was only Kurikka's tent camp while cutting sleepers for the railway.
20. *The Sydney Bulletin*, art. cit., 21 July 1900, p. 6. According to the Article the letter originally had been published in the Cairns Advocate, but this copy could not be found so the quotation is from the *Bulletin*.
21. A. Linnoila, op. cit., p. 124.
22. Mrs Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970.
23. John Ilmari Kolehmainen, 'Harmony Island. A Finnish utopian venture in British Columbia', *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, April 1941, Vol. V, No. 2, p. 112.
24. Jorma Pohjanpalo, 'Matti Kurikka ja Australia (Matti Kurikka and Australia)', *Suomen Silta*, No. 1, 1965, p. 26.
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27. Mrs Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970.
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29. Kolehmainen, op. cit., p. 121.
30. Mrs Hirmukallio, 15 and 17.6.1970.
31. Ibid.

32. Department of Immigration to the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 24.9.1900, 'Re Finnish Immigration', QA, No. 10134, in-letter 11278/1900, PRE/A 73; and art. cit., *Norden*, 116, 3.11.1900, p. 1.

33. Mrs Hirmukallio, Brisbane, 19.4.1971, a letter to the author who had sent her a copy of this article. While a year ago she could remember only a few verses she was now able to recall the whole poem. The song was translated from Finnish by Mrs Hirmukallio.