

ELORE (ISSN 1456-3010), vol. 20 – 2/2013.

Julkaisija: Suomen Kansantietouden Tutkijain Seura ry.

[http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/2_13/stark.pdf]



BOOK REVIEW

FROM THE SEEDS OF REDISCOVERED TEXTS COME NEW FIELDS OF INQUIRY

Laura Stark

KUISMIN, ANNA & DRISCOLL, M.J. (eds.) 2013: White Fields, Black Seeds: Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century. Studia Fennica Litteraria 7. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 214 pages.

In recent years, numerous letters, diaries, autobiographies, poems, and handwritten newspapers have been uncovered in Europe which provide important insights into the past writing and reading activities of farmers, crofters, tradesmen, artisans and labourers. The volume *White Fields, Black Seeds: Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century* provides new perspectives on the history of literacy and on the role of reading and writing in the lives of those Scandinavian commoners who received little or no education in earlier centuries and who as literates represented the minority in their communities. The title of the volume comes from a traditional Finnish riddle: “valkia pelto / siemenet mustat / kylvää ken taitaa? [white fields / black seeds / who can sow?]” in which the white field is paper, the black seeds are the written marks on the paper, and sowing is the act of writing. The act of writing was a suitable subject for a riddle at a time when very few persons possessed this mysterious skill. In the volume’s title, the term ‘the long 19th century’ is explained by the editors as referring to the period from the French Revolution to the First World War, a period of relative socio-political

continuity. The emphasis of the volume is on Finland and Iceland, representing the geographic peripheries of Scandinavia. Anna Kuismin and M. J. Driscoll point out in their introductory preface that whereas in previous centuries mass literacy in Finland, Sweden and Norway meant merely the ability to read religious texts, the situation was different in Iceland, where ordinary farmers, fishermen, and labourers actively read and copied out handwritten manuscripts.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING VERNACULAR LITERACIES OF THE PAST

Australian historian Martyn Lyons opens the volume by contrasting what he terms the “new” history from below with the “old” history from below carried out by the French *Annales* and the British neo-Marxist schools. The “old” history from below focused on public action rather than private lives, with ordinary individuals rarely speaking for themselves. Lyons argues that the New History from Below, by contrast, focuses on individual experiences of historical changes, and considers readers and writers to be active agents in the shaping of their own lives and cultures. The New History from Below may be more individualized and sensitive to distinctions such as class and gender, but according to Lyons it brings its own challenges.

In her contribution to the volume, Swedish historian Britt Liljewall re-examines the older assumption according to which the majority of persons in Nordic countries (and more specifically in Sweden) acquired the ability to read earlier than the majority of persons in other European countries. Using autobiographies written by Swedish commoners born before 1840, Liljewall points out that Swedish literacy appears to have developed not in advance of other European countries but at roughly the same time. Liljewall further argues that literacy does not automatically facilitate social development as was earlier assumed. Instead, when literacy remains at an elementary or passive level it can be a hindrance to social development and even used as an instrument for conservatism and oppression.

Icelandic historian David Ólafsson begins his article by making the point that the advent of printing in Europe did not lead to the disappearance of handwritten texts or manuscripts. Ólafsson explains that the printing press in Iceland was controlled by the Church from the mid-16th century to the mid-19th century, so that secular literature had to find other means of production and dissemination, such as copying out manuscripts by hand. Ólafsson describes the experiences and activities of one man born in 1840 who wrote extensively and who was a shepherd, farmhand and fisherman. Ólafsson explores how this writer learned to write as a child, to what literature he had access, and from which literate persons he received his model manuscripts for copying. As in Finland, most Icelandic commoners in the 19th-century could read but not write. However, the scribal production and the circulation of manuscript material provided an impetus that was not present in Finland for self-educated persons to write.

In his article textual studies scholar Matthew J. Driscoll emphasizes the point made by Ólafsson that in Iceland the manuscript culture continued to produce large numbers

of handwritten texts even after the coming of print in the 16th century until the 19th and early 20th centuries. He links the decline in manuscript culture to the decline of the winter evening home-reading sessions (*kvöldvaka*) practice which had provided a vital context for the consumption of manuscripts. Like Olafsson, Driscoll discusses the scribal network which covered Iceland in which scribes corresponded with each other and loaned each other the manuscripts they had managed to obtain.

PERSPECTIVES AND FATES OF INDIVIDUAL WRITERS

Icelandic historian Sigurður Gylti Magnússon looks at the motivations behind Icelanders' prodigious writing of both published life stories and unpublished "ego-documents": diaries, letters, and other personal testimony. He points out that the sagas provided many important models for commoners' to narratively organize their own sense of self and to structure their modes of self-expression. Since the sagas were such a living part of the mental world of 19th- and early 20th-century Icelanders, uneducated Icelanders did not hesitate to debate with academic scholars who were skeptical regarding the truth of the events depicted in the sagas.

Finnish folklorist Kirsti Salmi-Niklander discusses how hand-written newspapers were produced in Finland in *conversational communities* of like-minded persons in close interaction with each other. Salmi-Niklander characterizes handwritten newspapers as a form of *oral-literary local tradition* because they were written as a single copy but were communicated by being read aloud at meetings. The handwritten newspapers analyzed by Salmi-Niklander were motivated by political activism and expressed tensions within local communities. The two individual male authors discussed in her article were ambitious and frustrated by their lack of education, and their production of handwritten newspapers was a means of acquiring social status within their local milieu.

In her contribution to the volume, Ann-Catrine Edlund examines the diaries written by a rural serving maid born in 1917, arguing for the importance of contextualizing literacy practices as much as possible. She points out that this female writer tended to write not from her own personal perspective, but from the collective perspective of the farm on which she worked and the activities of the men in her household. Edlund's discussion raises the question of whether it might be possible to speak of an *episodic self*, in which the self is constructed through a continuous chain of narrative episodes.

Literary scholar Anna Kuismin examines the reasons why Finnish commoners with little or no schooling wrote autobiographies. Kuismin has compiled a database of self-educated, writing commoners born in Finland between 1751 and 1880 whose number now stands at 409, from which she has identified 65 texts that can be classified as life stories. According to Kuismin, whereas some authors wrote their life stories in order to pass information on to family members or to edify readers, others wrote in order to justify their actions or complain of injustices. Still others wrote their life stories as an apology or confession for past sins or failings. One common theme was the description of religious awakening. Finnish life narratives written by commoners do not describe

the lives only of those who triumphed against adversity, but also of those who depicted their own lives as ultimate failures.

Social historian Kaisa Kauranen examines the relationship between a prolific self-taught male crofter and his community. His never-published texts cover a wide range of subjects expressing severe criticism of groups at all levels of society. Because of the strict social hierarchy at the time he lived, the writer was divided from his fellow commoners by his literary skills and literate knowledge which he continually expanded, but neither was he accepted by the elites whose legislative privileges he criticized but whose writing skills he strove to imitate. The tragedy for this man was that if he had been born even a decade or two later, he could have joined the burgeoning popular movements and civic societies which needed members who could write.

In her contribution to the volume, Icelandic historian Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir examines Icelandic women's handwritten manuscripts and the subsequent treatment of these manuscripts in the archives of the National Library of Iceland. Hallgrímsdóttir takes as one example three versions of an autobiography detailing the life of a female servant who lived during the last half of the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries. Although this detailed autobiography provides unique and valuable insights into the life of an ordinary working-class Icelandic woman who lived at a time when autobiographies from women were extremely rare, the male archivist at the National Library of Iceland in the 1910s classified it not as a biography but as a "humorous composition" and part of "folk belief and folk wisdom", as did the editors of a volume of folk wisdom published at roughly the same time.

In her article on Finnish lay collectors of folklore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, religious studies scholar Kati Mikkola examines two such collectors who contested the notions of authenticity held by the educated elites who worked at the Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives in Helsinki. The collectors Vilho Itkonen and Ulla Mannonen defied and argued against the Archives' strict stance regarding what was valuable versus worthless and in so doing, they left behind traces which offer valuable perspectives on how so-called ordinary commoners understood their own traditions, knowledge and culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Finnish linguist Petri Lauerma discusses in his contribution the struggle between the Western and Eastern Finnish dialects over which would become the literary standard in the period 1810–1840. Lauerma argues convincingly that one of the important catalysts for linguistic development in Finland was religious revivalism in the 18th and early 19th centuries in which mobile groups of preachers encouraged non-literate followers in Northern and Eastern Finland to learn to write based on the older Western Biblical standard. This process demanded the simplification of the awkward, Western-based Old Literary Finnish through leveling innovations from Northern and Eastern Finnish dialects, and Lauerma argues that as revivalist movements spread throughout Finland, so too expanded the dialectal base of literary Finnish.

The last contribution to the volume, that by Finnish linguists Lea Laitinen and Taru Nordlund, examines three sets of letters from the long 19th century. Their article demonstrates, as has been observed by researchers in other countries, that self-educated writers did not use their own local dialect when writing but aimed at what is called an *intended standard*, which took into consideration the linguistic expectations of the recipient, in this case the so-called Biblical Finnish based on Western dialects. Laitinen and Nordlund explore concepts such as *performativity*, *audience design*, *group style*, and *stylistic rupture or breakdown* to discuss the dialogic nature of this correspondence within a variety of institutional frameworks.

OVERVIEW

Overall, the multidisciplinary anthology *White Fields, Black Seeds: Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century* represents a rich and clearly presented collection of current Nordic scholarship on issues of vernacular literacy. The length of the articles is user-friendly and they are written in a clear, accessible style. The articles in the volume not only present new source materials and writing from unstudied groups among the lower classes and rural commoners, but also ponder important theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues regarding the heretofore hidden history of the interplay between informal literacy, society, and culture. An anthology of this length is naturally not able to cover all genres of texts or writings from all social groups. For example, not discussed in this anthology are writings by self-educated commoners in the form of broadside ballads, plays, novels, almanacs and letters published in newspapers. Nevertheless, *White Fields, Black Seeds* highlights many of the fundamental issues and challenges that will need to be addressed by future researchers in this area.

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