



ARTIKKELI

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Countryside Borderscapes in Finland

ABSTRAKTI / ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a particular kind of fence (riukuaita) that visually fragmented the nineteenth-century rural landscape in Finland and deeply affected everyday mobility in the countryside. Expanding on observations made in a previous article, the first section situates earlier depictions of the Finnish countryside within the broader confrontation between classic and romantic landscape painting and presents the idea of a countryside transformed into a borderscape of sorts. The second section examines the cultural practices within the Alderman institution that sustained and administrated these borders and divisions. The third and final section explores how artists of the so-called Golden Age of Finnish Art depicted these borderscapes, and how it might affect the way we read and experience landscape paintings, especially when considered from the phenomenological perspective of actual and imaginary walking into the depicted scene.

27

walking, Finnish countryside, round-pole fence, riukuaita, landscape painting, borderscape, alderman institution, oltermannilaitos, beating the bounds

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Introduction

In my recently published peer-reviewed article ‘*Sensing Boundaries on Foot: Experiencing Limits of Mobility through Nineteenth Century European Art*’,¹ I have explored how urban and rural walking has been controlled, regulated, limited, or affected by a series of material and cultural mechanisms, which may fall outside the current studies on migration, bordering processes, and controls of mobility. This is partly because I use art objects like paintings or illustrations as both artworks and historical documents, which places the analysis somehow between the imaginary and the actuality of historical accounts, and partly because the movement of walking implies a phenomenological perspective that opens the lived experience of pedestrians on the ground level. Here I also aimed at challenging the old romantic association of walking with freedom or liberty—one that to this day keeps shaping our feelings about this activity: that we can experience a liberation of sorts whenever we have the opportunity of walking about, especially alone and outside the city sphere. Thus, speaking about limits of mobility does relate to limits of the act of walking.

While researching for the third section of the said-article, which deals with enclosure practices in rural Finland in the nineteenth century, something about a particular kind of round-pole fence called in Finnish ‘*riukuaita*’—a variation being the point fence ‘*pisteaita*’—defied and expanded my views about landscape painting and in consequence about walking in the Finnish countryside. In what follows, I will examine further how this kind of fence visually transformed parts of the Finnish rural landscape into a borderscape of sorts, what was the system that sustained these divisions, and their artistic depiction by the hands of those artists that belonged to the so-called Golden Age of Finnish Art. In this text, the operative term of ‘borderscape’ refers to a land that has been fragmented or reordered into internal divisions and opposing territories like private vs public, grazing vs farming land, human domain vs wilderness, and so on, and which can be visibly recognisable through border markers like fences.

Reading (fragmented) landscapes

As it is well known, the early nineteenth century landscape painting saw the contention between the idyllic apprehension of nature à la Claude Lorrain or Nicolas Poussin and a new sensibility brought about by Romantic artists, in a time when landscape painting was becoming enormously popular. Italian scenes of serene rural landscapes, full of verdant pastures, occasional ancient ruins, or forests here and there, waterfalls and rivers flowing in the foreground or from the background to the foreground, local folk or shepherds tending their herds, and above all, a distant view to the sea or to the mountains—all this proved to be too enticing for the imagination of Grand Tourists and artists alike. Indeed, the style of the Old Masters had lured a great number of artists from different parts of Europe and America to spend some time in Rome and its surroundings.² (This trip served the purpose of training, and for some, as a career boosting upon return to their home countries.³ It is worth to remember that travelling to Rome was done mostly under institutional support or patronage. At the time, it was a must because of the increasing policies regarding migration and the illegality of vagrancy in most nation-states, where ‘travelling artists’ would be considered potential vagrants.⁴)

This kind of visual motifs nurtured a certain way of seeing, reading and consuming landscapes. Thus, a painting should allow a rather unhindered imaginary walk through the landscape, from introductory motifs in the foreground, all the way into the background, without experiencing many obstacles. When the Romantics came to the fore, a new way of engaging with natural settings like gardens, forests, pastures, and seascapes through depictions of figures like wanderers, travellers, and pilgrims, compelled

viewers to vicariously experience nature through an art that meant not to replace nature but to reveal its mysteries and incommensurability. Despite the quarrel with traditional forms of landscape painting, the Romantics also appealed to an ideal of boundlessness, albeit in different ways too complex to explore here. Suffice to say that the one motif that excelled in epitomising this boundless freedom was the so-called summit experience (in German, *Gipfelerlebnis*)—a rather “modern” experience celebrated to greater or lesser extent not only in music, poetry, literature and philosophy but also in paintings throughout the long nineteenth century, from Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) to Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918).⁵ (Some of Friedrich’s most iconic landscapes include unexpected obstructions to the imaginary walk that are far too complex to cite here, and in that regard he remains an exception to this argument). Not surprisingly—for contemporary readers—, this *Gipfelerlebnis* was chiefly pursued by urban-like male figures (of some privilege) traversing mountains in pursuing a sublime experience, thus providing a strong contrast with the regular folk who inhabited those locations. Therefore, the concept of the ‘sublime’ {*Erhabene*} could be understood nowadays as associated with masculinity, keeping in mind the idea of unfathomable, free from measuring and controlling mechanisms, whereas ‘beauty’ is understood as feminine and controlled by aesthetic rules and principles.

In the case of the nineteenth-century Finnish art, the lack of higher geographical vantage points as seen in many German and Swiss mountain landscapes prompted Finnish artists to often assume viewpoints closer to the ground level, giving their sceneries a mood of being in the moment. This becomes evident in the series of lithographs compiled in Zacharias Topelius’ (1818–1898) *Finland framställt i teckningar* {*Finland depicted in drawings*}.⁶ Completed between 1845–1852 in Swedish, the book presented the geography, culture, society, industry, and economy of the Grand Duchy of Finland, in the style of popular ‘picturesque views’, ‘*voyages pittoresques et romantiques*’, or ‘*malerische Wanderungen*’ that introduced different lands like England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Russia, and the Americas to wider national or international audiences. It contains 120 lithographs commissioned from several Finnish artists and printed by Adler und Dietze in Dresden, with most of the contributions made by Johan Knutson (48), Pehr Adolf Kruskopf (31), Magnus von Wright (16), and Lennart Forstén (14).

The more we carefully observe these lithographs, the more apparent the *riukuaita* becomes. Despite its inconspicuousness in the book as a whole, a few drawings succeed at showing the widespread presence of this kind of fence across Finland, from the west coast to the east. Most notably the lithographs of Rauma (Raumo), Paloniemi/Lohja (Lojo), Munkkiniemi (Munksnäs), Laajasalo (Degerö), Savitaipale, Varkaus, Somerniemi (Sommarnäs), Savonlinna (Nyslott), Lappo, Juutas (Nykärleby), Oravainen (Oravais), nowadays part of Vaasa, and the Paikkarin torppa (Paikkari’s croft) in Sammati (nowadays part of Lohja), where Elias Lönnrot, the collector of the Finnish national epic Kalevala, was born and raised. The lithograph of Munkkiniemi [*Pic. 1*] by Magnus von Wright summarises three modes of transportation and perhaps of class: by carriage, horse, and foot. As mentioned above, walking supposedly guarantees all the freedom of movement off the beaten path, but here the long fences contrive all kinds of traffic to the road. Built as a mechanism to keep the cattle in and wild animals out, the fences also become a mechanism that controls the mobility of people.



[Pic. 1] Magnus von Wright, Munkkiniemi (Munksnäs)
Finland framställt i teckningar, 1845-1852
CC-BY-4.0 Finnish Heritage Agency, Inv.-No.: HK10008:44b



[Pic. 2] Johan Knutson, Juutas (Nykarleby)
Finland framställt i teckningar, 1845-1852
CC-BY-4.0 Finnish Heritage Agency, Inv.-No.: HK10008:106b

In Johan Knutson's lithograph of Juutas [Pic. 2], the length of the fences is more evident, where one can see what seems to be a farmer carrying hay in a one-person horse-drawn cart. Parallel to the flow of the man-made road is the natural transportation channel of the Lapua River {*Lapuanjoki*}, which, by joining other rivers, travels a length of 170 km from the pond of Sapsalampi in Alavus (Southern Ostrobothnia) into the Gulf of Bothnia. While the river reflects a seamless transition between fields in the middle- and background of the image, the long *riukuaita* cuts the foreground from the bottom left to the middle right, thus directing our imaginary walk into a place we cannot see. The relatively modest vantage point is what raises the view from the ground level above the fence to allow the unfolding of the landscape and a new route into the horizon. The viewer then must jump over the fence to allow the eye an imaginary walk through the fields and along the river.

Sustaining Borderscapes

As I have explained in my article *Sensing Boundaries on Foot*, the old enclosure practices in Finland saw many changes through the land reform of 1757 called the Great Enclosure or Great Division {*Isojako* in Finnish, *Storskiftet* in Swedish} under the rule of the Swedish Empire.⁷ Besides the common labours involved in farming, building fences became an essential but time- and material-consuming task. It imposed to the landscapes a regularity and division that mirrored early modern ideas of order and secular administrative procedures, and in visual terms, it transformed the rural landscape into a kind of borderscape. Thus, the widespread use of fences between villages, around farms, or even inside farms, creating alleyways, rendered the Finnish countryside into a fragmented landscape with defined borders, depending of course on the region, population density and wealth. The demarcation of borders also contributed to a sense of community with a more regular temporal structure around the different village activities. Most importantly, the community bounding nature of enclosure practices and its temporal structure was regulated by a new system of village administration {*kyläjärvjestysohje* or *kylähallinto*} introduced in 1742⁸ before the *Isojako*, although not consolidated until the next century and mostly in Ostrobothnia. This brought important changes, like the Alderman institution {*oltermannilaitos*}, which had roots in Central Europe. This institution replaced the old fence inspection system in place since mid-seventeenth century in the regions of Häme, Satakunta, and Southern Ostrobothnia, where fencing was mandatory and fence inspectors {*aidantarkastusmies*} were appointed.⁹ Conversely, parish priests oversaw order, discipline, and the morality of its parishioners. In the new system, parish residents had to elect an elder in the position of alderman {*oltermanni*} alongside two assistants appointed as lay judges {*lantamiehet*} to conform the village board, call for meetings, and lead matters concerning the village life: fences, ditches, roads, fire safety, schedules, watering for livestock, and forest use, as well as law and order, including the imposition of fines and the overseeing of night curfews.¹⁰

One may throw a parallel between this communal practice of building fences, its inspection by the alderman and his assistants (initially with the villagers too) with the much older annual custom of 'Beating the Bounds' in early modern Britain.¹¹ Borders and markers provided by the landscape demarcated the space in which parish life unfolded, and to commit to these natural boundaries parsons, churchwardens, landlords and other parishioners interested in ascribing themselves as to belonging to a particular parish, participated in an annual perambulation of the boundaries. Schoolmasters probably participated and took notes and draw sketch-maps to record the boundary markers. Before the passing of the Poor Law Act of 1601, religious processions to and around the parish boundaries took place to perform a blessing of the crops, exert spiritual control over the parish, and to preserve a lived and embodied

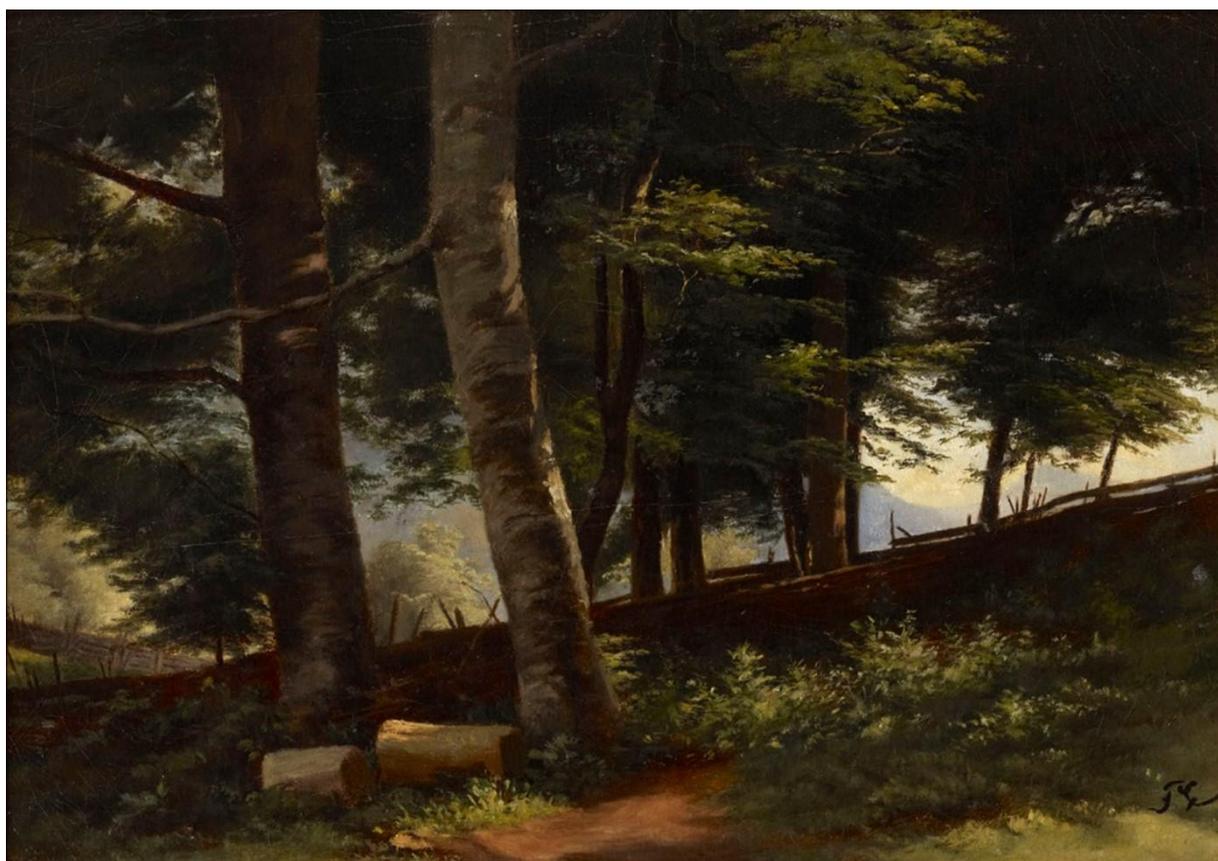
memory of border makers. Only afterwards, it evolved into a secular custom to assert the property rights of the civil parish and to refresh the collective memory of the boundaries by including younger members of the community, who carried willow wands to beat the border markers,¹² or to be beaten by them as a reminder of their belonging to the parish. The same tradition continued across the Atlantic in New England, but also in Central Europe. In Hungary, as Robert Gray argues, the custom of ‘beating the bounds’ (*batárjárás*) “acted as a repository of local knowledge, a way of knowing the environment, its use and the associate customary rights that emerged from the interaction between rural communities and their surroundings.”¹³ The problem was, of course, that walking the bounds was an unreliable source for legal agreements, since boundary markers moved or were lost, giving birth to disputes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the introduction of land registers, maps, and surveys was a rational, modern way of solving these issues, challenging “the peasant’s construction of the landscape,”¹⁴ and slowly divorcing the experience of sensing the boundaries on foot from bordering processes. As Ryden puts it, the modern approach to the landscape became an abstract and distant act of tracing over a flat map, no longer “approaching borders and their markers on foot and grasping them with hands, eyes, and mind.”¹⁵

In Finland, though, the story was different. The Finnish enclosure practices and their inspection under the Alderman Government point to something beyond the ‘beating the bounds’ custom, and not only because of the relative stability of the position of the fences. The remarkable feature of the alderman institution in certain regions of western Finland was the use of a special communication tool in the form of a rod or wand, namely, the alderman wand {*oltermanninsauva*}. Made of natural wood, it was used throughout the nineteenth century, either alone or in conjunction with another more modest stick of 25–30 cm long called the village baton {*kylänkapula*}. The alderman wand varied in style, shape, and length across regions. It was usually 75–100 cm long and featured signs, house names, year, indication of property of the alderman, or simply without any inscription. The wands of the villages of Yryselä and Palhojainen (municipality of Isokyrö, nowadays) were seven blocks {*kortteli*} long (roughly 104 cm), which was the same official height of the fences, so that the alderman could use the wand as a measuring device for its inspection.¹⁶ (In other parts of Finland, the fences were clearly much higher, even up to human size.) However, the main function was to summon villagers for a meeting. At first, the aldermen conveyed messages orally or in a form of sign language, due to illiteracy among peasants. By mid-nineteenth century though, as literacy grew, hand-written messages were attached to the wand. Thus, an alderman sent the wand and village baton to circulate through farmhouses and fences, either in opposite directions, or clockwise and anticlockwise, carried and passed along (presumably by foot) from a peasant to another, ought to be returned at the meeting by the final receivers.¹⁷ By completing regular circuits, the wand as the mobile symbol of the alderman’s leadership not only reassured the bounds under a common zone of administration; its message in Finnish also reinforced a linguistic border against the Swedish language, surpassing the more local boundaries of enclosures and guaranteeing a wider common culture and identity.

Depicting Borderscapes

This cultural practice of passing the Alderman’s wand—a relay of sorts—had to be done across the fences that divided the landscape. Remarkably, this feature of the Finnish countryside did not have a strong presence in the landscape paintings of the generation of artists after Knutson, which included painters like Werner Holmberg (1830-1860), Hjalmar Munsterhjelm (1840-1905), Berndt Lindholm (1841-1914), and Fanny Churberg (1845-1892), who gave impulse to the so-called Golden Age of Finnish Art. This

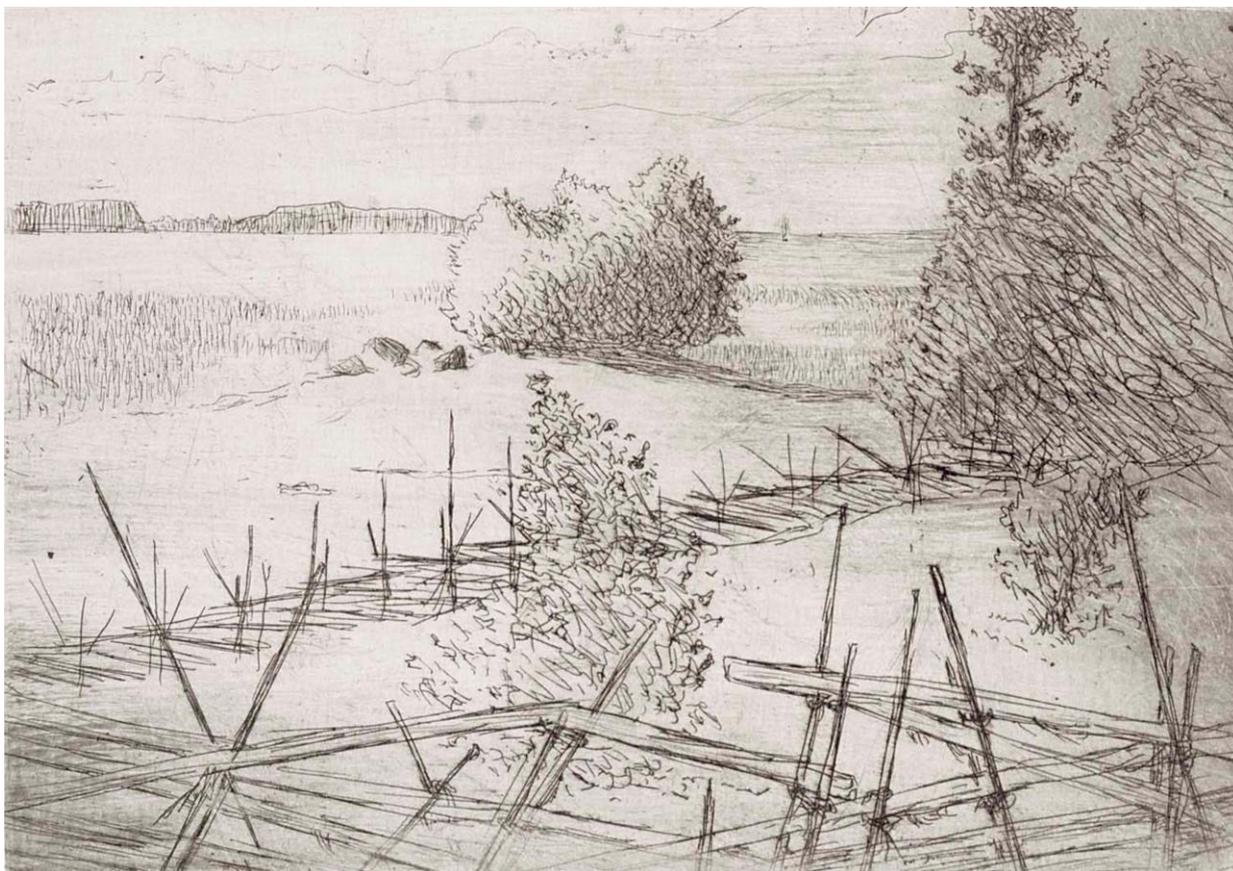
generation trained at the Königlich-Preussische Kunstakademie, known as the Düsseldorf School, which in the 1850s and 1860s still felt the strong influence of its most prominent first two directors, the Nazarene painters Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867) in 1821, and his successor and Nazarene brother Friedrich Wilhelm von Schadow (1789-1862) in 1829. Both Cornelius and Schadow had trained and worked in Rome and were notorious members the German artist colony in the Eternal City. (The latter, Schadow, had transformed the Düsseldorf school into an influential international training ground). When painting open landscapes, these Finnish artists followed the style developed at the Düsseldorf School, while preserving a sense of flow from one terrain into the next, including a passage for the eye to wander from the horizon into the sky. Remarkably, though the presence of the *riuknaita* in their works is sparse, whenever it appeared, it provided the scene a rather unusual hint of realism that reflected the actual conditions of the countryside life. This is the case of Lindholm's [Hämäläinen maisema](#) (*Landscape from Tavastia*, 1896) and Munsterhjelm's [Lähestyvä ukonilma](#), (*Imminent thunderstorms*, 1870–1879). Churberg's *Metsänsisusta* (*Forest interior*, 1871–72) [Pic. 3], on the other hand, offers a rare intimate scene in which two lines of fences cut the middle- and background, dividing the forest into man-controlled area and a natural one. It conveys a bordering experience in which the viewer is placed on the human side—signalled by the two pieces of cut tree trunks—, and whose low eye level seems to indicate that she is sitting or even partially laying down in a forest clearing.



[Pic. 3] Fanny Churberg, *Metsänsisusta* (*Forest interior*, 1871–72)
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 46,5 cm
 Copyright Free, Finnish National Gallery, Inv.-No. A III 2341

The next generation after Churberg and Lindholm, led by Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) and the artists who trained in Paris during the Belle Époque (1880s-1890s), like Victor Westerholm (1860–1919),

Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), Venny Soldan-Brofeldt (1863–1945), Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937), Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), and Pekka Halonen (1865–1933), were less shy in omitting the depiction of fences in the Finnish countryside, as seen both in their oil paintings and drawings. This also applies to other younger artists like Hugo Simberg (1873–1917) and Väinö Hämäläinen (1876–1940). No longer seen as an obstruction of the view, the *riukuaita* was raised even to the status of an artistic motif and a symbol of countryside life.



[Pic. 4] Hugo Simberg, *Kesämaisema* (*Summer Landscape*, 1899)
Etching on zinc plate, 22.7 × 35.6 cm
Copyright Free, Finnish National Gallery, Inv.-No. C III B I 136

See, for instance, Simberg's etching of a *Kesämaisema* {*Summer Landscape*} [Pic. 4] in which the viewer is facing a fence that blocks any attempt at passing physically into the middle- and background. The surprising element is how the closest fence guides the eye from the right to the left, then unto the next fence from left to right, where some bushes and a tree stand, and from here to the bush in the centre. Thus, the fences both guide the viewing experience and cut the adjacent field with a man-made geometry that contrasts with the flatness of the landscape between the bush in the centre and the hills on the left. This double function of the *riukuaita* as both territory boundaries that protect farms and villages from wild animals, while also controlling the mobility of living beings (including humans), and as an orientation device becomes clearer in Hämäläinen's winter landscape *Karjalasta* {*From Karelia*} [Pic. 5]. Because the snow flattens the ground and hides many landscape features that might orientate the (imaginary) walk, the fences now become the guide that provides a safe passage from the foreground into the village. Coincidentally, it follows the same pattern as in Simberg's etching, i.e., from right to left in the foreground, then jumping to the next fence from left to the centre of the image, from which a diagonal

extends to the back left, where a row of houses begins to stretch further to the right in the background. Had Caspar David Friedrich painted the same view one hundred years earlier, he might have omitted the fences to channel a disorientating experience that leaves the viewer both in and outside the image, raising the image's *Selbstbewusstsein*. But in Hämäläinen's winter landscape, the fences are not only a controlling mechanism of physical mobility, but also a guide for the imaginary walk into the landscape, in ways that both honours and contradicts the above-mentioned experience of reading landscape paintings. In simpler words, the *riukuaita* both obstructs and guides the aesthetic experience of the image.



[Pic. 5] Väinö Hämäläinen, *Karjalasta (From Karelia, 1908)*

Oil on canvas, 65 x 96 cm

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Borderscapes thus channel two parallel experiences of walking in the countryside: at once they impose limits of mobility but also—in some circumstances—signal a safe passage away from an inhospitable wilderness. All these features can be better seen in a great number of photographs of the Finnish countryside taken from the late nineteenth century into the interwar period and beyond. [Pic. 6-8] This photographic documentation is still the best evidence of the widespread use of round-pole wooden fences in the Finnish countryside, which to this day they can still be found around Finland. While they lack the artistry of paintings and drawings, these photographs proof how the *riukuaita* fragmented the landscape, thus creating a sort of countryside borderscape that affected life even beyond the human world.



*[Pic. 6] Esko Aaltonen
Village of Lunkaa in Tammela
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 Forssan Museo, Inv.-No.
EA3551*



*[Pic. 7] Eino Nikkilä
Eino Liitiä's farmer house in the village of Juhtimäki
(1931)
(Near today's Seitsemäinen National Park)
B&W Photograph, 9 x 12 cm
CC BY 4.0 Finnish Heritage Agency, Inv.-No.
KK1739:302*



*[Pic. 8] Tyyni Vahter, Alley between Rautala and Mattinen (1937)
(Polvijärven kirkonkylä, Eastern Finland)
B&W Photograph, 9 x 12 cm
CC BY 4.0 Finnish Heritage Agency, Inv.-No. KK2121:103*

¹ Carlos Idrobo, “Sensing Boundaries on Foot: Experiencing Limits of Mobility through Nineteenth Century European Art” in *Ennen ja nyt*, Vol 21 Nro 3 (2021): *Liikkuvuuden rajat – konkreettinen ja kuviteltu liikkuvuus pitkällä 1800-luvulla*. <https://doi.org/10.37449/ennenjanyt.109311>

² Golo Maurer, *Italien als Erlebnis und Vorstellung – Landschaftswahrnehmung deutscher Künstler und Reisender 1760–1870*. (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2015). See also Brendan Cassidy, “The Lure of “Magick Land”: British Artists and Italy in the Eighteenth Century,” in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Art*, ed. Michelle Facos (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), 17–34.

³ Cf. Sabine Wieber, “German Art Academies and their Impact on Artistic Style,” in Facos, *Companion*, 103–119.

⁴ Cf. Andreas Fahrmeir, “From Economics to Ethnicity and Back: Reflections on Emigration Control in Germany, 1800–2000,” in *Citizenship and Those Who Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation*, eds. Green, Nancy L., and Weil, François (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 176–192, here: 179.

⁵ Hans Joachim Neidhardt, “Das Gipfelerlebnis in der Kunst um 1800,” in *Studien zur deutschen Kunst und Architektur um 1800*, ed. Peter Bethausen (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1981), 94–117. See also Chapter 5 of my book, Carlos Idrobo, *Das, was von uns weggeht – Abwesenheit, Zeit und das Wandermotiv in der deutschen Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2019), 177–216.

⁶ Zacharias Topelius, *Finland framställt i teckningar*, eds. Jens Grandell and Rainer Knapas (Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 2011, <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:sls-7228-1552035302>).

⁷ Idrobo, *Sensing Boundaries*, 59–61.

⁸ First issued in Swedish, facilitating its introduction among the Swedish-speaking villages in Ostrobothnia. In turn, it was problematic for Finnish-speakers, who initially only had access to poor translations. See Reino Kallio, *Pohjanmaan suomenkielisten kylien oltermanninhallinto – Tutkimus vuoden 1742 kyläjärjestysohjeen toteuttamisesta* (PhD diss, Jyväskylän Yliopisto, 1982), 31. See also Kirsi Laine, *Maatalous, isojako ja talonpoikainen päätöksenteko Lounais-Suomessa 1750–1850* (Suomen maatalousmuseo Sarka: Loima, 2020).

⁹ Kallio, *Oltermanninhallinto*, 29–30.

¹⁰ In some parts of Ostrobothnia, curfews lasted for fifty years from the 1840s, nurturing in turn violence among young people. *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹ Probably instituted because of the Poor Law Act of 1601. Cf. Tratman, W. S. “Beating the Bounds” In *Folklore*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1931, 317–323.

¹² Cf. Tratman 1931, 321; Kent Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1993), referencing Maurice Beresford.

¹³ Gray, Robert W. “Walking the Boundaries between Modernity and Tradition: Perambulation and ‘Beating the Bounds in Nineteenth-Century Hungary” In *Walking Histories 1800–1914*, eds. Chad Bryant, Arthur Burns and Paul Readman (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 35–55, here: 38.

¹⁴ Cf. Gray, *Walking the Boundaries*, 47. Gray also argues that walking the boundaries was still anyhow useful to deal with the shortcomings of surveys and maps, as a sort of “alternative repository of knowledge... [...] that was more responsive to local circumstance, growing out of the intimate connection between the feet of the peasants and the landscape over which they walked.” (54–55)

¹⁵ Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31, 49, 188–190.