
How Not to Forget What We Ought to Remember

Ekrem, Carola, Gustavsson, Pamela, Hakala, Petra & Korhonen, Mikael 2014. *Arkiv, minne, glömska. Arkiven vid Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 1885–2010*. Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland. 490 pp. Ill. Maps. ISBN 9789515832580.

It was with mixed emotions that I first approached the recently published book *Arkiv, minne, glömska. Arkiven vid Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 1885–2010*. Almost 500 pages thick, the book's weight intimidated me a bit at first, I must admit. But, as so many times before, I was proved wrong.

In this book, the history of the archives and library of the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland is in focus, with an emphasis on the different collections. The aim of the book is to examine how the archives of the society were founded and how they developed. But this is also a book about the ways in which the society itself worked, and how it used the conception and idea of 'Swedish culture' in Finland.

The book contains four longer chapters, which are preceded by two shorter sections about the founding of the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland and its history. This is not by any means an untold history. During the latter part of the 1980s, a three-volume opus was published under the title *Forskning och vitterhet. Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 1885–1985* (eds. Torsten Steinby and Olof Mustelin). Here, the archive and library of the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland was described, more to provide an overview of the process of archiving and cataloguing. In this

book, however, the focus has changed and the archive and library are at the centre of the study.

The first longer part of the book is written by Carola Ekrem, and focuses on the collection of folk traditions at the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland. The archive contains results of more than a hundred years of work, first documenting the culture of the peasantry in Swedish Finland. The collection contains material well known from other similar archives; stories of people's lives and the conditions in which they lived. This also helps link the past with the present as well as the future. The stories contain information ranging from everyday conditions to holidays, from working life to leisure, from the farming and fishing societies of nineteenth-century Finland to today's more multicultural society.

Where Ekrem focuses on the collections of folk traditions, the next chapter, written by Pamela Gustavsson, revolves around the collections of dialects and names at the society. The society's collection of dialect transcripts and recordings are extensive and paint a picture of not only how the language has changed over the years, but also of how the society has changed along with it. In addition to these, there are also collections of names used in Finland, names of people, animals and plants as well as names of places, houses and farms. The collections also contain information on how they were spelled and pronounced as well as on what they meant. Gustavsson also shows how the society today works with dialects, language and names and how the old ways of collecting information were replaced in the 1970s, during which time the questions became more open and accessible and the focus was on the individuals rather than the dialect and the names themselves.

This curiousness in something Petra Hakala, the author of the third chapter of the book, points out. She concentrates on the collections in the society's archives. She starts around the year 1885, when the society was founded in honour of one of Finland's most important poets, Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877). But the most important underlying reason for its founding had more to do with the vivid debate about language as well as cultural and educational policy in the country at the time. During the 1880s, both the public and academic spheres were more and more divided into 'Swedish' or 'Finnish'; the two groups existed side by side, evolving around different languages, having different identities and perhaps different sense of national heritage. This led to an increasing desire to document, to preserve and to convey what was considered to be the Swedish cultural heritage in Finland. The main purpose of the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland became to uphold and preserve the notion of a Swedish National Culture. One of the initiators and promoters was Carl Gustaf Estlander (1834–1910), professor of aesthetics and modern literature at the University of Helsingfors.

In the last chapter, Mikael Korhonen contemplates different ways of gaining knowledge about the society and the people living in it. He looks back at the more traditional ways of acquiring knowledge, but mostly gazing towards the future, pointing at different ways of making the collections accessible for the public. New technology, of course, plays a great role in this process, and digitalising both source materials as well as publications are areas of priority for the future. But Korhonen, just as Hakala, also focuses on the archivists themselves, those people behind the growing collections, and how their role became more professionalized over the years. This has resulted in new questions to discuss, such as archival facilities and strategies for preservation.

In the book *Arkiv, minne, glömska* the focus is on the different principles of collecting. The aim is to investigate how the collections at the archive have evolved from then to now and what the future entails. But also the assessments and the considerations that have been the foundation

when collecting information to the archive are at the centre of the authors' attention.

The recurring questions about the principles of collecting material and information, how they have changed over time and how these changes affected the material being collected and – of course – the society itself bind the different chapters together. How did the different spirit of the times affect the investigations and the research performed by the employees at the society? And how did this process in turn affect the ways we can obtain knowledge about that particular period of time? Another recurring question is how the collections being put together today will influence the way the future generations can understand our own time. With these questions serving as a sounding board, the different chapters with their different perspectives work very well together. In particular, the double function – creating as well as receiving material – is well illustrated in the book.

I would like to have read more about some of the more general questions and ideas behind the policies at the society. The connection between the idea of what scientific research is all about and the idea of a common nation, inhabited by people with both a Swedish and a Finnish culture is pointed out; I would like to have seen more of that. And, in connection with that, what kind of material was rejected in the aspiration of presenting a source material with a high degree of scientific value?

The length of a book should not be a matter of discussion. But, perhaps, in this case, it is worth mentioning. Even if the different chapters have their own focus, they actually move around in the same sphere. The idea behind the early fieldworks and the way the first collections were established is very much a common history for the different collections at the society. It would have been worth the effort to refine the chapters and point out the common background in order to avoid repetition.

Arkiv, minne, glömska is very down-to-earth. The language is pleasant, easily accessible and captivating. The almost 500 pages heavy book seems somehow shorter and after reading the book, I feel not only at home with the history of

the collections at the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland, but I also find myself knowing a great deal more about the history of Finland and the history of the Swedish culture in Finland. For those who move in the Finno-Swedish sphere, *Arkiv, minne, glömska* is a standard work, and they will probably find themselves very much at home and familiar with the settings, the people and the ideas. The well-developed index at the back of the book makes it easy to navigate the book and skip to different parts that interest them in particular. For the rest of us, who practically know (knew!) more or less nothing more than the existence of the society: the book is a wonderful and exceptional road into new knowledge about Finland as a nation. This also makes the book interesting

for a larger audience, outside the group of those already interested.

Also worth mentioning are the many illustrations in the book, from pictures of early day's fieldwork to maps picturing the spread of different dialects. The illustrations are also very informative and add to the texts. They work as informative pictures but also to illustrate the source materials for those that are not so familiar with the collections. To sum up; *Arkiv, minne, glömska. Arkiven vid Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 1885–2010* is well worth reading, and I am somewhat surprised that it has not received more attention. Yet.

Marie Steinrud