

Summary

Library, Books and Reading Community. Uneducated Commoners as Readers in the Finnish Municipality of Karstula in the 19th Century

This research examined reading habits in the Finnish-speaking countryside, specifically in the agricultural municipality of Karstula, in Central Finland. The first library, containing some 100 books, was founded in 1861 by a wealthy local farmer. In 1876 the library was re-founded as a municipal library. The borrowing of books was free of charge and the locals could read hundreds of books without buying them. It could actually be argued that the library was financed by Finnish alcohol drinkers. Finland, then an autonomous Grand Duchy belonging to the Russian empire, taxed the producers of alcohol. From these funds municipalities received yearly subsidies, which the local decision-makers could use as they pleased. In Karstula, the library was financed by these alcohol taxes. In 1894 there were 468 titles, books and journals to be borrowed.

The study of reading habits in the uneducated, rural and Finnish-speaking municipality of Karstula has been made possible due to the locally-preserved source material: the book catalogue of the local library from the year 1894, the loaning records and a ledger of the library. Municipal protocols, newspaper articles and archive material have also been used, alongside research literature, in order to describe the context of a municipality undergoing a process of modernization, which was literary, but also social and technological in nature.

After reconstructing the book catalogue in order to identify which books were actually available in the library, the source material shows in detail which books were being borrowed during the period 1884–1893. During these years the existence of the local library enabled books to be borrowed a total of 7,895 times. The aim of my research was to study local reading, made possible by the library, within the context of a local society during a period when Finnish society was undergoing rapid social change. This research has included a conscious effort to

reject what Brian V. Street has labelled as autonomous interpretations of literacy, *i.e.*, rejecting models that interpret literacy as a skill which is independent of social circumstances. Similarly, causality between literacy and other factors and circumstances – literacy leads to this and that – has not been postulated *a priori*. Instead, literacy and local reading have been interpreted as taking place in an inter-connected network of social, economic, political and cultural circumstances and, in this 19th-century Finnish case, the context of a Finnish society that is undergoing a rapid modernization process.

The cause of the Finnish language was taken up by university-educated Finns in the 19th century, and the educated class provided the Finnish-speaking public with orthography, grammar, books, newspapers, translations of foreign books, as well as various societies publishing and distributing literature. A Finnish-speaking literary culture was made possible, for example, by the Finnish Literature Society, business-oriented publishers, pro-Finnish activists, the founding of Finnish-speaking schools and the political circumstances which made these activities possible.

In the Finnish-speaking municipality of Karstula, we see the local landowners taking over the local government after the municipal reform of 1865. Parishes led by vicars, previous units of local government in the countryside, were changed into secular units of local government. Local wealthy farmers were also elected, representing the estate of farmers in their area, to do the legislative work at the Finnish Diet. On the other hand, the local vicar Julius Immanuel Gummerus (1855–1919) represented the estate of clergy on several occasions. He was also only the second Finnish theologian to write his doctoral thesis in the Finnish language. The local activists worked for fifteen years to get a school founded, and succeeded in this in 1878. There was the great Finnish famine of 1866–1868, an evangelical revival movement and rather a large-scale emmigration into the United States. The development of the wood-processing industry created a demand for timber and provided new earnings both for workers and especially for landowners. The emmigration furthered the skill of writing in a community where learning to write was not part of the ecclesiastical literacy examined

by the Lutheran church. Contemporary sources state that Karstula received more letters from abroad than letters written from within Finland. There were exercises in local philanthropy, such as support for orphaned children, the hiring of a midwife who helped the poor for free, and later a doctor and a locally founded hospital. There were various efforts at furthering agriculture and improving postal connections. Local reading, made possible by the collection of books in the local library, took place in this context.

The library contained some books on agriculture, on abstinence from alcohol as well as on the question of the founding of banks. If the loan records had not been preserved, we would assume that this literature had something to do with the local developments. New books on agriculture or manuals on the care of horses and cattle, etc., were however seldom borrowed in this agricultural community. Farming was not studied or learned from books, but through participation in agricultural work and in the farmers' society. Similarly, the temperance movement reached Karstula, but not through the few library books on the subject, describing the horrors of drinking, which were rarely borrowed. One book, which was never borrowed, suggested the founding of a bank and putting part of servants' salaries into saving accounts so that, on leaving service, they would still have some fruits of their labour. It seems that, in the question of introducing novelties, newspapers, societies and local participation in the Diet in Helsinki were far more important and influential than library books. For example, Karstula landowners' society decided in 1892 that part of servants' pay would be saved in the bank and given to them when they quit service. This idea had previously been discussed in the Diet in 1891, where the vicar and a local farmer represented their estates, as a means of improving the position of servants.

It has been stereotypical to state that the Finnish Lutheran Church with its folk education taught Finns to read. However, a number of the academically educated – such as Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), the Finnish “national philosopher”, and Uno Cygnaeus (1810–1888), the founding father of the Finnish folk school system – became acquainted

with the life of the commoners in the middle of the 19th century and stated that the actual reading skills of Finns were poor.

Egil Johansson has maintained that literacy was widespread in Sweden (which at that time included Finland) by 1800. This is a misconception based on a literal reading of church records. In reality, there existed two different, socially-defined types of literacy both in Sweden and in Finland: the modern-type literacy of the educated and the higher classes, and the ecclesiastical literacy, recorded in church records, of the masses. Ecclesiastical literacy did not include writing skills, but being ecclesiastically literate did not actually require that one could read either. The content of ecclesiastical literacy in the 1850s has been described, for example, by Juho Saarinen (1846–1920), a tenant farmer's son who went on to study theology and became the vicar of the Finnish parish in St. Petersburg: "The real man was he who could freely read by heart his ABC book and [Olaus] Svebelius's Catechism [an explanation of Luther's catechism, first translated into Finnish in 1745]. He who in addition had the stamina to learn by heart [Johan] Möller's catechism [an explanation of Luther, translated into Finnish in 1793] was considered quite a scholar." There were Finnish-speaking special groups and individuals with the modern type of literacy among the uneducated masses during the 19th century and even earlier, but this does not change the big picture. The ability to read a book was not commonplace even in the 1880s. In 1884 books were borrowed 1,256 times from the Karstula library, but only by some 300 persons in the municipality of some 7,000 inhabitants.

As a matter of fact and as stated in a decree of 1866 enabling the founding of folk schools in the countryside, the duty of teaching children to read, was, "as before", that of the parents. As Lutheran bishop Frans Ludvig Schauman (1810–1877) said, commenting on the poor reading skills of people in Karstula during his visitation in the parish in 1875, it was not the job of the pastors, but of the parents to teach children to read. But if parents were illiterate, how could they teach their children?

There were ambulatory schools in the parishes teaching children for a two-week period before moving on to the next village. However, there

were neither official qualification requirements for the teaching nor any formal education for the teachers until an academy offering one-year courses was founded in the town of Hämeenlinna in 1890. The aim of these schools was not to educate the children to become book readers. Until the curriculum of the ambulatory schools started to resemble that of the folk schools at the end of the century, with children studying writing, singing and maths, the ambulatory schools were intended to advance the reading skills of the masses, *i.e.*, in ecclesiastical literacy.

The aim of ecclesiastical literacy was to become able to “read” Luther’s *Small Catechism* and other books that explained or interpreted it. Ecclesiastical literacy was required in order to be confirmed, to receive the first communion and, after accomplishing this, to acquire the right to get married. Those claiming that the church taught Finns to read have not paid attention to the fact that ecclesiastical literacy as examined by Lutheran pastors and recorded in church records does not usually distinguish those who were actual readers from those who read by heart. What has been also ignored is the question of reading material. What kind of readers could people actually be or become without access to a variety of books?

In this situation, what was relevant and efficient in promoting reading and the availability of the books was the Finnish library revival, which took place from the 1830s–1840s onward. Volunteers around the country, pastors, local dignitaries and enlightened farmers took up the task of founding smaller and larger libraries in towns and municipalities. This library revival was propagated in the newspapers and in some cases supported by Lutheran bishops as a means of furthering religious education, enlightening the general public and giving people something useful to do – *i.e.*, reading – on Sundays, instead of drinking. In 1874 there were at least 390 municipal libraries around the country and actually many more since youth societies, workers’ societies and factories founded their own. In the 1910s there were some 2,400 libraries in Finland. The total number of libraries is actually quite difficult to estimate since, for example, folk schools, which were founded not only in the municipal centres but also in distant villages, seemed to have had “libraries”, or small book collections for lending.

These various Finnish libraries made collections of books available locally and free of charge or for a small fee. An important aspect of this was the democratization of literature. Using the library, even the poorest of the poor could read a book without buying it, if he or she was just skillful enough. The great number of Finnish libraries also indicates that concerning the latter half of the 19th century, a book's ownership, owning a book or books, no longer tells us how informed Finns were about literature or about a certain book. We may also note that the voluntarily-founded network of libraries and the number of books published in Finnish, the previously vernacular language of the country, grew hand in hand. Due to translations and later works by Finnish-speaking authors, the Finnish-speaking majority of the population was provided with literature they could read in their mother tongue.

The list of most-loaned books depicts the popularity of old religious books, especially the translations of Martin Luther's writings, which for its part testifies to the religious conservatism of the readers. The most popular Finnish writers were Zacharias Topelius (1818–1896), writer and Swedish-speaking professor of history, with his novel *The Surgeon's Stories*, Finnish Lutheran pastor Johan Fredrik Bergh (1795–1866) with his posthumous collection of sermons, and writer and book publisher Karl Jakob Gummerus (1840–1898), also the publisher of widely-read periodicals. Among popular reading was also a collection of Finnish folk tales edited by Eero Salmelainen (1830–1867). The books by Gummerus have nowadays been forgotten and are not considered high quality literature. In his time, however, he was popular and widely read. The popularity of Gummerus at Karstula library was also due to the fact that the novels of most other authors writing in Finnish were simply not available. Gummerus was also the brother of the local vicar. His books, many of them written in a sentimental spirit similar to that of Christoph von Schmidt (1768–1854) – whose book *Rose von Tannenburg* was popular reading in Karstula – were not morally criticized by the Finnish conservatives, who could not come to terms with the new realistic literature.

Notable among the most loaned non-religious books is the interest shown in legal matters, whereas nonfiction in general was of minor

importance to the readers. Books teaching a modern, rationalistic world view, concerning, for example, the planets, natural phenomena and the futility of superstitions as well as school books on mathematics, were borrowed, but in considerably smaller numbers than religious books. Library books also meant that in a rural community of readers, where the only formal educational facility was the folk school, small groups of people were also informed about such matters as a book attributed to Antonio Palerio and its publishing history, the teachings of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, gymnastics, physics, the pyramids, travels in Palestine and places mentioned in the Old and New Testament, the history of geographical explorations and great inventions, Guiseppe Garibaldi, Finnish history and previous wars fought on Finnish soil, Swedish kings, gardening, music, singing and Finnish translations of musical terms such as *staccato*.

Fiction opened up historical, celestial and political horizons. Those reading historical novels, such as Elisabeth Charles's books, were taken through the lives of Luther and the Schönberg-Cotta family and the early Christians, into the middle of the German Reformation and the middle of the first Christian century. Some books and magazines described the possibility that there was life on other planets and even on comets. A Finnish book of fairy tales from 1893 was the only library book describing a democratic form of government, as we see in the following quotation:

Do you know what a republic is? See, it is a country where there is no emperor, no king or not even a queen, but only the "family-master" of the country, i.e. the president -- This form of government would not be so crazy, since probably republics are also heaven-borne. But sometimes it happens that the electors nominating the president have been chosen by the devil and then they all are great scoundrels.

Some books, such as *Enon opetukset* (Uncle's teachings) by Antero Warelius (1821–1904), a Lutheran Finnish pastor, propagated a rational world view, dismissal of superstitions, and described natural phenomena

like volcanos and new inventions like electricity. Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884), a medical doctor and professor of Finnish language and the creator of *The Kalevala*, published *Suomalaisen Talonpojan Koti-lääkäri* (The Finnish Peasant's Home Doctor) in 1839. Besides offering practical advice, Lönnrot's Home Doctor was a propagator of a rational world view. It heavily criticized traditional healing methods based on magic and the self-proclaimed healers of popular religion, who fooled the gullible. It argued against interpreting diseases as punishments from God, encouraged kindness towards children, and instructed parents in the best ways of teaching their children to read.

The most borrowed books at Karstula library, 1884–1893.

Book	Number of loans 1884–1893	Loans made by men/women
Luther, <i>Kirkkopostilla</i> [Church Postil]	576	336/240
Luther, <i>Mannaa Jumalan lapsille</i> [excerpts from Luther's works]	372	166/206
Luther, <i>Huonepostilla</i> [House Postil]	214	100/114
<i>Uusi testamentti</i> [The New Testament]	207	117/90
Zacharias Topelius, <i>Välskärin kertomukset</i> [The Surgeon's Stories]	180	115/65
Johan Arndt, <i>Totisesta kristillisyydestä</i> [True Christianity]	156	98/58
Johann Quirsfeld, <i>Taivaallisen yrttitarhan seura</i> [orig. <i>Geistlichen Myrrhen-Garten</i>]	142	65/87
Christoph von Schmidt, <i>Uusi Genoveeva</i> [Rose von Tannenburg]	133	62/71
Luther, <i>Epistolapostilla</i> [Epistle Sermons]	122	82/40
<i>Raamattu</i> [The Bible]	122	74/48
Luther, <i>Aarre-aitta</i> [orig. <i>Biblisches Spruch- und Schatzkästlein/Schatzkästchen</i> , ed. by J. C. Schinmeier]	115	41/74

J. F. Bergh, <i>Postilla</i> [a Finnish collection of sermons]	114	55/59
Eero Salmelainen (ed.), <i>Suomen kansan satuja ja tarinoita</i> [Finnish fairy tales and stories]	112	67/45
Gummerus, <i>Uuteloita II</i> [Short stories II]	97	48/49
John Kristian Swanljung, <i>Käsikirja lainopissa</i> [a handbook of legal matters]	92	88/4
Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, <i>Paul ja Wirginia</i> [Paul and Wirginie]	88	38/50
Ruotsin valtakunnan laki [The Law of Sweden]	88	82/6

In this study, reading has been examined in the local context, taking into consideration the overall development and modernization of local society. The library with its books arrived in rural circumstances where the popular religion, earlier described as folk religion, was a living tradition with a magical understanding of the world. The people were Lutheran, but hundreds of years of ecclesiastical teaching had not removed the living tradition of spells and magic in Finland. With appropriate spells and other measures a wide range of things were governed, including healing and stopping bleeding, taking care of cattle, finding thieves, calling a bear to attack the neighbour's cows, and getting rid of snakes. Taking this into consideration, the books entered a society with a pre-modern world view, believing that the use of the right words could govern nature. The library, however, provided "new words" for governing and understanding nature and society: books on the law, agriculture and foreign countries, on history, inventions and religion. The library also made the novels of the day available, and the pastime of reading for fun, previously restricted to the upper classes, also became possible for the members of the lower classes.

In 1894, Karstula library contained 468 items of books and newspapers. The least borrowed books included Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the anonymously published Finnish book *Muhammedin elämä* (The life of Mohammed). They were both borrowed only six times, while a book on the Stone Age attracted only one reader, and the tribulations

of the Huguenots described by the Finnish pastor and doctor of theology, Johan Samuel Pajula, (1856–1918) interested no-one.

During the period 1884–1993 library books were borrowed from Karstula library at least 7,895 times (4,606 times by men/3,289 by women). The most popular author by far was Martin Luther. His books or books extracted from his works were borrowed a total of 1,798 times. The main translation of Luther's book into Finnish was the work of the evangelical revival movement. It published Luther's works in large numbers in the 19th century. Because of this activity, the Finnish-speaking members of the Lutheran church, at least those with adequate reading skills and an interest in religious matters, could get personally acquainted with Luther's writings for the first time.

The readers' interest in religious books testifies to the traditional union of books and religion among the formally uneducated Finnish commoners. The availability of a wide range of religious texts, nonetheless, also provided a new way of reading for the religiously motivated readers. Instead of repeatedly reading the same religious texts, the library offered the opportunity for a modern, extensive reading whereby, having read one book, a new book, previously unknown to the reader, could be chosen for reading.

With its books, the library provided the agrarian periphery with various groups of informed people, thus paving a way towards a literate society. Some local readers were well-informed in the writings of Martin Luther while others read the law books or books on general history, especially the Finnish edited version of world history written by the German historian, Georg Weber. In comparison, Finnish history was less interesting than that of foreign countries. The reason for this was obviously the books themselves. The available Finnish history books were theoretical? studies on history while the books on general history were popularized, also edited to suit Finnish conditions, being easy to read and beautifully illustrated.

In the rural municipality, the library opened up access to foreign literature and made available some foreign classics. Foreign books translated into Finnish and available at the library included, for example, a short version of Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first

two parts of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a translation of A. F. Hoffman's children's version of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Paul Belloni Du Chaillu's *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, as well as Jules Verne's *A Floating City* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Henry Morton Stanley's books on the Free State of the Congo provided Finnish readers with an idealized picture of this "noble" venture at the same time as when appalling atrocities were taking place in the actual Congo.

The collection of books in Karstula library was politically and religiously quite conservative in the sense that it contained no realistic novels of the time, no books by Finnish female authors and no books on the political movements of the day, such as socialism, except for a translation of Ivan Sahlertz's booklet *Kuwia eläinkunnasta*. This work, originally published in Danish in 1874, took examples from the animal kingdom in order to testify to the impossibility of socialism and communism as functioning social systems. Even the first Finnish-speaking novel, Aleksis Kivi's (1834–1872) *Seitsemän veljestä* (*The Seven Brothers*, 1870/1873), which was heavily criticized by conservatives for its "immoral", non-idolized picture of rural Finns, did not enter the library until in 1894. Instead, rural people could read about Norwegian peasant life in Björnstjerne Björnson's early work, *A Happy Boy*. Women readers, on the other hand, resembled Simone de Beauvoir's "other sex", the second gender. They read about the life of women and the proper female virtues and duties as depicted by male writers.

Between 1884–1894, close to 8,000 book loans were made from Karstula library. It is highly unlikely that this amount of books or reading would have taken place in a countryside periphery without the collection provided by the library. Since Karstula library was just one library in a country with hundreds of other local libraries, we can assume that that the role of voluntarily-founded libraries, together with the growing number of newspapers and journals, was paramount in teaching Finnish-speaking people to read books, practice their reading, and widen their horizons.