

THE LADY WITH THE BOW

The Story of
Finnish Women



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The Lady with the Bow

THE LADY

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WITH THE BOW

The Story of Finnish Women

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FOREWORD

In December 1989 a seminar was held under the auspices of the Finnish Cultural Foundation entitled *Työ, Nainen, Elämä. Suomalaisen naisen työ* (Work, Woman, Life. Finnish woman's work). The papers presented covered the full range of women's work in the building of Finnish society. The scope of this book is equally as wide. The reader is introduced to the role of strong Finnish women in everyday work as well as the arts and literature. The work concludes with an in-depth analysis of women as the builders of the Finnish welfare state.

The idea for both the seminar and the book came from the need to counter the findings of one widely circulated American study in which Finland had been cited as a country where women were more commonly in full-time employment than elsewhere in Scandinavia, yet which provided no system of child daycare. How had Finnish women succeeded in combining work and family it was asked. The researcher's predicament was a failure to discover or comprehend Finnish studies and statistics. Here we offer both the facts and their interpretations.

Another factor that has made this book possi-

ble is the emphasis placed on feminist studies by the Finnish Academy in recent years. A transition from the pioneer stage to new wave studies is now taking place in this field, and this means a move from narrow feminist to social gender studies. In my opinion Finnish feminist studies believe more in integration than isolation which, in the world at large, has often led to ghettoisation.

The life and work of the Finnish woman is revealed through the specialised views of the writers. We have provided her with a solid, historical background. After all, the reason for the gulf between women's and men's wages lies in the past; the female occupations being long considered an extension of unpaid housework.

This book is an important contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the University of Helsinki by a woman, Queen Christina of Sweden. It also introduces the foreign reader to a Finland that is much more than the land of a thousand lakes. It is published in honour of the life, work and life's work of the Finnish woman – yesterday, today and tomorrow. Long has she merited this story.

Päivi Setälä



MERJA
MANNINEN

FINNISH
WOMEN'S
OPPORTUNITIES
BEFORE
THE 19TH
CENTURY

In his book *Germania* (c. 98 BC), the Roman historian Tacitus wrote some strange tales of the races that inhabited the north. At a time when Rome had achieved cultural supremacy, the North still lived in prehistoric barbarianism. The period of prehistory for which no written record exists, extends in Finland up to the 11th century AD, to the end of the Viking period and the time when Christianity is thought to have reached the country.

Somehow Tacitus had obtained knowledge of the habits and customs of these northern races. About the "wild and horribly poor" Fenni he wrote: "The same hunt provides food for men and women alike; for the women go everywhere with the men and claim a share in securing the prey." This gave a clear picture of the strength of northern women. Whatever the truth of the matter is, the story tells of women participating in the same work as men, even in hunting which was a purely male activity.

This tale by Tacitus is curiously supported by Stone Age rock engravings from Astuvansalmi in Ristiina, near Mikkeli, an area considered to be the site of one of the earliest cultural settlements in Finland. The engraving depicts a typically mythical hunting scene of elks, hunters, horned shamans and, oddly enough, two women. These women have caused archaeologists a real headache because one of them carries a bow. A female figure sporting a bow is a virtually unknown character in rock engravings. Were these women taking part in the hunt alongside their Fennian, Finnish menfolk? And if so, were women more equal then than they were at many later periods?

When considering the position of women in times past, it can be seen that this has not gradually improved the nearer the present we approach. Rather women have had greater or lesser opportunities at different periods, depending on prevailing laws and customs or their own status in society.

Stone Age rock engraving from Astuvansalmi, Ristiina. The lady with the bow in on the left. This gave rise to the belief that ancient Finnish women hunted alongside their menfolk.

Archaeology, which it is so charmingly said provides a picture of life through death, reveals that women in Bronze Age (circa 1300 BC to the beginning of our own time) farming communities did much the same work as their sisters in historic agrarian societies. Sickles for harvesting grain have been found in women's graves, also curved knives for cutting hides, awls for making holes, needles and distaffs.

Analyses of grave goods from the Iron Age – which in Finland extends up to the 12th century AD – give a useful insight into the basic division of labour between men and women: "In Eurasian graves the men had weapons but no tools. Thus if grave goods are a true reflection of past life then Eurasian men just went about rattling their weapons and left the work to women."

Graves from the Viking period (circa 800–1000 AD), on the other hand, reveal a greater equality between the sexes. Women's grave goods are much richer, which would appear to indicate that Viking women were considerably more independent than has hitherto been thought. Some of these graves have caused considerable searching among archaeologists; there is one where a woman has two magnificent swords beside her, another with a curled-up man buried under her feet, and yet another surrounded by the articles of trade – scales, purse and dog – which strictly speaking are male grave goods. The latter is assumed to have been a trader's widow who carried on the business after her husband passed away. Thus she premeditated her latter-day sisters who were allowed by law to continue the occupation, trade or craft of their late husbands.

Folklorists have studied life in peasant, agrarian society and naturally paid attention to women's position within it. Generally speaking, agricultural society was fairly static and remained virtually unchanged until the 19th century. Thus the evidence of later times is thought to be reasonably valid for the earlier periods.

Since time immemorial, marriage has been thought to be the goal and main event of a woman's life. It has been their most important occupation and women's opportunities on the marriage market have been dependent on wealth: "For a strip of land you'd marry a plain one, but for a whole farm even a vixen" as the old saying goes. Not only wealth but also work was respected in agrarian society.

These two demands on women are well covered in the pastoral letter of Melartopaeus, dean of Karelia, at the end of the 18th century: "If there be a youth desireth of marrying and entering into that holy state of marriage that God Himself hath blessed, then he, and likewise his parents, should not be so mindfull that he taketh unto himself as his companion and spouse one who hath been brought up in the respect and fear of God, but any natural creature fashioned in man's likeness who hath a cow and a sheep, a broad back, sturdy shoulders, and strong arms."

In principle all people in agriculture performed the same work, but in practice there was a clear differentiation: the women remained more within the home, doing the housework, caring for the young and the old, singing the tribal or family ritual runes and dirges, and creating culture and passing it on. No other sources reveal information about life at that time other than the folklorists' interpretations of folk poetry and dirges. Men's work was directed away from the home, towards the community, and demanded strength and courage. Even today we can see a similar kind of division prevailing in our own society.

The idea of women, due to their inherent weakness, turning inwards into their own private world mainly owes itself to church teaching. The church gained a foothold in Finland in the 13th century, when the Swedish king and church embarked on a "crusade" which gradually turned Finland into a vassal state over the next two centuries. In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church – which considered itself to be the sole

authority – taught that woman was incomplete, an “imperfect man”, and created to serve man. Thus the church brought Aristotelian and ecclesiastic teaching to the peoples of the north. That woman was an imperfect man guaranteed that she had less opportunities and rights in society.

Yet it was just the Catholic Church, through the monastic system, that provided women with the opportunity to learn and create in the convents it established. Albeit that the convents were often more a glorified place of custody for the daughters of the rich – and a cheaper solution than marriage – many gifted women learned to read the old writings and by copying them pass on the knowledge so gleamed. Only as a nun could a woman free herself from her expected social role. Although none of the Finnish convents were like the Héloïse of old, that of the Order of St. Bridget in Naantali, near Turku, was exceptional. It offered women an education of the quality they were not to generally receive under the Lutheran Church until the demise of the old order of Estates and the rise of the women’s rights movement at the end of the 19th century. After the dissolution of the monasteries, women no longer had the opportunity to break away from their traditional roles as wife and mother. The position of abbess had also given them a chance to wield power. This, too, ceased to exist. The convent offered its inmates protection from the cold realities of life. Outside women were busy about their work but their lives were not particularly safe, if an appeal by the Swedish king that women be left in peace is anything to go by. This is the oldest document in the National Archives of Finland. Dating from 1316 and issued at Viipuri castle, it addressed all subjects in the province of Karelia as follows: “Let it be proclaimed that all those living in marriage, widows, nuns and maidens shall enjoy the same peace and safety in respect to property as to person as in the realm of Sweden.”

What then do the laws of the Swedish realm, and which extended to Finland, tell us about women’s lives? Before the courts, a woman was responsible for her own deeds; that is as a law-breaker she was treated as equal to a man. But because of her status as a ward she was unfit to bear witness. All women, with the exception of widows, were under guardianship as they were not considered competent to manage their own affairs. And because of their diminished responsibility, even widows were considered unfit to be the guardians of their own children, and had to find a man to do it for them.

In medieval law the word “man” meant a person. However, on occasion it was a woman that occurred first to the legislator in compiling sections of certain laws: in respect to work “the wife milks another man’s animals, lambs or goats . . .”, or in remarking on women’s uncouth language “if a wife or a man uses abusive words against the other” or in witchcraft “if a wife or man lives by sorcery . . .” When the laws were applied they gradually began to shape people’s ideas and thoughts.

An important Swedish jurist, Clas Rålamb, pondered in the late 17th century why women in the laws of the realm were generally considered simple minded and easily cheated, for which reason they were disbarred from carrying on a business. The learned jurist was of the opinion that most women were considerably more responsible than men so that the law in regard to trading should be changed “particularly so because women do not do business to their disadvantage but always to their real advantage”.

Another learned gentleman, the geographer Eric Tuneld, wrote in the year 1740 that the welfare of the realm was much dependent upon “the living habits of the female sex”. In other words, if the economy of the state was managed badly and the general wellbeing diminished, then women too were to be held responsible! Tuneld, however, continues that the women of the land

have been known since time immemorial for their virtue, chastity, gaiety, industry and thrift. All honour, therefore, to women as the builders of a nation's wealth, but what did society offer them? What rights, what work, what influence?

Finnish society during the 17th and 18th centuries was divided into four Estates, each with its own clearly defined rights and duties. A woman belonged to her father's estate and upon marriage to her husband's. Her rights were defined by her class and marital status. For this reason it is impossible to talk generally about "women's rights". A burgher's widow and a labourer's wife had precious little in common.

What work did society offer women? Within the Swedish realm from the Middle Ages onwards every effort had been made to bind labour by a system of annual hiring contracts. Whereas early on those considered to be without means were required to accept what work was offered them, by the 17th century the non-employed sought work themselves in order to avoid the consequences. Thus virtually every young, unmarried woman was forced to hire herself out as a domestic servant. Even the daughters of town burghers might well serve a period as a servant before getting married. In sheer numbers and work contribution, domestic servants constituted a major part of the population of 18th century towns.

If marriage was woman's most common form of livelihood, then being a domestic was the next. A servant girl's wage was naturally half of a farm lad's, so it paid to keep a couple of industrious young girls rather than a day-dreaming boy. Any study of women's work is complicated by the failure of sources to mention their occupations. The sources available – tax records, account books, parish registers, confirmation class records, court records – list a woman as a man's sister, mother, wife, daughter, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, etc. Yet a man's title or occupation

is always mentioned. Nevertheless, it appeared to be fairly customary for a woman to sell her skills at washing, baking, spinning or cleaning. It is, however, extremely difficult to find documentary evidence of such occasional employment. That it existed can be deduced from the need of many women to support themselves and their families.

There is no mention in private ledgers of wages being paid to women for occasional work, but fortunately some persistent women took their wage disputes to court: a weaver felt she had received too little for the cloth she had woven. The matter was thrashed out in court and other women weavers called as witnesses. In this fortunate example even the size of the remuneration is stated, because the court required a detailed record to be kept.

The same household skills were required by innkeepers, butchers and vintners which, in the towns, were trades largely managed by women. In the manufactories, particularly tobacco and silk-weaving, it was possible to use female labour. Even the works managers in silk-weaving were women, probably due to their skills in this field. However, women were not entitled to be trained or carry out bourgeois occupations, crafts or trades. The guild system controlled entry into the crafts until well into the 19th century. But there was one group of women who had the right to these occupations; the widows of tradesmen and craftsmen. For this reason all over the country there were women managers of trading establishments and proprietors of handicraft workshops – shoemakers, pewterers, ropemakers, dyers, etc. They managed as well as their male colleagues, and behaved in the same way – there is no evidence of a particularly "soft" feminine line.

The first purely female occupation established for women in Finnish towns was that of midwife. From time immemorial women had assisted at childbirth, but only from the mid-18th century did each town try to have a trained midwife.

The Day of Judgement – women in Hell, men in Heaven.
Early 19th century oil painting from Keuruu church.
National Museum of Finland.



Stockholm was the only place that offered instruction in midwifery, and it was a demanding school with books and everything.

Many women tried to earn a livelihood by work, often becoming quite inventive in exploiting the few means and opportunities offered by society. But there were also those who were dependent upon the help of relatives or applied for poor law relief. There was little relief available and most of those mentioned in 18th century records were women – wives, widows and spinsters. With the vintners mentioned above, the right to sell alcohol was apparently given as a form of poor relief, because the licencing boards placed great stress on the abject poverty or large family of the applicant. Applications for relief also indicate the limited opportunities women had to earn a living. But it also reveals that many women were unable to earn a living because their estate or class made it impossible. "Dirty", physical work was unsuitable for a gentlewoman, and the "better" jobs in government and private offices only became available to them in the late 19th century.

It was probably these "better" jobs that the Turku provincial governor had in mind when he addressed an enquiry to the town magistracy at the request of the national chamber of commerce in the 1780s. The enquiry was addressed to the town's craftsmen and traders asking them of their opinion as to the possibilities of women earning their living in different branches of trade and industry. The governor also thought it fit to remark that old prejudices should be in no way a hindrance to women acquiring a reasonable income, continuing that: "Women are frequently more trustworthy at work and less demanding as to remuneration than men."

And what about women's rights and duties as members of society? Women with property of their own paid the same taxes as men. Women in bourgeois occupations and those that owned houses or land had to pay towards the mainten-

ance of roads, bridges and public buildings. Women traders and craft workshop proprietors were also responsible for the exceptionally burdensome cost of the national inn system. They, too, had to contribute towards the travelling expenses of their local representative to the diet, even though they were excluded from the suffrage. Participation in decision making in Finland varied between towns; in some women could vote, others not. In many towns the elders might well have been of the same opinion as the burghers of Vaasa who (in 1738) were horrified at the prospect of women taking part in decision making because "it was quite obvious, according to God's own order, that women are simple and gullible and duty bound to remain in the place they belong to, but especially because they are not free". It is useful mentioning that according to the Church Code of 1686 women could participate in their parish elections, that is vote in elections for the priest, curate and cantor, provided they owned property in the parish.

In addition to duties patriarchal society also ordained the criteria of woman's honour. This woman's honour, which as we all know is "the most beautiful thing a woman can own", did not only depend upon a woman's deeds, but how those deeds looked to others. And what those deeds should and should not appear like was determined by men. A woman was considered in much the same way as property, as something to be protected. The church watched over women's lives and they were kept in order through a system of admonitions and stigmas. Also the judiciary, which ensured that the laws were obeyed, investigated women's deeds and behaviour. From the court records we can deduce what a woman could expect from life. Fortunately there were many women who were not just born, married, gave birth and died, thus only leaving a record in the parish registers, but lived contrary to the rules of law and honour. From the records of such cases we gain much knowledge about the lives and

opportunities of women before the turn of the 19th century.

As one consequence of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Finland was ceded by Sweden to Russia in 1809 and became an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Imperial Empire. Gradually during the nineteenth century the old system of Estates

collapsed and was ultimately replaced by one in which the rights of all citizens in society were, in principle, equal. Even women's rights and opportunities were no longer based on estate or marital status, but mainly on their social class and sex, the fact that they were women.

Woman ploughing, 1905.

