



Novels, Histories, Novel Nations

Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia

Edited by Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes and Ilona Pikkanen

Studia Fennica
Historica 19

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Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes, Ilona Pikkanen, February 2015

Preface

Describing the whimsical fate of historical painting, Francis Haskell (1971: 109) pointedly remarked that “No kind of art was more influential during the first half of the nineteenth century and none has now so hopelessly retreated beyond the frontiers of our appreciation”. In the context of Romantic Historicism most of the great painters of the academic art world attempted reconstructions of historical scenes that were appreciated by both art *connoisseurs* and the wider public, but after the breakthrough of Modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century this sort of evocation of the past seemed so banal that the whole concept of historical painting was largely dismissed as futile.

The genre of the historical novel has experienced an equally changeable destiny, even if in a less dramatic form. Having its heyday in the nineteenth century, its emergence at the beginning of the century was linked to the fundamental social and cultural transformations of the era, such as the change in time consciousness, modernisation and the rise of nationalisms. In the course of the century, history established itself as an academic discipline, but the popular forms for dealing with the past, including the historical novel, became equally ubiquitous and were successfully used in the various national constructions of identity (Trumpener 1997; Moretti 1999). Both the historical novel and painting aimed at a total retrospective view of a nation, with a detailed representation of its people and milieus in their historical development and across all segments of society (Maxwell 2009: 59; Duncan 2006: 179).¹ The detailed representations of time and space also allowed for powerful ideological and political generalisations. The decline of the genres in the twentieth century can be linked to the experiences of the two world wars, to the critique of nationalism and to the transformations in the literary and art worlds.

The reasons for the renewed interest in the historical novel (and, indeed, historical fiction) and painting in the last decades of the twentieth century are again similar. The study of nationalism and so-called invented traditions from the 1970s and of cultural memory from the 1990s onwards² made the nineteenth-century forms germane again and posed the question of their relationship to the new modes of representing the past in fictional form that had been developed in response to the experiences of the Second World

War. This volume is a result of those developments in the fields of cultural memory and theories of nationalism.

We will look at Finnish and Estonian historical fiction and its role in the cultural memory of these two countries throughout the past two centuries. We have chosen a broad and inclusive approach and will include not only historical novels but also works outside or on the fringes of that genre. The starting point for the collective study is the realisation that these works of fiction have played a distinct, and in many ways similar role in Finnish and Estonian nationalisms and cultural memory. Both countries have particularly vivid traditions of historical novels, novellas and plays. It has also been widely acknowledged that literature in general and historical fiction in particular have been crucial in shaping cultural identity in these countries (cf. Nummi 1993: 12; Tamm 2008). However, the study of historical fiction in Finland and Estonia has not yet formed the “kind of interdisciplinary borderland, to which historians, novelists and literature scholars have come in growing numbers” as claimed for other countries by a recent authority (Demos 2005: 329).

We intend to venture into this intriguing territory by adopting the interdisciplinary approach of cultural memory studies. In choosing cultural memory as our point of departure, we are interested not so much in historical fiction as a narrowly literary phenomenon, but rather in the ways in which it acts in culture and interacts with other media of cultural memory such as popular and professional history writing, life writing, visual culture, the politics of memory and so forth. As will become clear in the course of the study, the approach enables new perspectives to be opened up for Finnish and Estonian literature and interest to be provoked in the texts, periods and questions that have in many cases lacked a suitable mode of access and have therefore fallen into oblivion.

In opening up new perspectives, the comparative exploration of Finnish and Estonian historical fiction pursued in the book is crucial. Finland and Estonia offer good ground for comparison for a number of reasons. Situated in the north-eastern fringes of Europe, the two countries have especially close geographical, linguistic and cultural links (Raun 1987; Alenius 1998). As they are separated only by the narrow Gulf of Finland, the transmission of cultural influences has been easy. The Finnish and Estonian languages both belong to the Finno-Ugric language group and are closely related, even if they are not directly mutually comprehensible. Both countries were part of the Russian empire during the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century and have therefore often been perceived similarly in theoretical models of nation building.³ On the European map, both Finns and Estonians belong to the ‘late-coming’ or ‘young’ nations, the somewhat earlier Finnish nation building having served as a major model for Estonian activists and led to the construction of a shared Finno-Ugric identity that gained prominence in both countries in the late nineteenth century. Although the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union and the strong Soviet influence over Finland after the Second World War complicated the relations between the two nations for a long period, and economic inequality in the post-Soviet period has left its mark on cross-gulf interaction, the two nations are still

characterized by a very close relationship and more often than not they each perceive the other as the closest brother nation. The parallel developments and close resemblances are also reflected in the many similarities that can be found in their historical fiction, especially when studied in the framework of cultural memory.

However, Finnish and Estonian histories, and consequently their memory cultures, also diverge considerably at certain points. These differences come not only from the significant variations in the course of history, and hence in the 'available pasts', but e.g. in the nineteenth century also from the relationship between the administrative, economic and intellectual elite and the common people, and from the extent to which different classes participated in civil society at the time. All these factors have influenced the development of a national narrative in history writing, historical fiction and other cultural media.

These similarities and differences make the comparison a particularly productive undertaking. It is precisely because of the combination of closeness and strangeness that Finland and Estonia present a good case study for examining the functioning of cultural memory and the processes of remembering and forgetting in the national framework (see also the Introduction). Hopefully the comparative study of the Finnish and Estonian cases will also contribute theoretically to the study of cultural memory, as it focuses specially on the role of literature as one of its central media. The following preface sketches the theoretical context in which this study is situated and explains the structure of the book. The specificities of Finnish and Estonian cultural memory are discussed and an overview of historical fiction in the two countries is given in the next introductory chapter, followed by individual studies of different authors, texts and topics.

The Historical Novel and Cultural Memory

While there is a plurality of concepts in memory studies that are used to refer to how communities remember their past, such as collective memory, connective memory or social memory,⁴ this book draws primarily on the concept of cultural memory proposed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, and further developed in reference to literature by Ann Rigney and Astrid Erll.⁵ The Assmanns define cultural memory as "the reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assmann 1995: 132). In their theory of cultural memory they are inspired by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' work on *mémoire collective*. Halbwachs (1992) emphasises the social frames of remembering that create group cohesion and influence individual memory. While for Halbwachs the frames are produced by social interaction, the Assmanns go beyond this understanding and stress the role of cultural objects such as texts, images and rituals and of their continual collective 'cultivation' in the construction, transformation and distribution of the common frames.

Another classic in memory studies, Pierre Nora (1989: 7) also stresses the role of material and symbolic 'sites of memory', where remembering coalesces and crystallises itself.⁶ However, following Halbwachs, Nora allocates these sites a secondary surrogate character in relation to the genuine unmediated memory of the group, which is passed on by intergenerational communication and interaction. From Nora's nostalgic and civilisation-critical perspective, the unmediated memory has ceased to exist and the work of cultural remembering is left to the artificial sites of memory, where memories of the past are only lingering on. The Assmanns, however, assign to cultural artefacts the primary formative and proactive role in creating the long-term historical memory of cultures and communities.

Yet another important implication of the cultural memory approach is the idea that cultural memory is selective and functions through the principle of scarcity crystallising memories in a limited number of canonical texts or sites (Assmann 1995: 130; Rigney 2005: 16). However, as images of the past are always constructed in relation to the contemporary situation and its needs, cultural memory is inherently a processual performance, a constant cultivation of the texts and sites that brings about their gradual transformation and re-interpretation (Rigney 2012: 19).

In addition, Ann Rigney (2005: 20) underlines that certain stories, themes, figures or motifs come to shape cultural memory only when they are repeated in different media that feed into each other. The understanding of remediation opens up a new perspective and offers a framework for studying historical fictions in a wider cultural context. In other words, if we enquire as to how these texts participated in the construction, distribution and transformation of the historical memory of nations, this has to be studied in its relationship to such media of memory as popular and professional history writing, visual culture, theatre, opera and so forth.

The idea that long term cultural memory is formed by cultural media and rituals, rather than passed down from one generation to the next by social interaction, is particularly important in the Finnish-Estonian context, where the nineteenth-century national movements opposed themselves in their rhetoric to the available written cultural heritage and capitalized on the purportedly authentic oral memory of the non-dominant ethnic groups of Finns and Estonians. Even if the collection and archiving of the folklore consequently became one of the most important mobilizing projects of the national movements in the region,⁷ the present study shows that various other cultural media were of equal importance, including the written cultural heritage of other nations, in the making of the memory of the new nations. By studying works of historical fiction of the two countries, this book explores how the historical memory of the emerging nations was constructed in the nineteenth century in highly selective terms by the foregrounding of certain events, themes and motifs and overshadowing of others to suit the contemporary needs of the nation building processes. It then proceeds to inquire into the ways these nineteenth century sites and figures of memory were appropriated, re-interpreted and transformed in the twentieth century in the different political and cultural circumstances. Consequently, the cultural memory approach enables us to show how the cultural processes of

recycling create continuity, and how some sites and figures maintain their importance while others fall into oblivion. It also helps to shed light on the ways in which new memorial forms are introduced and how the relevance of some mnemonic practices, such as the historical novel, has changed in relation to that of the others.

Ann Rigney (2004: 383; 2001: 9) argues that historical novels can function as 'portable monuments', as media of cultural memory, because even if the readers are aware that they are reading a work of fiction, they nevertheless attribute a certain representational value to it. The reading strategy is explained by the hybridity of historical fiction as a genre, which by definition uses both historical and invented story elements and makes use both of historical materials and the poetic licence that allows for invention in the creation of fictional worlds (*ibid.*: 19). It is precisely the freedom to invent that is paradoxically the aspect that makes literary fiction so powerful as a medium of memory, because the facilitation of the narrativisation of events means the images of the past created in fiction are more memorable than those of other cultural fields such as history writing, which is bound by evidence in its rendering of the past.⁸ In addition to the memorability or the ability to stick in the mind that goes with narrative skills,⁹ the role of the historical novel as a public forum for channelling and framing diverse local memories is also highlighted by Rigney in her analysis of Walter Scott's fiction (Rigney 2012: 25).

The cultural memory approach studies literature in its two-fold relationship to memory culture as the mediator between the existing memory culture and its reconfiguration (Erll 2011: 156–157). When studying how literature channels, fixes, distributes and transforms memories, it is, consequently, interested both in the ways in which fiction makes use of the available sources and figures of memory, and in how fiction is appropriated and elaborated in reception.

Many contributions in this book explore how historical fiction transfers already existing sources into literary narratives and creates the figures of memory that carry specific cultural significance. The interest of these analyses comes partly from the specificity of the Finnish and Estonian pasts. The national elites of Finland and Estonia in the nineteenth century had very few sources, heroes and events available from earlier periods that could be used for creating a glorious past for the emerging nations. In Estonia, especially, there were even fewer that could be persuasively branded as 'the nation's own'. This lack of sources was not inevitable, but resulted rather from the fact that the young national histories opposed themselves to those of their national others, the Swedish for Finland and the Baltic German for Estonia. The national elites wanted to build an alternative history that would focus purely on the past of the Finnish and Estonian-speaking peasantry and it was precisely this choice that led to an inevitable paucity of sources.

In addition, the nineteenth-century writers in Estonia especially found themselves having to write their histories in a struggle with the (colonial) medieval, early modern and modern Baltic German texts, reversing and adapting the repertoire of the events, heroes and narrative templates available in them.¹⁰ For this reason, the study of nineteenth-century Estonian historical

fiction and popular history writing has to trace the ways in which it reworked medieval and early modern chronicles that represented the perspective of the Baltic Germans, the new national enemy. Similarly, historical fiction in Finland appropriated Swedish figures and rewrote them into Finnish national heroes. The limited number of sources, heroes, events and motifs and, consequently, the high level of their recursivity in the construction of the national pasts, makes the process of mediation and remediation, or the traffic of these memories, especially interesting to study.

Furthermore, many chapters in this book are interested in how the different genres, protagonist types, literary devices and motifs, present in the local literary culture or transported from the international one, have participated in the construction of the cultural memory. In addition to the historical novel and historiographic metafiction, subgenres like romance and the slavery story in nineteenth-century literature play a role here. As genres carry values and ways of thinking (Erll 2011: 74), these literary forms have influenced considerably the ways in which the past is imagined. However, many genres of international literary culture were also considerably reworked in the local context in order to create figures of memory based on the local histories and some of the articles here show how these borrowed elements acquire new interpretation and relevance in the course of this process.

In addition to sourcing from and remediating cultural memory, literature also feeds into it by distributing figures of memory created in fiction that are taken up by other media of culture. Here the questions of canon building and of reception are crucial. Literature as a medium of memory is a phenomenon of reception (Erll 2011: 160), because it has its mnemonic function only when it is widely read and discussed. To a certain extent this is achieved by the formation of the canon, important works of literature that every culture recirculates and re-affirms with the help of institutional means (Assmann 2008: 100). At the same time however, it also means that scholars of cultural memory have to go beyond the high and low divide in literary studies and explore the distribution of images of the past in popular literature. Speaking on the construction of historical memory for the non-dominant ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, Miroslaw Hroch (1999: 101) has argued that in the nineteenth-century fiction there was no correspondence between aesthetic value and social and national relevance. The study of reception and canon building in the Finnish and Estonian context promises various interesting results. It lets us explain not only why certain texts have maintained their canonical status with or without durable aesthetic value, but also why others have been immensely popular but have then fallen into oblivion. By answering the latter questions, cultural memory studies offers a new key for reading texts that have become irrelevant or inaccessible from the narrower perspective of literary studies such as the Finnish and Estonian popular historical novel of the interwar period or Stalinist literature in contemporary Estonia. In addition, the revision and rewriting of historical fiction in the changed contexts of memory culture or political constraints is of interest here. However, the contributors to the study are well aware that such a re-evaluation of historical fiction and its canon participates itself in the performance and transformation of cultural memory.

The cultural memory approach is interested not only in literary reception but also in the wider afterlife of stories, characters and motifs in other media of memory (Rigney 2012). That afterlife may continue in theatre and film, but also in history writing, public rituals and politics of memory. Ann Rigney (2012: 12, 20) distinguishes between ‘the push factor’ or ‘procreativity’, which is the productivity of historical fiction in pushing towards the creation of new versions of itself or its figures of memory, and ‘the pull factor’, which is the appropriations of the text by different groups for their own ends. When a representational status is given to historical fiction, it functions for Rigney as a history of sorts, a partly unsatisfactory account of the past that precisely due to its incompleteness may spur new interpretations, rewritings and appropriations. In giving a promise of ‘imminent history’ and creating a historiographical desideratum for future generations, historical fiction accelerates diverse cultural production around the figures and events represented (Rigney 2001: 55–56). This leads Rigney (2012: 38) to suggest that sometimes it is not their coherent, memorable storylines that earn some historical novels a prominent role in memory culture, but rather the tensions and ambivalences in their structure and reception that provoke new interpretations.

The Historical Novel and the Nation

Alongside the perspective of cultural memory, the recent studies that draw the link between the historical novel and modernisation and more specifically between the historical novel and nation building (Duncan 2006: 173), are relevant for the inquiry into the historical fiction of the ‘young’ nations like Finland and Estonia. Given the belated modernisation and ‘young’ nationalisms of the two countries, the comparative study of their two literatures has a revisionary or corrective potential in relation to the canon of the European historical novel which is based mainly on the literatures of long-established nation states like Great Britain and France.

In his groundbreaking study of the genre, Georg Lukács (1983: 42, 53) argues that one of the most important innovations of Walter Scott’s fiction was the way it modelled time. Scott represented the past as radically different from the present but linked to it as a phase in the teleological historical process.¹¹ The concept of history has increasingly been seen as having enabled the imagining of the nation.

In his argument about the relationship between the nation and the modern novel more generally, Benedict Anderson (1991: 24–25) for his part sees the modern ‘meanwhile’ as the configuration of time that made the imagining of the nation possible. The novel with its multiple storylines allowed a community of individuals to be imagined who may not have known each other but still belonged together because their lives moved contemporaneously onward in the homogeneous empty time. The simultaneity of the storylines creates the space of community.

Building on Anderson’s idea, Franco Moretti (1999: 20) has shown how many subgenres of the nineteenth century novel functioned as “the symbolic

form of the nation state, ... a form that (unlike an anthem, or a monument) not only does not conceal the nation's internal divisions, *but manages to turn them into a story*". Even if for Moretti the historical novel negotiates space rather than time by addressing the internal borders of the nation state, the spatial divisions still represent the different temporal stages of development. By erasing these internal borders in the course of its plot, the historical novel 'streamlines' the nation (*ibid.*: 40).

Jonathan Culler (1999: 25) has pointed out that two separate arguments are intertwined in these reflections on the novel and the nation: one about the capacity of the novel to model national space in its purely formal features and the other emphasising the role of the novel in representing the social space of specific nations. Culler doubts the strength of the latter argument and questions the ability of the novel to influence the processes of nation building by its representations of social space and the nation's past. Instead, he stresses the importance of socioeconomic (markets) and political (wars) factors in strengthening the differential identity of 'us' and 'them' and leaves to the novel the auxiliary role of creating the conditions for an imagining of communities that can be pitted against each other in this way. Many contributions to this book show how the novels shape the nation by negotiating social borders for the sake of the differential construction of identity.

The political and social relevance of the classical Scottian historical novel in the context of modernisation and nation building is usually limited to the period before 1848 (Lukács 1983; Maxwell 1998: 545; Jameson 2013: 264). After that, it is argued, its representations of the past were cut off from the vital present interests and the historical novel turned into an antiquarian form, the main task of which was entertainment (Anderson 2011). In addition, the Marxist tradition of the study of the genre has been haunted from its very beginning by the obvious links of the genre to romantic nationalism. Consequently, it tries to define only specific parts of the tradition of the historical novel as politically progressive and aesthetically refined literature worthy of scholarly interest (Jameson 1983: 3; Anderson 2011).¹² A history of the genre that is modelled on a few European literatures and tries to split 'the serious historical novel' off from its popular forms, denying them social relevance, is unhelpful in understanding the role of the genre in smaller literatures, in particular for the performance of cultural memory.

The relatively belated emergence of historical fiction in Finland and Estonia in the second half of the nineteenth century can be explained by the processes of belated modernisation and nation building. Historical novels modelled on Scott proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century in both countries because they enabled a historical memory to be constructed for the new nations that were being made at that time. However, what cannot be drawn in the Finnish and Estonian context is any dividing line between the serious historical novel and the romance. This book is determined to show the relevance of the popular historical novel for the processes of nation building, in particular the role of the romance plot in negotiating the social borders between communities. In accordance with the cultural memory approach, we will emphasise that memory work is done not only

by canonical novels but also by novels that have had a huge influence on the imagining of the national past but have then quickly fallen into oblivion as literary works.

Although the function of the historical fiction on both sides of the Gulf of Finland in the nineteenth century still coincided with that in Europe, even if belatedly, the presence and the position of the genre in Finnish and Estonian literature of the twentieth century diverged considerably from canonical European literary history and there is a plethora of questions that need to be addressed. At the turn of century, so the story goes, the historical novel is internationally a middlebrow realist genre that loses its reputation for good after the arrival of Modernism, as it is inherently incompatible with its interests (Anderson 2011).¹³ In addition to aesthetic innovations, the First World War strongly deheroized the favourite subjects of historical novel, the wars and revolutions, and the Second World War changed for good the ways in which literature approached history. The post-Second World War novelistic form dealing with the past has been studied and theorised since the 1980s under the title of historiographic metafiction, which stresses the playful subversive stance of the form in relation to the credos of nineteenth-century history writing and historical fiction (Hutcheon 1988: 105–123).¹⁴ But as the form is strongly linked to postmodernism and late capitalism (Elias 2001: ix), it seems to be a First World genre that leaves out much that has been written elsewhere.¹⁵

Furthermore, the new memory culture that took shape from the late 1980s in response to the Holocaust and decolonisation (Huyssen 2003: 12) has led to new ways of approaching the past in fictional form, such as literature modelled on the testimonial mode and dealing with the traumas that violent histories have inflicted on individuals. Literary scholars have only begun to approach the question of how these new ways of engaging with the past in literature are related to earlier ones.

Under these circumstances, how do we explain the prominence of the historical novel in several periods of the twentieth century? If it is true that the historical novel is the most political of all subgenres of the novel, can the differences in literatures be reduced to diverging historical and political circumstances? Should we argue that the genre was strongly present in interwar Finland and Estonia because of the continuing relevance of nation building in the newly established nation states, or because a belligerent culture and its products stood the test of time in both countries? Or is the prominence of the historical novel related more generally to burning domestic political issues such as the legacies of the Civil War in post-Second World War Finland or the political resistance to Soviet regime in Estonia in the 1970s? And if we argue for the continuing relevance of nation building in the region throughout the twentieth century, does the historical fiction dealing with it remain within the limits of the traditional forms stemming from the nineteenth century? What are the formal responses to the attempt to symbolize the twentieth century events in these texts? Seen from Finland and Estonia, the gap between nineteenth-century and postmodern historical fiction does not seem to be so wide and there are various in-between forms.

Since its emergence along with Western nationalism, historical fiction has been one of the key forms for constructing national histories – and it has not lost its importance even today. This volume highlights the cultural work historical fiction performed in Finland and Estonia ca. 1800–2000 in the ongoing articulation of national identities.

This book comprises of a theoretical preface, a comparative survey of Finnish and Estonian historical fiction in their socio-political contexts, case studies by literary scholars and historians and a summary chapter by Ann Rigney that places Finnish and Estonian historical fiction in a broader European perspective.

This volume is highly relevant to academics and students interested in cultural memory and nationalism studies at large. As one of the very few edited collections of comparative studies on Finnish and Estonian literature, it is also a must-read to those who study Finnish and Estonian subjects in particular. As the volume is situated in the cross-disciplinary field of cultural memory studies, it demonstrates that historical fiction is a stimulating research subject for various disciplines, including history, ethnology, cultural studies, art history and film studies. In all of these fields, this book is also suitable for students at different levels of study and as a reference guide.



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