



# White Field, Black Seeds

*Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century*

Edited by Anna Kuismin and M. J. Driscoll

**Studia Fennica**  
Litteraria 7

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## Preface

### Exploring the Processes and Practices of Literacy in the Nordic Countries

Valkia pelto,  
siemenet mustat.  
Kylvää ken taitaa?

(White field,  
black seeds;  
who can sow?)<sup>1</sup>

Although the riddle quoted here – of which there are over 250 variants in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society – comes out of oral tradition, the question it poses points to another realm: the white field is paper, the black seeds ink, and so sowing refers to the act of writing. At the time the riddle was first recorded, in the mid-19th century, the majority of Finland’s rural population was not able to put their thoughts down on paper. From the 18th century to the early 20th, reading and writing were regarded as separate skills in Lutheran Finland, and the latter seen as unnecessary for much of the population. The situation was similar in Sweden and Norway, too: above all, mass literacy concerned the ability to read religious texts. Yet there were a number of ordinary people with no access to formal schooling who nevertheless learnt to write and subsequently used their skill to produce texts of many different kinds – writings which open up fascinating vistas for multi-disciplinary research.

The scene was rather different in Iceland, a country widely known for its exceptionally strong medieval literary tradition, first and foremost the many vellum manuscripts containing sagas and poetry of various kinds, chronicles, learned and religious works and so on – nearly all written in the vernacular. What is less well known is the fact that the literary culture of the following centuries was also largely practised via hand-written media, despite the arrival of the printing press in Iceland in the 1530s. In addition to the well-known body of medieval texts, there exists a rich corpus of literary material from the post-medieval period, a large proportion of which was commissioned, copied, read and/or owned by ordinary farmers, fisherman and labourers. As in Finland, there has in recent years been an upsurge in interest in these texts among Icelandic scholars involved in what may be called “Post-Gutenberg” manuscript studies, i.e. research into the structure

and mechanisms of chirographic transmission in the age of print and how the two cultures existed side by side, for far longer, and far more dynamically, than has hitherto been appreciated.

The present collection of articles has its origin in interaction between Finnish and Icelandic scholars interested in the processes and practices of literacy among the common people. Anna Kuismin's multi-disciplinary research network focusing on literacy practices in 19th-century Finland (*Kansanihmiset ja kirjallistuminen 1800-luvun Suomessa*) has organised campaigns for collecting manuscripts and compiling catalogues of archival material, arranged seminars and conferences and produced both scholarly and popular publications. A team of researchers active in this Finnish network joined forces with their Icelandic colleagues from the Reykjavík Academy, a centre for independent scholars in the humanities and social sciences, and sought out scholars working on similar topics from other Nordic countries too. The result was a series of explorative workshops, *The common people and the processes of literacy in the Nordic countries: Excursions into scribal and print cultures in 18th- and 19th-centuries*, led by Professor Lea Laitinen from the University of Helsinki and financed by a grant from the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences in 2009.

These workshops brought together scholars from Finnish and Scandinavian languages, literature, history and folklore, social history, the history of ideas and book history to explore the practices and processes through which Nordic societies became more and more permeated by writing during "the long 19th century" (roughly from the French Revolution to the First World War). The first workshop was held at Kiljavanranta, Finland, and the second at the Arnamagnæan Institute, University of Copenhagen. In all, 23 participants from Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden took part. In addition, keynote lectures were given by Wim Vandebussche, Professor of Dutch linguistics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and Martyne Lyons, Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

The workshops in turn resulted in the research project *Reading and writing from below: Toward a new social history of literacy in the Nordic sphere during the long 19th century*, funded by a NORDCORP grant from 2011 to 2014 and led by Taru Nordlund and Anna Kuismin from the University of Helsinki, M. J. Driscoll from the University of Copenhagen, Ann-Catrine Edlund from Umeå University and Davíð Ólafsson from the Reykjavík Academy. This project involves researchers from several disciplines and seeks to contribute to the study of the social and cultural history of literacy in the Nordic countries by focusing on the roles played by the written word in the everyday lives of ordinary people, i.e. those with little or no formal education from the lower strata of society, and in this way challenging both traditional dichotomies such as manuscript vs. print, oral vs. written and centre vs. periphery and the ways in which the processes of literacy education, acquisition and appropriation have previously been understood.

The overall aim of the present volume is to throw light on various aspects of literacy in Finland, Iceland and Sweden<sup>2</sup> from the late 18th to

the early 20th century. Although a number of different approaches are represented, what unites the contributions are the emphasis on socio-cultural contexts and the notion that literacy is not just the ability to read and write but rather the totality of the processes and practices involved in the production, dissemination and reception of written texts, thus providing insights into cultural diversity different from dominant spheres. In addition, the contributions have in common a focus on non-privileged people, their experiences and points of view. The writers naturally draw from research done outside the Nordic countries too, e.g. British new literacy studies.

Although the articles in this collection focus on specific historical periods and contexts, comparable developments are currently taking place within linguistic communities which are in the process of constructing their own cultures of literacy, and our project is thus of potential relevance to these emerging literate cultures, not least in examining the processes of knowledge acquisition on a grassroots level and their significance for democracy. There is also an interesting parallel between developments in the 19th century and the contemporary literacy practices which the current revolution in information technology has brought about in the lives of ordinary people.

In the first article, Martyn Lyons characterises the tenets of the “new history from below”, which sees common people as active agents rather than passive recipients; it is based on writings from the grassroots and focuses on individual experiences of historical change. Cultural history today has two main intellectual ancestors, argues Lyons: one is the Annales School and the other is the British neo-Marxist social history of the 1960s. Both have given us a brand of “history from below”, but they have seen this chiefly in terms of collective mentalities or movements. Lyons argues that the history of popular writing practices currently represents a new history from below, in that it emphasises individual rather than collective experience, and relies on what ordinary people actually wrote for themselves.

### *Literacy Acquisition and Scribal Cultures*

The law for general education was passed in Denmark as early as 1814, whereas in Sweden it was passed in 1842, in Norway 1848, in 1907 in Iceland and in Finland not until 1921. In Sweden, research on the history of literacy has been conducted by social historian Egil Johansson from Umeå University. Using parish registers and their examination records to determine the literacy rates in the whole country, Johansson discovered that Swedish people learnt to read from the late 17th century onwards, whereas the ability to write was much rarer. In her article, Britt Liljewall employs a qualitative approach, using autobiographical narratives as her source material. She analyses different stages in reaching functional reading and writing competence and pays attention to the roles of gender and social status in the acquisition of literacy, finding an interesting connection between the long-cherished view of Sweden as a leader in the literacy sweepstakes and the notion of Sweden as a *folkhemmet* (“home of the people”), the cornerstone of national identity.

Like Liljewall, Davíð Ólafsson explores the acquisition of reading and

writing skills outside the institutional literacy practices provided by the Church. The old written culture of Iceland, combined with the lack of access to the medium of print, gave rise to a scribal culture parallel to the culture of print. According to Davíð Ólafsson, self- (or self-initiated) education was one of the driving forces behind vernacular literacy practices. Both printed and hand-written texts were read aloud at winter-evening gatherings (*kvöldvökur*, sing. *kvöldvaka*), when people did handicrafts and passed the time in company. The case of Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur (1840–1930), from south-western Iceland, presents the phases in self-education needed for a fully-fledged scribe. An important part of the education of this “wordmonger”, as the author likes to refer to his subject, was provided in the literary milieu of Akranes, where there was an active interest in the production and circulation of manuscripts. In addition to his copying activities, Sighvatur Grímsson wrote an autobiography, compiled genealogies and produced other texts of various kinds.

After briefly sketching the history of manuscript culture in Iceland, M. J. Driscoll looks at another of the great “late” copyists, Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi (1835–1922), an ordinary farmer with no formal education in whose hand are preserved copies, generally more than one, of nearly 200 sagas – essentially everything that was in circulation in Iceland at the time. Magnús was unusual among copyists in detailing in prefaces to his manuscripts how he had got hold of his exemplars and whether he had seen other versions of the texts he copied, providing a wealth of information on the mechanisms of chirographic transmission in late 19th- and early 20th-century Iceland, mechanisms which even as he wrote were rapidly becoming irrelevant as the *kvöldvaka* lost its importance as a social and cultural institution.

The tradition of *kvöldvaka* also figures in Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon’s article on Icelandic autobiographies. The article claims that the ancient sagas – traditionally read aloud at gatherings but increasingly as time went on read silently in private – have had a profound impact on popular thought in Iceland well into the 20th century. The centrality of the sagas in Icelandic culture has left its mark as recurring motifs and on the reticent way feelings and emotions are described in life stories. The sagas taught Icelanders to fulfil their roles with stoicism and accept whatever circumstance threw at them, and they provided people with modes of living, thinking and shaping their memories. According to Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, this could not have happened without the high degree of cultural homogeneity found in Iceland.

While there was a strong oral element in Icelandic scribal culture – since texts were most often written to be read aloud – Finland has had a lively tradition of producing hand-written newspapers. In her article, Kirsti Salmi-Niklander analyses the socio-cultural functions of this practice in 19th- and early 20th-century Finland, drawing attention to the social, ideological and emotional needs of those who contributed to and edited hand-written newspapers as a part of the activities in youth or workers’ associations. Salmi-Niklander distinguishes three modes of writing in these papers: the monological mode, which provides possibilities for mediating ideological messages, the dialogical mode, which allow for the expression and processes

of hidden tensions in small groups and communities, and the collective mode, which opens up ways of expressing emotions and experiences. These modes can be found in the hand-written newspapers of a single community and in the authorial strategies of individual writers. As Salmi-Niklander shows, however, their impact varies in different communities and at different historical periods.

### *Genres and Case Studies*

The concepts developed in the New Literacy Studies and actor-network theory form the basis for Ann-Catrine Edlund's theoretical and methodological reflections on the study of diaries. Edlund also employs an ethnographic approach in her case study of the diary of Linnéa Johansson, a country maid in northern Sweden. Before starting to keep a diary, Johansson was involved in another literacy practice: writing down songs in a notebook. Edlund examines the functions of Johansson's diary keeping, the writer's representation of herself in her diary as well the ways in which her thoughts and feelings are expressed. There is a significant change which takes place in Johansson's diary: after having recorded events in the households at which she served, the diarist begins to create a space of her own on the pages of her notebook and becomes a subject in the narrative which is unfolding in her diary.

Anna Kuusmin (formerly Makkonen) introduces a corpus of some sixty autobiographical texts penned by Finnish common people, drawn from several archives and from printed sources. The focus of her article is on the writers' motives and audiences. The earliest Finnish life stories drew generic traits from family inscriptions, devotional books and oral poetry, while some of the latest ones took their form from the first-person novel. Many kinds of reasons motivated people to write about the course of their lives: some wanted to pass information on for future generations, others to educate their peers. There were also those who were motivated by a need to apologise, take revenge or confess. Stories of conversion include both religious autobiographies and narratives focusing on the awakening to nation-building and public enlightenment.

Whereas the Icelandic farmer, fisherman and scribe Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur could enjoy the support of his network of like-minded people, the protagonist of Kaisa Kauranen's research, crofter Kustaa Brask, was more of an outsider in his surroundings. Brask was an indefatigable writer who sent thousands of hand-written pages to the Finnish Literature Society over several decades, writings which offer interesting perspectives into life in rural Finland – class relations, customs, ways of thinking and prevailing mentalities. Kauranen's article deals with these topics through an examination of a range of texts by Brask, including historical and societal writings, with an emphasis on those concerned with literacy and public enlightenment. His relationship with the Finnish Literature Society and the owners of the croft on which he lived provided constraints on the ways in which he could express his views on social inequality.

## *A New Look at the Archives*

The articles of Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir and Kati Mikkola place emphasis on the awareness of the ways in which the collecting and classification of archival material have been practised and the kinds of ideologies that lie behind these practices. As Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir shows in her article, women's manuscripts and texts about women are not always easily found in library and archival catalogues, as they are frequently catalogued under the names of their husbands, fathers or brothers, which has naturally had consequences for scholars' selection of sources and resulted in a marginalisation of women in research. For example, the story of the servant woman Guðrún Ketilsdóttir (1759–1842) from northern Iceland, written down from her oral delivery, has been categorised as a story of a foolish person in Páll Eggert Ólason's catalogue of manuscripts in the National Library. When the text in its three manuscript versions is analysed and connected to the historical and cultural background of Guðrún Ketilsdóttir, a fascinating story emerges of an Icelandic woman from below.

Recording folklore was a vital part of both Icelandic and Finnish nation building, practised by scholars and amateur collectors alike. In her article Kati Mikkola analyses the relationship between the academic experts of the Finnish Literature Society and those lay collectors who came from the lower ranks of society. Analysing the correspondence and contributions of the two collectors Vilho Itkonen (1872–1918), a working-class man with theosophical leanings, and Ulla Mannonen (1895–1958), a Karelian evacuee, Mikkola shows how they challenged the authority of the archival authorities and points out how the once questionable and even controversial contributions contested the hegemonic concepts and roles offered by the collecting organisation. The work done by Mannonen and Itkonen underscores the dimension of variability added to the archives with the passage of time: once deemed worthless, they have now acquired new value.

## *Language*

Petri Lauerma shows in his article how the revivalist movements contributed to the development of Finnish literary language in three separate, though partially overlapping, waves. The first wave of Pietism was felt in westernmost Finland as early as the 18th century, but it made only a superficial impact on Old Literary Finnish. The second wave is analysed through the cases of Henrik Renqvist (1789–1866) and Paavo Ruotsalainen (1777–1852). According to Lauerma, revivalism activated the use and knowledge of western-based Old Literary Finnish in eastern Finland, but it also guaranteed that the old literary language began to change. The third wave came when the “awakenist” type of revivalism spread into southern and northern Ostrobothnia (from the 1830s on). In general, the influence of northern dialects filtered away many features of eastern Finnish type, but it also made sure the Finnish language did not split into two literary languages during the 19th century.

Lea Laitinen and Taru Nordlund apply linguistic approaches to texts

written by common people in 19th-century Finland. From the interactional point of view of contemporary historical sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, they focus on context dependent meanings of expressions referring to the participation in a communicative event: belonging to a group, membership and identity in a speech community, as well as its ideological implications. The authors analyse certain syntactic alternatives of Finnish personal forms that the self-educated writers used as a resource for creating their own linguistic practices and styles as members of local and global communities they identified with. Interestingly, the texts reveal that the writers have exploited resources from three different linguistic varieties shared in their social community: the old Biblical Finnish, the new Standard Finnish and their own dialect.

Laitinen and Nordlund draw the conclusion that the process of creating new stylistic practices cannot be described as either from above or from below but from a common ground. They also discuss theoretical concepts used in linguistic research on texts by self-educated writers. The authors point out that in the analysis of the texts, the notion intended standard is directly related to another key notion, audience design. As for concepts stylistic rupture and intended standard, they turn in actual practice easily to represent the ideology of from above. In this case, the yardstick of the text is, for instance, stylistic purity, the ideal of the standard language, instead of looking it into from the own meaning making of the text.

## NOTES

- 1 Elias Lönnrot, "Suomalaisia Arvoituksia", in Z. Topelius, *Maamme-kirja*, 81.
- 2 There has been some research from below on the practices and processes of literacy in Norway and Denmark. Jostein Fet's *Skrivande bønder* is a valuable work, focusing on the northern Vestlandet from 1600 to 1850 (Fet 2003). One can also mention Arne Apelseth's doctoral dissertation, *Den låge danniga*, from the University of Bergen in 2004, and the articles of Bjarne Stoklund, Bjørn Poulsen and Tine Damsholt on Danish peasant diaries in *Writing Peasants* (Lorenzen-Schmidt & Poulsen 2002).

## A New History from Below?

### The Writing Culture of European Peasants, c. 1850 – c.1920

In Philippe Poirrier's recent book on the current state of cultural history, two great traditions stand out for the influence they have exerted world-wide over this domain: first, the tradition of the French Annales school, and second, the British neo-Marxist school (Poirrier 2008, 189). I would like to discuss them both very briefly, as part of the "old" history from below, in order to bring into relief what is new and different about the work being carried out today by historians of scribal culture and ordinary writings in Spain, Italy, France and the Nordic countries. What I call the "new history from below" is distinctive because it is based on writings from the grassroots, and because it focuses on individual experiences of historical change. The problem of reconciling the individual with the general remains, and we need to avoid producing a history of isolated fragments, in a gallery of fascinating but exceptional proletarian authors. In the second half of this chapter, I would like to illustrate some generalising themes and contextual problems in my own work which help me to resolve this difficulty.

#### *The Old History from Below*

First of all, then, I would like to offer some comments on the "old" history from below and on the difficulties it presents to the historian. For a long time, a history of the lower classes seemed unreachable, an impossible dream. The Annales School – the first great historiographical family to be considered in Poirrier's survey – believed, in its middle phase, that the lives of the anonymous poor could only be investigated on a collective basis, through long statistical series of demographic data, data on literacy rates or the price of bread. According to François Furet, a quantitative analysis was the only way to incorporate the lower classes into the general historical narrative, through "number and anonymity" (cited in Kaye 1984, 225). As a result, the subordinate classes remained a silent and disincarnated mass without any personal identity. In the Braudelian tradition, the regional histories for which the Annales School became famous concentrated on the interaction between the geographical environment and human society. Thus in LeRoy Ladurie's *The Peasants of Languedoc*, a chapter on the local vegetation and

crops seemed literally to prioritise the vegetable grassroots over the human inhabitants of south-western France (LeRoy Ladurie 1966).

One of the hallmarks of the Annales paradigm was the development of the history of mentalities, as promoted by the founding fathers Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. Here again, the “history from below” focused on “collective mentalities” – a debatable concept since it did not sufficiently differentiate on grounds of class or gender. Both Bloch and Febvre, in different ways, sought to reconstruct the intellectual coherence of an entire age, assuming that coherence and unity underpinned every past culture (Burguière 2009). This was in clear contrast to Marxist approaches, which emphasised the material bases of cultural phenomena and stressed class conflict rather than cultural consensus. Febvre’s own *Rabelais* was an illustration of this. Febvre argued strongly against psychological anachronism, because in his view to consider the scabrous poet an atheist was to impose a 20th-century idea on a 16th-century mind, for whom modern atheism was not conceivable (Febvre 1982). This study of one eminent writer, however, did not take into account the possibility that men and women, lords, merchants and peasants might each have their own mental horizons, viewed with conceptual tools that were not only different from each other, but perhaps mutually antagonistic.

In its later phase, when the Annales School as such was disintegrating, its historians turned to case-histories, and the vogue for quantification and “serial history” (the examination of long series of homogeneous data) declined. LeRoy Ladurie himself gave up counting illiterate conscripts and calculating the dates of the wine harvest as indicators of long-term climate change; in the 1970s he reconstructed himself as the author of the bestselling *Montaillou*, a micro-history of a medieval Pyrenean village full of real-life characters – a “history from below” from which we can today draw inspiration (LeRoy Ladurie 1972 & 1980). Natalie Zemon Davis’s studies of individuals like Martin Guerre and Leo Africanus may also be considered in this category (Davis 1983 & 2007).

The Annales tradition influenced the historical discipline worldwide, which is why I have devoted attention to it here. Other forms of history from below have certainly presented valuable elements of originality, such as *microstoria* in Italy, *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany or subaltern studies in India, but none of these had the same resonance outside the history of their own country. The Annales rejected traditional political narrative, and preferred the history of the popular classes to the history of elites, but it produced the “old history from below” – a history which remained collective and largely impersonal.

The British neo-Marxist school represents the second great tradition, and inspired the new wave of social history of the 1960s. Like the Annales, the British Marxists revolved around a journal – *Past and Present* – which, under editors like Philip Abrams, published left-leaning, cutting-edge research with a strong sociological flavour. Theirs was a very open and British form of Marxism, by which I mean it was undogmatic, unhampered by ideological rigidity, and it welcomed debate (Kaye 1984, 222–232). Its stars were the great English historians “from below” Christopher Hill (on the English Revolution of the 17th century), Eric Hobsbawm (in several well-known studies and, until his death last year, still producing), E. P. Thompson

(on the British working classes) and George Rudé (on the crowd in the French Revolution), among others. Their studies revealed the working classes in the process of formation, in their political actions, with agendas and ideologies which differed from those of revolutionary leaders and were often antagonistic towards them. In studying workers' and revolutionary movements, these historians redefined "history from below" as the history of the politically conscious subordinate classes, and of the collective movements which advanced workers' struggles.

Of course, there were some partial exceptions to this picture, notably the micro-studies inspired by Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College, Oxford (Samuel 1975 & 1977), as well as the work of Richard Cobb on French Revolutionary history, which tended to focus on the anarchic, the criminal and the marginalised (Cobb 1972). But the generalisation still holds good. This was an "old" history from below in the sense that it focused on collective activism, political movements and the development of organised labour. Its protagonists analysed history based on class relationships and emerging class consciousness. Although they restored a sense of power and agency to the working-classes, they were primarily interested in public action rather than private lives. The actual members of the lower classes remained an anonymous mass and the personalisation of History from Below was yet to come. Since ordinary individuals rarely, if ever, spoke for themselves in this history, Antonio Gibelli has provocatively asked whether we have ever really had a "history from below" at all (Gibelli 2000).

The old history from below, then, was a collective and anonymous history, in which the true voices of ordinary people were rarely heard. The new history from below is in contrast more individualised, and more sensitive to the voices of the poor. We now know that the problem with ordinary writings is not that they are scarce and ephemeral, but that there is such an abundance of them that the historian hardly knows where to begin.

### *The New History from Below*

I owe the phrase to Tim Hitchcock, who dropped it quite casually into his review of Sokoll's *Essex Pauper Letters* (Hitchcock 2004). I think he was on to something. The new history from below is new for four main reasons:

1. It re-evaluates individual experience;
2. It searches for the personal and private voices of *la gente comune*, however they may be mediated through institutional or other channels;
3. It modifies the direction taken by the linguistic turn, against which it is in some sense a reaction; and
4. It considers ordinary readers and writers as active agents in the shaping of their own lives and cultures.

I should like to comment on these four points in turn.

*White field, black seeds – who can sow?* Although the riddle from which these words are taken comes from oral tradition, it refers to the ability to write, a skill which in most Nordic countries was not regarded as necessary for everyone. And yet a significant number of ordinary people with no access to formal schooling took up the pen and produced a variety of highly interesting texts: diaries, letters, memoirs, collections of folklore and handwritten newspapers.

This collection presents the work of primarily Nordic scholars from fields such as linguistics, history, literature and folklore studies who share an interest in the production, dissemination and reception of written texts by non-privileged people during the long nineteenth century.



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