

ALISA MANNINEN

Minna Canth

Writing to Challenge



Dialogue Books

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Alisa Manninen

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Introduction

The story of Minna Canth is also the story of the changes that created the foundation of modern Finland in the nineteenth century, told through the life of a woman who became a trailblazer in the new field of Finnish-language literature. Canth is a significant figure in Finnish history, but her international reach has remained limited because her key works have not been translated into English until now. Translations have always been important for the spreading of new ideas and their reshaping into locally meaningful movements. Canth was among the Finns who used translations to familiarise themselves with social and political theories in order to make their small country a more just, prosperous society. She had to read most foreign works in Swedish. By the time of her death, however, translations into Finnish were no longer commercially unviable.

Canth was one of the authors who proved that there were audiences for topical literature and social commentary. She participated in the making of a vibrant culture at a time when Finns had to adapt to monumental shifts in politics, economy, and social structure, and she did so by calling attention to injustices that should be addressed. Canth had faith that acknowledgement of their existence would strengthen Finland by clearing the path for reform. She made herself a champion for her causes, a public figure who presented indictments of the ways in which Finns were failed by their society and visions of how much more they could become.

Between Sweden to the west and Russia to the east, Finland was long one of the battlegrounds where the two great powers of Northern Europe clashed. In the Middle Ages Sweden gradually expanded into the regions today known as Finland, then inhabited by various groups that spoke non-Scandinavian languages. The peace treaty of 1323 between Sweden and Novgorod defined Finland's eastern border and established the majority of it as belonging to the Swedish state: for the first time, a Finland came into being, yet only as part of a

greater whole to which it was subject. The Great Northern War (1700–21) led to the decline of the Swedish Empire while Russia rose. The eighteenth century witnessed its two destructive occupations of Finland, the Great Wrath (1713–21) and the Lesser Wrath (1742–43).

In the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars, Russia seized Finland and Sweden recognised this in the peace treaty of 1809. One of the benefits to Russia was obvious: Saint Petersburg's location at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland became more defensible against any foreign enemy that might try to reach the capital by land or sea. The brutality of the previous occupations was not repeated in a political climate in which the Russian emperor wanted to gain lasting control over the land by winning the compliance of its elites. Separated by the Gulf of Bothnia from most of Sweden proper, Finland had enough geographical distance to its old ruler that it was possible to contemplate new arrangements.

The Diet assembled the representatives of Finland's four Estates (nobility, clergy, burghers, and peasants), who pledged their allegiance to Alexander I not as the Emperor of Russia but as the Grand Duke of Finland. Finland became an autonomous grand duchy whose estates, laws, and Lutheran religion Alexander promised to respect. This served his interests, allowing the empire to expand with relatively little effort since local elites would not have to be remade, merely reoriented from Stockholm to the west towards Saint Petersburg to the southeast. Alexander was prepared to be obliging in order to secure his gains and free himself to concentrate on the greater European conflict. Yet the question that was left open to debate was whether the Diet of 1809 had established Finland as a separate state ruled by a Russian grand duke or merely made it a province of Russia, with Finns arguing in favour of the former view and Russians imposing their power in accordance with the latter.¹ Finland's society, culture, religion, and languages acted as a foundation of difference that only strengthened over time. During the 108 years that Finland spent as part of the Russian Empire, emperors would not always feel as bound to respect Finnish autonomy as Finns believed they should be. In the final decades of this period, harsh measures of Russification that aimed at reducing

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autonomy and cultural distinctness inspired a Finnish struggle for independence.

As the era of autonomy began, there was a need to create institutions so that administrative tasks that had been carried out in Sweden for Finland could be carried out in Finland itself. This bureaucracy meant increased opportunities for the nobility but gradually undermined its position by giving newcomers a path to power as well. The administration of the grand duchy had been made separate from that of Russia: Russian civil servants did not have the authority to decide Finnish matters. The grand duke was the head of state, represented by the governor-general, who commanded the military forces present in Finland. The administration was handled by the Senate, which was active throughout the era and subject to the grand duke alone.

The Diet of the Estates formed Finland's legislative assembly, but after 1809 it would not convene again until 1863, in the reign of Alexander II. Battered by the Crimean War and revolts in the empire, the new emperor wanted to revitalise Russia by modernising political processes and ending some of the old abuses, such as serfdom (which did not exist in Finland, another key difference that influenced the way political culture developed in the two countries). Alexander sought to reward Finland for having avoided unrest and improve Russia's damaged reputation abroad by giving the autonomous grand duchy control over itself. To the Finns, the Diet of 1863 came to be seen as confirmation of statehood.² From this point onwards, the Diet convened every few years until the Great Strike of 1905 ended the first period of Russification (1899–1905). This led to universal suffrage and the creation of Finland's own parliament in 1906.

Culturally, these political changes inspired a growing sense of Finland as a nation. In the words of a slogan that is still remembered two hundred years later, 'Swedes we are not, Russians we will never be, so let us be Finns.'³ But what was a Finn? In the eighteenth century politicians had begun to envision futures for Finland in which its efforts were to be more firmly focused on developing itself rather than supporting Sweden; scholars initiated a search for signs of the pre-Swedish past, from preserved myths to surviving customs, and encouraged an early awareness among the elite of a Finnish identity subject to but separate from Sweden.⁴ As a result of autonomy, the institutions that a

nation required were being built. The 'constitution' from the Swedish era was not set in stone but nonetheless represented a general set of laws and political customs. There was religious unity with Lutheran Christianity firmly established; Orthodoxy had small footholds in the east.

Yet linguistically, there was a clear divide. The Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish are mutually intelligible; the countries share a pre-Christian Viking culture. Though Finland is Nordic, it is not part of Scandinavia, two terms that are often confused with each other. When the Swedes brought Christianity to Finland, the old gods it displaced were not the Viking gods. Nothing demonstrates the difference more clearly than Finnish: it belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family (of which Hungarian and Estonian are the other major languages) and is unintelligible to Scandinavians.

The society that developed over six centuries of Swedish rule became much like those in the Scandinavian countries, but it was one in which the majority did not have a voice in their own language. When part of Sweden, they had been a minority, ruled from Stockholm. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, autonomy changed this. With the proverbial stroke of a pen, in a Finland defined as its own administrative entity that was governed from Helsinki, Finnish was repositioned as the language of 87 per cent of the population.⁵ Yet at the same time, nothing changed. Swedish was still the language of the established elite, of administration, education, trade, literature. Those in power had no obligation to use Finnish even in their legal dealings with Finnish speakers. If you wanted to go to school, have your case heard in court, rise higher in your profession, you had to be able to speak Swedish. This situation had been tenable under the old system in which Finland was part of Sweden and there was little social mobility, but no longer.

In the early years of autonomy, Russian studies increased significantly. Knowledge of Russian became a requirement to be appointed to civil service or receive a degree. Yet the reality was different. Soon enough the governor-general had cause to complain that a university certificate only attested that its recipient was capable of reading Russian, not necessarily of comprehending it.⁶ However, the harshest attempts to impose Russian on Finland would wait until the February Manifesto of 1899 and its notorious measures of Russification;

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these included the dissolution of institutions that symbolised Finland's autonomy, such as its customs office and currency, and the establishment of Russian as the language of government and secondary schools.

Initially, Russia did not feel threatened by the Fennomans, supporters of the Finnish language and eventually of Finnish nationalism. It welcomed the separation of Finland from Scandinavian culture: the belief was that Finnish would not only replace Swedish but also be joined by Russian, the language of the new masters. The weaker the ties between Finland and Sweden, the easier it would be for Russia to retain control over what was said in Finland and prevent it from acting as a pathway through which unwelcome ideologies made their way to Russia.⁷ Yet though Finland created an identity that was not tied to Sweden, this did not, in the end, have the result that Russia intended.

The great movements of the nineteenth century influenced increasing numbers of Finns from both the Swedish-speaking elite and the Finnish-speaking majority: Fennoman nationalism offered a vision of Finland as a country in its own right, industrialisation reshaped the social order through wide-ranging changes to the economy, and socialist and feminist ideas began to reach those excluded from the growing prosperity and power around them. Cultural forces paved the way for a political solution to the language question: Finnish was accepted as a language capable of creating works of genuine artistic value and became an official language of administration and education, equal to Swedish. In the 1890s, empowered by a shared national identity, Finns crossed the old language barrier to unite in opposition to Russification. Together with the expansion of modern democracy, these developments allowed Finland to affirm its right to exist as a nation and ultimately to declare independence in 1917, seizing the opportunity provided by the Russian Revolution.

Minna Canth's life, from 1844 to 1897, illustrates the shaping of this new Finland. A native Finnish speaker, she spent her early childhood in Tampere, the first industrial city. Her father was born an illegitimate rural peasant, hired as a teenager by a textile factory, then promoted to foreman, and finally became an independent merchant after he assumed control of the draper's shop he ran for the factory. This enabled him to give his daughter the best Swedish-

language education that girls' schools offered in the 1850s. Canth studied in the country's first Finnish-language teachers' seminary in Jyväskylä, a city in the central Lakeland region. Yet when she married her lecturer and became the mother of a large family, her career seemed to have ended before it began. However, her husband took up a second job as a journalist that gradually became his wife's work instead. In the 1870s, a period of major expansion for newspapers, Canth wrote her first political articles and published short stories. After she was widowed at the age of thirty-five, she discovered her talent for business upon taking over her late father's shop in Kuopio, a city in Eastern Finland that became an important trading hub. There, in the 1880s, Canth wrote plays that helped validate the newly founded Finnish Theatre's mission of bringing art to the masses in the capital city of Helsinki and on regional tours. She lived a provincial life, tied down by her responsibilities, but from within the walls of her home she made an impact on a national scale.

Canth was a nineteenth-century woman who managed to survive and thrive while balancing the demands of multiple careers. She was one of the first authors, and the first woman, to win fame by writing what are now considered classics in the Finnish language. Canth brought urban workers to the stage and examined how women from various classes responded to the pressures of society, whether moral, sexual, or financial. She was involved in the political debates of her era as both author and journalist, known for her writings on the woman question and workers' rights in particular. A respectable widow, she courted controversy with her public statements and artistic choices. Canth's salon brought together established cultural figures and newcomers from various backgrounds to debate the topics of the day, from social and natural sciences to new European ideas on literature, in an environment where the hostess made everyone feel welcome. As she carried out her literary and social activity, she also raised the draper's shop to greater success than it had known under her father.

Canth advocated for future prosperity through present-day reform at a crucial moment in Finnish history. A century of change led to the reshaping of Finland from the backwater region of a fading Sweden to an autonomous, suddenly prosperous grand duchy of Russia and, finally, a small democracy

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that led the way on a global scale with its universal suffrage and the election of the world's first woman members of parliament. This is a vital, fascinating piece of European history, presented through the life of a woman who discovered how much she had to say and said it, without fear.

1. A Factory Family

Canth spent her life in three cities that each left their mark on her as a person and an author. The briefest of these periods was the first, yet it would acquire a fitting resonance as Canth grew from Miinu Johnson, the worker's daughter, to Minna Canth, the workers' champion. Her road began in a city that rose from obscurity as the Manchester of Finland: factories sprang up in the midst of forests and lakes. It was founded in 1779 by King Gustav III of Sweden and given the name of Tammerfors after the Tammer rapids. Most cities had both Swedish and Finnish names; the future capital was thus called Helsingfors or Helsinki, depending on the speaker. For a city to have only a Finnish name was an indication of newness or remoteness. Yet though its official founding dated to the era of Swedish rule, Tampere became an emblem of modernity as an industrial city dominated by Finnish speakers.

The king had established an important right: Tampere's citizens were allowed to practise their trades freely, without being restricted by the edicts of guilds. The only free city in Finland, located on a site where a twice-yearly fair had been held since the seventeenth century, Tampere would also benefit from its rapids during industrialisation. In the 1810s it was still more of a village in truth, home to artisans and a paper mill. Baize was manufactured in small factories that barely merited the title. There was little sign of planning: houses were humble, mostly with roofs of peat or thatch and without stone foundations, and surrounded by signs of rural life, such as barns and pigsties, even though the city's charter banned farming within it. Since there was insufficient industry to provide for the people, authorities ignored the cattle that could be seen in the streets. Yet the presence of shops and artisans' signs showed that this was a hub that served the surrounding countryside.¹

An event that shaped Tampere's future took place in 1820 when James Finlayson founded his textile factory. He was a Scot who had acquired experience as an engineer and specialised in spinning machines. Since the

United Kingdom banned the export of machines, Finlayson was one of the many professionals to be lured abroad by promises of great rewards. He came to Saint Petersburg where Emperor Alexander I, seeking to improve Russian industry, had founded factories. In time his health made him resign from his job, which freed him to follow a friend's advice and visit Tampere. Finlayson saw that the rapids were a convenient source of power, workers could be hired from the countryside, prices were low, and textile materials were available.

Tampere had been eyed by Russia as a site for potential development and Alexander I visited it during his 1819 tour of Finland. When Finlayson, an employee of proven talent, petitioned the state for support, the time had come to see whether Tampere could indeed supply Russia with products it wanted. Finlayson received a loan, as well as various privileges (including freedom from taxation for his foreign professionals), to help him on his way. It was a further sign of the importance that Russia assigned to the factory planned for this remote inland region of Finland that Finlayson received burghers' rights immediately even though the process often stalled for those without prominent backers. The Russian state bet on the right horse. The Finlayson factory would grow to become the largest in the Nordic countries, a position it held for the entire nineteenth century.²

Though the domestic materials of wool and flax were initially used, it was cotton that became the main product and defined the image of the factory. 1828 marked the year when Finlayson began to produce cotton yarn with water-powered spinning machines. The demand grew swiftly and by the next year the factory had dedicated itself solely to cotton. The privileges of 1820 gave the right to duty-free export to Russia, a market far larger than Finland. As the factory expanded in the 1830s, its products were aimed across the eastern border, but there was growing demand for cotton yarn domestically as well.³ In the early 1850s this would lead Finlayson to make Canth's father a merchant and send him further inland to sell its yarn in the draper's shop that the factory established.

Finlayson initiated the custom for factories to form little communities of their own. In a village that would increase in size until it lived up to its designation as a city, there were not enough established institutions that could

meet all of Tampere's needs. Finlayson responded by providing its employees with all manner of benefits that were meant to keep workers productive and attached to their jobs. Young people from the rural surplus population arrived from the 1820s onwards in search of relative prosperity greater than what they could expect in agriculture or service; they included large numbers of women and children. In 1839 a factory school was founded, attended by both child workers and workers' children. There would be a workers' association, a workers' library, a sickness benefit fund, a hospital where the factory paid the workers' expenses. Two policemen were employed to keep an eye on the fights that broke out. 300 workers formed a fire brigade. In the 1840s the factory bought large plots of land for workers' housing, further tying them to their jobs.⁴

James Finlayson and his wife Margaret were pious Quakers who saw it as their duty to support the spiritual and intellectual growth of the workers. However, as a businessman Finlayson was not quite up to par with his talents as engineer and benefactor, unable to plan sufficiently for the future or manage his financial assets. In 1836 he sold the factory to Carl Samuel Nottbeck and Georg Adolf Rauch, the kind of Baltic Germans that played an important role as the Russian Empire industrialised. The new owners committed themselves to respect the founder's Christian principles and continued improving the workers' conditions. They initiated a swift expansion that transformed the factory. Technological improvements included mechanical weaving, which began in 1839 and initiated the period of true industrial growth.⁵ In such a distant corner of Europe, foreign capital played a key role: the first three owners of Finlayson were immigrants. Finnish citizenship was easily granted to entrepreneurs, most of them Swedes, Russians, or Germans, who had been born and educated abroad; they had the means to found some of the biggest factories in Finland.⁶

Yet however the change had begun, the impact of industrialisation on Finland would repeat the patterns already familiar from other countries. The Finlayson factory offered workers and their families both stability and opportunity. Tampere grew from its modest beginnings into a genuine industrial city, a rarity in a country where 90 per cent were employed in

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BORN INTO A WORKING-CLASS FAMILY in nineteenth-century Finland, Minna Canth became a trailblazer as the country's first woman playwright: she shocked audiences with her daring and won them over with her skill. At the same time, she ran a business that made her one of the most successful merchants in her city and raised her seven children.

Canth discovered in her middle age that she could begin a professional career in more than one field and change her society too. As a social realist who wrote in Finnish and championed the rights of women and workers, Canth was at the heart of an era of national awakening that prepared Finland for independence from Russia. A woman who did not hesitate to challenge authority and expose injustice, she had both admirers and enemies.

This biography by Alisa Manninen, the translator of Canth's plays *The Workman's Wife* and *Anna Liisa*, explores how she became a national icon in her own lifetime by being unafraid to be political.

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