

Sara Wacklin

*One Hundred Memories
from Ostrobothnia*



Translated with an Introduction by Alisa Manninen

Triologue Books

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Sara Wacklin: Her Land, Life, and Literature

Sara Wacklin (1790–1846) was known as a character in the city of her birth, a local figure who stood out due to her peculiarities and was respected for her achievements. So she might have remained, one of the many Wacklins who appear in histories of Oulu, granted a few sentences here and there by authors who set out to describe the Finnish region of Ostrobothnia in days gone by and the people who populated it. Yet her final achievement in life was to establish herself not only as a character but an authority on Ostrobothnia from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Wacklin's authority, her right to tell stories and assert their claim to authenticity (while acknowledging potential unreliability) by labelling them as memories, did not go unchallenged. *One Hundred Memories from Ostrobothnia* nonetheless became her legacy. Revealing her talent as an author, she drew on her own life and old tales that had been recounted to her in order to create a semi-fictional three-volume novel that offers a vividly detailed account of Ostrobothnian customs and locations even as it serves as a literary delight that jumps from one genre to another. Wacklin conveys her love for her home, her amusement at its quirks and pride in its feats, and her conviction that these one hundred memories are worthy of being recorded and capable of entertaining readers even beyond those familiar with the places and eras they describe.

I. The Land

Ostrobothnia (Pohjanmaa in Finnish, Österbotten in Swedish) has been defined in various ways, sometimes extending as far north as the southern parts of Lapland and usually including the western coast of Finland, which received

significant influences from Sweden on the other side of the Gulf of Bothnia. In modern usage Coastal Ostrobothnia, to the south of the setting of this novel, is usually called simply Ostrobothnia. The historical term encompassed five other regions as well. The one that Wacklin describes is today called Northern Ostrobothnia and still dominated by her hometown of Oulu (Uleåborg in Swedish, named after the castle built on an island in the delta of the River Oulujoki). A major port in the Bay of Bothnia, it offered the products of northern and eastern Finland a route to the sea and onwards to Stockholm and Europe.

Sweden had gradually extended its control over Finland during the Middle Ages and in the fourteenth century the state consisted of two halves, Sweden to the west and Finland to the east. The coastal regions were most firmly bound by culture and trade to Sweden. Elites, civil servants, and merchants spoke Swedish; many of the families that appear in this book were founded by a Finn who Swedecised his name when he found success. Finnish was the language of the majority population of the land, though in coastal regions even peasants and fishers were likely to have Swedish as their first language.

Sweden and Russia fought numerous wars over the centuries, which included two notable Russian invasions of Finland, the Great Wrath (1713–21) and the Lesser Wrath (1742–43). The Napoleonic Wars marked a decisive moment. Sweden's defeat in the Finnish War (1808–09), to which Wacklin devotes many of her memories, led to the establishment of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland ruled by the Emperor of Russia. For the first time, the land was its own administrative entity. It would be transformed over the course of the nineteenth century and become a more culturally confident and industrialised country, with the first major changes emerging in Wacklin's lifetime. The past, however, was what she knew and recorded for her readers, and it was shaped by the importance of Sweden, especially in Ostrobothnia; Russians appear as temporary visitors.

Oulu was founded in 1605 by King Charles IX at a spot suitable for trade. Water routes connected inland regions to the new port and through it to the coasts of Finland and Sweden. By the time of Wacklin's birth, Oulu was a major regional force, strongly influenced by mercantilism. Its city plan became fairly

The Land

orderly, the result of rebuilding after numerous smaller fires and efforts to increase regularity. With few stone buildings, it was known that the city was vulnerable to fire. Fire equipment was purchased, inspections were held, and residents were assigned roles to assume in the event of a fire; sensible precautions that would prove insufficient in the face of a conflagration beyond anything the city had seen before.

An important event in Oulu's development was the granting of staple rights, which allowed it to conduct foreign trade and freed it from its former submission to Stockholm in that regard. Oulu first petitioned for the rights in 1719, initiating a struggle that lasted for decades until it culminated in victory in 1765. Merchants could now expand their reach and take greater risks, which brought greater rewards to the lucky ones. The Wacklins were only one among the many burgher families that grew wealthy and formed a network of deals and marriages that surfaces constantly throughout these memories. Staple rights speeded up the growth of Oulu's population and it became one of the largest cities in Finland. However, with some 3,000 people, it was still a far cry from Stockholm's 70,000. The Swedish capital was its most vital trading partner, though the partnership was very much an unequal one. The Baltic Sea offered ships passage to more distant shores.

When the Province of Oulu was established in 1775 and the city became home to the governor, its regional prominence was reaffirmed. This also brought more gentry to the city, where they joined burghers in creating an environment in which academic and cultural accomplishments were held in esteem. Most of the workers were servants. They often arrived from the countryside in search of employment in the houses of the wealthy, who might have to pay good wages in order to hold on to their servants in the face of competing offers. Sailors and workers employed by factories and shipyards could also prosper. The presence of artisans increased gradually. More polished manners led to a greater demand for the related professionals, such as someone who could create wigs in fashionable styles. The city spent money on a poor relief system, as did the church, but private charity played an important role in supporting those who were poorly paid or unemployed.

The trade that Oulu was most associated with was the sale of tar. Other important exports included pitch (a speciality of the Wacklins), wood, food (salmon in particular), and butter. Salt was the most necessary of the imports that ships brought to the city. However, various foreign delicacies increasingly found their way to Oulu, which also enjoyed its own regional dishes; Wacklin describes both in lavish detail. Trade meant that customs houses had a great deal of work to do. Products that were brought into the city for use within were taxed.

The most dramatic event of this period took place on 23 May 1822 when the Great Fire of Oulu burnt down the city. The fire that began at night in the workshop of the dyer Pape spread wildly, the flames carried onwards by the wind. The efforts to put out the fire were hindered because a dry spring had emptied wells. The small wooden buildings were so close to one another that some caught fire from the heat alone. The Great Fire was visible to ships in the Gulf of Bothnia. The ensuing investigation did not establish a definitive cause, but the consequences were clear enough. Less than one sixth of the city's houses remained standing. Private individuals sent generous aid to Oulu. The future was nonetheless daunting. People had to rebuild their lives and their city, which was transformed. The Great Fire was recognised as marking an end to one chapter in Oulu's history. It also acts as a conclusion to the wandering story of *One Hundred Memories from Ostrobothnia*, which pays tribute to the old Oulu and invites the reader to envision a time gone by.

A visitor to the Oulu of today still has opportunities to encounter Sara Wacklin. A street was named after her in 1908, later a park as well. A memorial relief shows Wacklin carved in stone, while a plaque marks the site of the last of the schools that she ran in the city, located next to the cathedral. Wacklin has inspired plays and awards, art that draws upon her writing and work that recognises her career. The readers of the newspaper *Kaleva* voted her Oulu's most significant resident in 2005. How did Wacklin elevate herself from a woman who was a peculiar personality in her lifetime into a cultural figure who remains an honoured personage more than two hundred years after she was born?

II. The Author

The author, remarkable throughout her life for her readiness to seek out knowledge and undertake journeys in the pursuit of her goals and career, never lost her attachment to the city of her birth. She was born in Oulu on 26 May 1790 as Sara Elizabeth Wacklin, a name she would never exchange for another and preserved even in the preface to her book at a time when there was still an inclination for women to be circumspect about their authorship in order to lessen the risk of damage to their reputation. S. E. W—n offered only a flimsy nod to that custom; dissatisfied readers would know very well who was to be the target of their ire. But that lay in the future. The girl's parents were Zacharias Michaelsson Wacklin, a city prosecutor, and Catharina Samuelsdotter Uhlander, a merchant's daughter. She had two older brothers, Samuel Gabriel and Carl Fredrik. In her earliest years, the name that defined her was Wacklin.

In the one hundred memories that cover more than one hundred years of life in Ostrobothnia, Wacklins from one generation after another appear, often bearing the names of their forebears and creating a web of connections to other prominent families in Oulu that would later be recorded by the most prominent Wacklin of all, then simply Sara Liza to her family. Michael Wacklin (or Mikko Vakkola, to give the Finnish form of his name) was given credit for establishing the line in Oulu, where the young peasant came in 1694 from the countryside of Northern Savonia. He became postmaster in 1717, a job that he apparently did not carry out entirely to the satisfaction of the residents; there was an accusation of frequent drunkenness. No matter: he was there, one of his sons took over the job, and the Wacklins had arrived, ready to build fortunes through trade and win fame (thanks to Sara) that would outlast the money.

This first Michael's eldest son had a son, the elegant 'Prince Michael', and it was his son Zacharias who became the father of our author. Among the Wacklins who appear in the book are also the hermit, another Michael, the merchant, another Zachris, and the bride kidnapper, Isak; curiously, another Isak Wacklin does not receive a mention despite his career as Finland's first professional painter. The saddest of the memories must have been the tale of

the author's brother Samuel, who died young during the Finnish War. Yet the earliest tragedy of her life is only briefly mentioned in the memories of the two characters who serve as semi-autobiographical portraits of Sara Wacklin herself.

Despite all these Wacklins and all these connections, the death of her father when Sara was three years old left his widow and children in great poverty. They had to rely on the charity of others. Wacklin would recall that twice she had been so hungry that she did not have the strength to move, though she said that she never complained; in one of the published memories, Samuel pretends to need no more food in order to give his meagre portion to his fretful little sister. Local prominence was thus no shield against want: when misfortune struck, one had to be prepared to work hard, as one's humbler ancestors had once done. Wacklin wrote: 'I feel only compassion for all people, I neither love nor hate anyone, for no one has loved me and no one has taught me to love anyone. I have never felt any gratitude in my empty, joyless life, which was given to me by my parents, who left only the legacy of misery.' This was a bleak perspective that reflected Wacklin's enduring sense of isolation. However, she was also aware of her own strength and capability.

If Wacklin felt no gratitude, she did not receive it either, only further demands for her labour. But she did not break under such emotional and financial pressure. She took care of her mother for many years, but she also pursued her own career and education. That her life was more than the bleakness of the darker moments she put down in writing is illustrated by the playfulness and wonder that she allows to shine in *One Hundred Memories from Ostrobothnia*. Many of the characters in them are left fatherless and must face the world's trials with grit and resourcefulness. In 'The Ghost at the Grave', Wacklin describes her author surrogate as

a poor, ugly, and unprotected girl, who had been deprived of her earthly support at an early age and later endured many hard trials in the school of poverty. ... The poor girl was given no education other than what she had been able to acquire by herself, like a blind chicken that pecks at a grain

These one hundred memories are a journey through time in the Finnish region of Northern Ostrobothnia. They portray the coastal city of Oulu and the surrounding countryside with captivating literary skill and authenticity, bringing the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to life. The memories include folk tales and historical accounts, social comedy and romantic drama, introducing the reader to the region in all its variety. People from many different layers of society have their own stories to tell: the narrative moves from the delightful parties of the upper classes to the harsh struggles of poor workers.

The book's unique structure, with chapters that jump from one era and genre to another, often gives it the charm of a fairy tale. However, it is always grounded in regional cultures and customs. When people are confronted with dramatic events, such as the war against Russia or the Great Fire of Oulu, the dangers they face are shockingly vivid. A mixture of whimsy and realism, these memories continue to delight readers.

Sara Wacklin (1790-1846) made her mark as a successful teacher who became one of the first authors to publish a novel in Finland. *One Hundred Memories from Ostrobothnia* is her legacy, a classic beloved for its fascinating portrayal of life on Finland's northern coast. Although the name of her novel draws attention to the importance of remembering the past, Wacklin herself looked to the future. She was prepared to make bold choices in order to earn a living and find personal and professional fulfilment, as well as champion social causes that were important to her. Wacklin founded several girls' schools, travelled to Paris for a university education, and won lasting recognition as an author who preserved the rich history of her home region for the generations to come.

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