



Cartoon created in response to a debate about mixed bathing,
late nineteenth century (Raseborgs Museum, Ekenäs)

'Finish Off with Finland'

A MISCELLANY

Tony Lurcock

'She has been everywhere you can think of, and she's going
to finish off with Finland. You can't go any further than that,
can you?'

Henry James, *Confidence* (1879)

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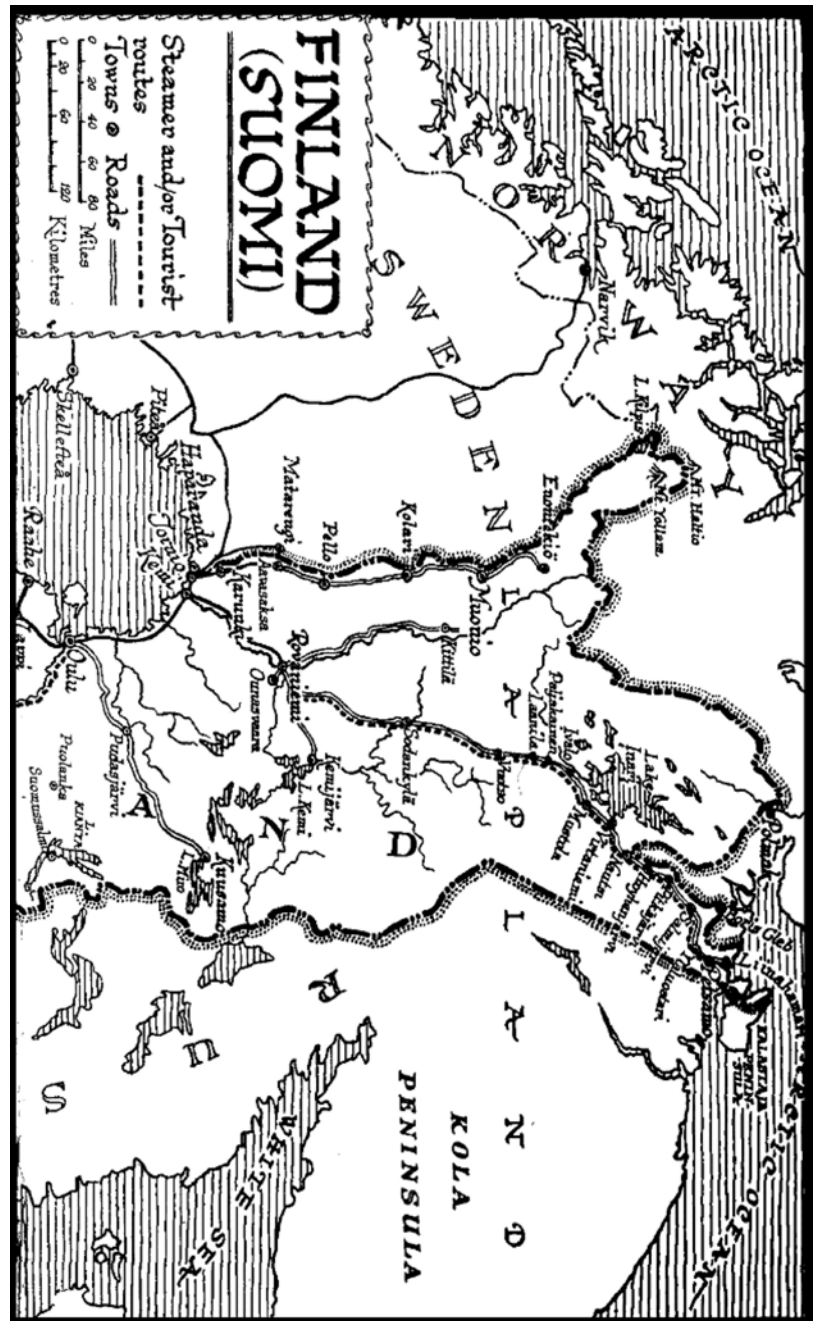
A detailed map of Finland can be found at Kartapaikka.

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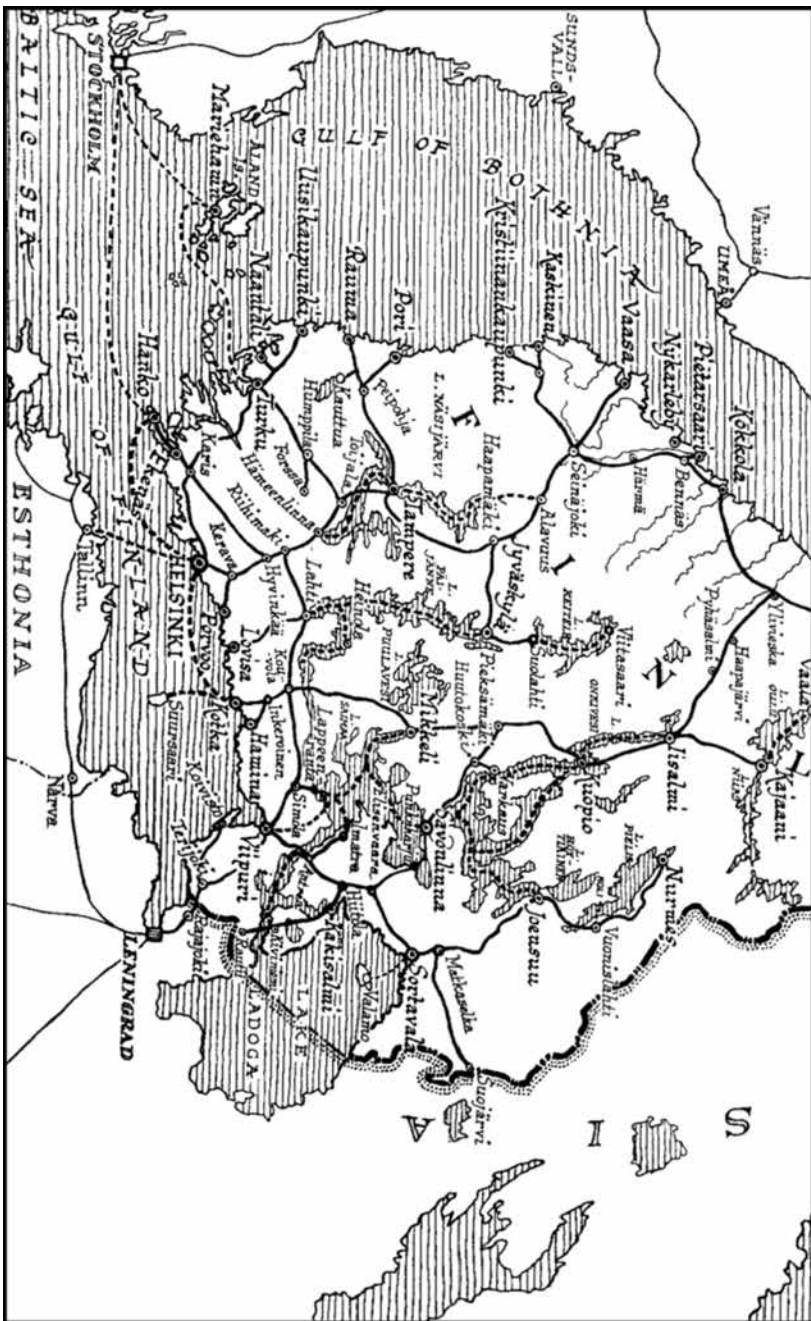
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Attempts to trace possible copyright issues of several books from extinct publishers have failed; in several instances I have provided current publishers or their agents with details about my application and its intended use, but have heard no more. Some of these failures are undoubtedly the result of Lockdown, which has entailed many of the relevant staff working from home. It has been especially difficult to discover the copyright holders of some of the poems reprinted here, several of which I snipped out of periodicals over the years, while others were passed on to me by friends, with no thought of further transmission. The publisher will rectify at the earliest opportunity any omissions or errors brought to his notice.

I am especially grateful to Kate Clanchy for allowing me to include her short memoir, as well as two poems. Extracts from John Greening’s *The Silence* (2019) are reproduced by kind permission of Carcanet Press Ltd, Manchester; poems by Donald Adamson, published by Indigo Dreams, are included by kind permission of the author, and Hugo Williams gave personal permission to include ‘Desire’. Extracts from *Direction North* by John Sykes, published by Hutchinson, are reproduced by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.



Map c.1930 with place names in Finnish



Preface

The varied contents of this volume come from the the mid-eighteenth century to the present day. I have retained the spelling of the earlier extracts, as well as the place names. Until the late 1930s British writers almost invariably used the Swedish rather than the Finnish place names – Helsingfors, Åbo and Tammerfors for example, instead of Helsinki, Turku and Tampere – and I have retained them in quoted passages. In my own text I have used the Finnish names, which with a couple of exceptions are now used almost universally. Ekenäs is also known by its Finnish name, Tammisaari. I have annotated with square brackets any places where there might be confusion. Vyborg, as it is now called in English, was very variously spelt by early travellers, and occasionally recent writers have used the Finnish name, Viipuri.

Several of the chapters contain material which might seem distantly familiar to one or two readers who have read any of my earlier Finland books. Some of the sauna experiences, for example, have appeared before, but here contribute to a focused presentation of how the British experience and response to the sauna have developed over two centuries. The same goes for ‘Crossing the Russian Border’, and for some of the observations on Finnish education.

The title of this volume is a barely-disguised statement of intent: it is the last book I shall write about Finland, and calling it a miscellany acknowledges that it does not have the coherence of the earlier volumes. The Contents page shows how I have arranged the material into some semblance of order.

All books and other authorities cited are listed. A * next to a name indicates a figure who is described in more detail in another chapter.

Introduction

This book is the sequel and conclusion to what I have termed *The Finland Trilogy*. This consists of *Not so Barren or Uncultivated* (2010), *No Particular Hurry* (2013), and *A Life of Extremes* (2015), which chronicle the discovery of Finland by the British in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, concluding in 1941.

Unlike its predecessors, this fourth volume is thematic rather than chronological. I had already been heading this way in Volume 3, expanding the theme of the first two volumes from ‘British Travellers in Finland’ to ‘The British discover Modern Finland’. Here the pattern has been modified and considerably expanded. In the first section the arrangement of the earlier volumes is actually reversed, presenting Finnish experiences of England. Opening the book with a long essay on ‘Mannerheim and Britain’ immediately establishes the change.

Section 2 first reverts to the territory of the first volume of the Trilogy with two early travellers who had eluded me ten years ago; they both deserve being rescued from oblivion. They are followed by two accounts of British experiences in eastern Finland over the last two centuries.

A Life of Extremes, which was based largely on travellers’ accounts, concluded in 1941. The British visitors in Section 3 also travelled in Finland, but were principally settled in one place. This gives them very different responses and much better insights than had been possible for most of the earlier travellers, ever on the move.

The starting point of Section 4 is the present day, looking back at the history and developments of some of the aspects of Finland which have been particularly noticed in Britain in recent years – the Kalevala and early Finnish literature, the sauna, and education.

I have come across more than a dozen English novels set in Finland, and have read several of them to the end. They are no better or worse, I suppose, than any random selection of novels. I have chosen three which present very different faces of Finland in style, content, and period. The poems are a selection from the large number which I have found over the years, and am still finding.

Slowly, after the war, the British presence in Finland had revived, thanks partly to the arrival of English teachers; German was losing its position as Finland's first foreign language. The Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952 formed a turning point, putting Finland back on the map, as it were. Visitor accommodation had to be contrived for the occasion; it remained in use as tourists began to return, but the opulent style of travel writing which had been prolific since the 1890s did not revive. British writing about travel in Finland appeared not so much in dedicated volumes as in books with wider views of Finland, and in magazine articles.

Earlier accounts of Finland by the British, especially those described in *No Particular Hurry*, were written principally by tourists; the cover picture, Victor Westerholm's 'A View at Ruissalo' – ladies in white muslin out boating, with an elaborate summer villa reflected in the water beside them – hints at the contents of the volume. The contact which these travellers had with the ordinary life of Finns was very limited, and for many of them non-existent. During the inter-war period only two British writers described experiences of everyday life in Finland: Jim Ingram lived hand-to-mouth, and was more likely to have slept in a hayrick than at an inn, while Bernard Newman on his bicycle travelled on a budget of five shillings a week.

All the post-war writers in the present volume who record their time in Finland show, in different ways, some of the conditions in which Finns actually lived; Diana Ashcroft* lodged

at the doctor's house in Kaajani, where her room doubled as the patients' waiting room. In Ivalo Walter Bacon* was fully involved with the work of his wife, the only dentist in the whole commune; he undertook the developing of the dental X-rays, which had to be done in the bathroom. These temporary British residents often describe happenings which are important parts of daily life, distinctively Finnish but not in any way grand or remarkable. For these reasons they have been missed, or have simply passed under the radar of earlier travellers. Mayday, or 'Vappu', with its singing and attendant student antics, is one. Ashcroft alone, among the unnumbered British travellers whose books I have read over the years, describes a Finnish family Christmas. She and John Sykes* each describe the all-engrossing traditional ceremony of student graduation from High School; the huge contrast between the austerity of 1948 and the prosperity of 1965 is sobering. Both Ashcroft and John Grundy* took part in midsummer festivals. Sykes's portrayal of the middle-class family with whom he lodged in Tampere shows his skills as a novelist; the account of his experience as a passenger in an incident of competitive Finnish driving is, quite simply, hair-raising. Many such first-hand experiences appear in these post-war accounts, with the writers now partakers rather than observers of Finnish life.

Julian Evans, reviewing *A Life of Extremes* in the *Times Literary Supplement* (27 May 2016), wrote that 'to describe the 1930s as 'little short of triumphant' [my term in the Epilogue] is to overplay a decade that had vicious undercurrents of nationalism and score-settling dating back to the Civil War of 1918.' I could certainly have made it clearer that 'triumphant' was not my own opinion, but that of the many writers whose accounts were the subject of my book. They were very far from discovering everything: none of these authors wrote of undercurrents, or would even have known what they were. That in itself reveals – exposes, one might say – something about British travellers: their lack of curiosity was one of their

limitations. In writing all three books I had been aware of the superficiality of many of their observations, and on occasion, usually parenthetically, gave my own 'take' on an issue, termed by the *Vasabladet* reviewer as 'satirical asides'.

Earlier generations of travel writers had not followed any tradition of investigative journalism; readers who wanted objective information about Finland could turn elsewhere. A number of the 'non-travel books' about Finland published between the wars did provide, or purported to provide, such information. These books included few or no first-hand experiences, but provided a history of Finland, describing its institutions, economy, and politics. While some of these writers certainly did take the trouble to put themselves in the picture of Finland's wider interests and concerns, these rarely took them very far, or very deep: none of them gives any idea at all of the extent of poverty, urban slums, and tuberculosis. Neither Frank Fox in *Finland Today* (1926) nor Kay Gilmour in her excellent *Finland* (1931) has anything to say about these conditions. Fox, a journalist and former war correspondent, actually has a whole chapter on 'Finland's Social Conditions', but the nearest he comes to describing them – and it is not very near – is one sentence: 'Co-operation helps Finland considerably to a happy social life, both in keeping down prices for consumers and in helping producers to market their goods profitably.' T. W. Atchley was for several years Lecturer in English at Helsinki University; one would expect that his *Finland* (1931) would see, or even look, below the surface of the life around him. He gives a whole page to Kallio, but only to describe the church, adding simply that the area is 'inhabited chiefly by poor people'. The University is a short walk from Kallio, but if he ever walked around there and saw the slums, and how the poor people actually lived, he either did not register the experience, or else thought it unsuitable as material for his book. A year earlier Harry A. Franck, in *A Scandinavian Summer*, had stated boldly: 'There are no slums in the Scandi-

navian lands, no easily approachable poor'. The travel writers on Finland were not alone in wearing blinkers.

British knowledge of the Nordic nations has both increased and improved in recent decades. Beyond the illustrated brochures and weekend travel supplements, perceptions have been brought sharply up to date by the gritty realism of some of the television dramas; 'Nordic Noir' has become a brand name. Starting with *Wallander* and *The Killing* we have, thanks to BBC4 on Saturday evenings, seen a good deal of the less attractive sides of Sweden, then of Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. The political and social issues which underlie many of these series – crime, poverty, drugs and immigrants – get little coverage in the British press, and none at all in the travel pages. Awareness of these aspects of modern Finland had come mainly from the cinema, especially the films of Aki Kaurismäki. Only in 2021 did *All the Sins* (*Kaikki synnit*) and *Man is Room 301* (*Huone 301*) arrive on BBC4, but subscription networks had already moved in on the Nordic market with two highly acclaimed Finnish crime series, *Deadwind* (*Karppi*) and *Bordertown* (*Sorjonen*).

I have given quite detailed presentations of Finnish education in 'They can all read!'. It has been a particular interest in Britain for thirty years, but in more recent times has been rather displaced by the 'discovery' that Finland is one of the most equitable countries in the world. Not unconnected with this was 'The World Happiness Report', released by the United Nations in 2018 and confirmed in 2019 and 2020, where Finland was named the happiest country in the world. (This met with some surprise, even in Finland. A British TV reporter in Helsinki, seeking the reactions of people in the street, had this response from one incredulous interviewee: 'You mean there are places worse than this?')

It was in 2017 that Danny Dorling, Professor of Geography at Oxford University, and Annika Koljonen, a Cambridge postgraduate, met in Cambridge during a course of lectures

organised by an affiliate of the Equality Trust. The following year they began their attempts 'to understand why statistics about Finland's education, healthcare, and political system were beginning to be mentioned so frequently in discussions about equality'. They decided to 'take a detailed look at one of the world's equitable countries, and along the way to work out how its people had created it and how they benefited from it.' This led, in September 2020, to the publication of *Finntopia. What we can learn from the World's happiest Country*. 'Of course,' they concede in the Preface, 'Finland is not Utopia – but its people have worked to build a better world with far more rigour and determination than any other nation on the planet.'

The first pages of this book gave me a sense of déjà vu; I felt that I had been here before when writing about British travellers in Finland in the 1930s. There the homogeneity of society was widely noted and admired: F. J. North, for example, remarked on the 'comparatively slight differences to be seen between the standards of living attained by various sections of the community'. Halliday Sutherland agreed, adding 'class distinctions are further reduced by the children of all classes meeting in secondary schools and at the universities.' The dust jacket of Sydney A. Clark's *Finland on Ten Pounds* reads in part:

A great curiosity has been awakened concerning the post-war republic of Finland. How does Finland do it? What is her formula for success? With a population half that of London in an area three times that of England, with a language of mysterious origin and great difficulty, she has quickly set her mark on civilisation.

Clark wrote 'I hope sincerely that my praise of Finland has not exalted her to a pedestal of tedious perfection.' *Finntopia*, unlike these largely impressionistic accounts of Finland, is a rigorous, yet very readable, academic study, bristling with 'a

huge range of statistics and sources'; in an Appendix it lists more than a hundred of the areas in which Finland is 'deemed to excel', provided by 'Statistics Finland'.

The reviewer of *Finland on Ten Pounds* in *The Spectator* wrote wistfully, 'It is a mixed pleasure for us who live further south to read this book.' I think that British readers of *Finntopia* will probably feel the same.