The Finns in America: Their History and Their Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

The reasons for Finnish immigration to the United States near the turn of the twentieth-century varied, though most often Finns left their country because they were landless and hungry. Once in America, the Finnish people formed tight-knit communities and were highly active in both political and social organizations. The Finns do not deserve to be overlooked in the study of immigrant literature, and this research proves that the literary contributions of the Finnish people are significant. Research was drawn primarily from secondary sources, due to the lack of English translations of Finnish-American literature, but by examining Isaac Polvi’s recently published *Autobiography of a Finnish Immigrant*, the value of Finnish-American literature to the American literary canon is undeniable.

Acknowledgements

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I had the pleasure of an interview and afternoon coffee with Eric Setala, a Finnish immigrant living in Republic, Michigan. Unfortunately, Eric arrived in the United States later than the time period on which this essay focuses, and as a result, I was not able incorporate any of the information that I obtained from the interview. Still, I owe him thanks for the time he spent sharing his experiences with me.
The Finns in America: Their History and Their Literature

Farewell to all of these:
Fields and berried forests,
Flowery lanes and heather heaths,
Island-dotted lakes
Deep whitefish waters
Fir-covered hills
And dales bedecked with birches.

*Kalevala* 24: 455-62

This parting tribute may have been prominent in the mind of a Finnish emigrant as he left his rural homeland for America near the end of the nineteenth-century. The excerpt is from the *Kalevala*, Finland’s national folk epic, passed on for generations as oral folklore until 1835 when Elias Lönnrot, a country doctor, finally composed the epic of nearly 23,000 lines from the many folk ballads he had compiled. According to Richard Impola, the *Kalevala* in Finland played a key role in developing a sense of ethnic and national identity and in the eventual emergence of Finland as an independent nation in 1917, after centuries under the control of other countries (9). Doubtless, the Finnish immigrant communities that coalesced in America carried this identity with them, as well as the wisdom and spirit of their *Kalevala*, as they tried to adjust to a new country and language while still attempting to preserve what made them Finnish.

Between 1870 and 1920, approximately 340,000 Finns immigrated to the United States. According to Hoglund in his foreword to History of Finns in Michigan, Finnish
immigrant numbers peaked between 1899 and the start of World War I as a result of political unrest and the lack of land and jobs available to the poor in Finland (8). The vast majority of those who emigrated came from rural areas, and settled mainly in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Washington, Oregon, and California\(^1\). The greatest numbers of Finnish immigrants were drawn to the northern parts of Minnesota and Michigan where the landscape was not unlike rural Finland—"bedecked with birches." Many found work in iron or copper mining, others in the lumber industry, and a handful were able to return to farming. With them, the Finnish immigrants brought ethnic pride, rural sensibilities, Finnish humor, sisu, the sauna, and an associative spirit. Some indulged themselves in drunkenness; many others established temperance societies. Though relatively few in number compared to other immigrant groups, the Finns established schools, multitudes of Finnish-American newspapers, labor organizations, churches, athletic clubs, choral groups, and library clubs.

This paper will explore the Finns in America, particularly those who came to Michigan and the Great Lakes region. I will survey the events in Finland that caused waves of emigration, as well as Finnish culture and identity, community life in America, and Finnish-American literature, in order to demonstrate the rich but widely unknown contributions that the Finns have made to America and its diverse canon of literature.

I. The Finns in Finland and the United States

    I'm going to America
    Everyone is on his way.
    The American shores are sanded
    With gold they say.

\(^1\) See Appendix A
I'll embark from Hankoniemi
On a small boat and go.
'Cause Finland can't support
The children of her poor.

Finnish immigrant ballad (Engle 31)

A vast northern land of ice, snow, water, forest, rock, and summer midnight sun, sprinkled with 100,000 lakes and waterways, Finland is a country whose landscape has done much to form the character of its inhabitants (Engle 7). Before modern technology, the dense forests and harsh winters made communication between homesteads difficult and subsequently, the country was vulnerable to invasion from its neighbors.

Beginning in 1155, Finland was under Swedish monarchic rule for nearly 600 years. As a result, the Finns became virtually indistinguishable from the Swedes.

“Swedes were often appointed to high offices in Finland, which strengthened the position of the Swedish language in Finland on the cost of native Finnish culture” (Kuoppamäki). As the power of Russia to the east grew stronger, Sweden forced the Finnish to fight and finance its conflicts with Russia. Between 1570 and 1809, Finland was caught in the middle of five wars between Russia and Sweden that lasted for more than 60 years altogether (Engle 14). In 1809, under attack by both Russia and Denmark, Sweden signed a treaty that gave Finland to Russia. Finland became an autonomous grand duchy of Russia, and because of this unprecedented autonomy, the country began to prosper as it never had before. The Finns were guaranteed rights they had enjoyed under Swedish rule, such as worshipping as Lutherans, and a greater number of official posts previously occupied by Swedes were open to Finns.
The Finnish people also had a national awakening during the nineteenth-century, aided by the publication of the epic *Kalevala*, their strong Lutheran faith, and by their autonomy. They began to speak their language more often, instead of Swedish. It was the beginning of self-recognition for the Finns—both of the uniqueness of the Finnish people, and their culture (Library of Congress). On February 14, 1900, Russia responded to international pressure to free Finland by tightening imperial control over the country. Many Finnish men were afraid of being drafted into Russian military service and fled the country. When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in Russia, Finland took advantage of the confusion and claimed its independence in 1917.

During the first half of the nineteenth-century, very few Finns had traveled to the United States in search of opportunity. A Finnish farmer named William Lundell settled in Massachusetts in the 1830’s; during the gold rush of the 1840’s, Finnish sailors returned home from California with pocketfuls of money and inspired dozens of Finns to return to California. However, the greatest numbers of Finns coming to America followed the American Civil War. Hoglund states in his book, *Finnish Immigrants in America* that:

During the American Civil War the solicitation of Finnish miners in Norway inaugurated the mainstream of immigration from Finland to the United States. In 1864 the Quincy Mining Company, located in the Copper Country of northern Michigan, sent two agents to solicit miners from Norway. Consequently, in the two ensuing decades perhaps between 700 and 1000 Finns came via Norway to the United States. Although few in number, these arrivals made Michigan better known to their homeland,
and the state became the first major center for the much greater numbers on emigrants leaving unsolicited from Finland. (9)

Between July 1883, and June 1920, American officials recorded the arrival of 257,382 Finnish arrivals (Hoglund 7). It is now believed that this number is lower than the actual number of Finnish immigrants because some American officials simply categorized the Finns as Russians for many years.

As the feelings of Finnish nationalism were developing, so were the problems that would lead to the massive wave of emigration near the end of the nineteenth-century. Overpopulation, large numbers of landless people, low wages, and uncertainty of employment pushed many Finns to migrate to the growing urban area of Finland’s southern coast. However, many did not stop at the coast and boarded ships bound for America where they believed, like the emigrants of many other countries, they would find the streets paved in gold (Coan 355).

Around 1900, the first great wave of Finns to America was a wave of “patriotic emigration,” prompted by the ascension of Nicholas II to the throne of Russia in 1894. “Although he took the oath and gave his sovereign promise to honor the constitutional government of Finland...he soon surrendered to...his advisers. To them, an autonomous, democratic, and Western-minded Finland had long been a thorn in the side” (Holmio 65). A Russian governor-general was sent to Finland whose duty was to Russianize Finland and deprive it of its autonomy. Thus, there was a surge in the numbers of Finns emigrating as they fled the oppression of Russia.

Another cause for emigration was the fact that many rural Finns did not own land of their own and poverty and hunger were constancies. “In 1870, 92.6 percent of the
people in Finland lived in rural areas; in 1880, 91.6 percent; in 1890, 90.1 percent; and in 1900, 87.5 percent (Holmio 55). This rural population was mostly landless and rapidly increasing. In 1870, only about 13 percent of the rural population was comprised of landowners. Most were tenant farmers or hired workers.

According to Holmio, depending on the size of the farmstead, “from spring to fall, many extra workers were needed, and to insure their availability, the landowners had...developed a system of retaining small tenant farmers and cottagers on their lands” (55-6). In the eighteenth century, the government of Finland had taken action and guaranteed labor for landowners by providing a legal system for compulsory labor—persons whose ability to pay taxes was in doubt, had to go to work for someone else. In addition, the poor were not permitted to wander the countryside in search of work because of vagrancy laws that were in effect, and because the poor were forced to find work and could not go far, the employers were able to keep wages low. When vagrancy laws were relaxed in 1883 and allowed for freedom of movement for honest workers, the promise of wealth and land in America very easily drew the attention of poor, landless Finns. In addition, during the 1860s, there were several years of harsh winters that lasted well into the planting season, and as a result, crops were not able to grow to maturity, and a dismal harvest followed. Several years of famine plagued Finland’s rural communities. The estate owners were well fed, however, and turned their backs on Finland’s poor.
"By 1900 Finland's people were changing the mode of rural life celebrated in their epic Kalevala. Their mythical Sampo, magic mill of abundance, now was being rebuilt with the help of modern industry" (Hoglund 3). For a long time Finland's industrial wealth came from tar production for shipbuilding, but after the advent of steamships and steel ships, the tar industry collapsed, as tar is not needed in the production of such ships. Other industries followed in the wake of the tar industry, and more of the surplus population from poor rural areas started to migrate to the urban areas.

The rapidly multiplying factories of urban areas on the southern coast near the large cities of Helsinki and Turku drew the starved attention of these poor rural Finns, most of whom were young unmarried men. Yet many Finns in the rural areas had no money to travel the long distance to the cities, and therefore had no choice but to remain in the remote, self-contained agricultural areas and continue life in the only way they knew how, under the yoke of another.

Finns who left the country were often criticized by their fellow citizens. Churchmen, writers, and public officials were generally hostile. The emigrants were labeled as unpatriotic, and the officials who registered them for passports apparently did not understand or chose to ignore the economic hardships that plagued most of Finland's population. The Lutheran clergymen condemned those who left for America, certain that they were heading straight into sin and low morals (Engle 35). They feared that Finnish men would commit bigamy once they landed in America, and would forget about the wife and children he had left behind. One bishop declared, "no one had to leave Finland
to find land” and that “departure violated the Biblical injunction to remain and work in one’s native country” (Hoglund 11). Finnish officials even attempted to discourage immigration—at one point, the clergy refused to recognize any marriage contracted in America. In fact, “the departure of the emigrants was of profound significance. Finland’s population reached three million only a few years before World War I” and so the burgeoning industrial economy did in fact need workers (Virtanen). Still, the Finns could not be dissuaded by the criticism and threats. “The heart pleaded ‘no’ but the stomach commanded ‘yes’ was the saying during those hard days” (Engle 33).

“The main attraction was the high wage level in the USA; in certain occupations five times higher than in Finland. Work was available for men and boys in mines, lumber camps, factories and railroad construction. Employers regarded Finns as good and reliable workers. The homes of wealthy Americans offered employment to women, and Finnish servant girls were in considerable demand” (Koivukangas). In America, Finns simply found it easier to earn their bread than in their homeland.

When they arrived in the United States, most Finnish immigrants made their way to the states of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin—coincidentally, these landscapes resembled the land they had left behind in Finland. Many were unprepared for the American job market. Very few could speak English and, like many other immigrant groups, the Finns were drawn towards jobs where very little English was needed—the mines and the mills (mass emigration from Finland began too late to allow most Finns to settle as farmers upon their arrival in America). Finns mined copper in Upper Michigan and Montana; iron ore in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan; and coal in Pennsylvania, Montana, and Washington. In Upper Michigan, the counties of Houghton, Baraga,
Ontonagon, and Keweenaw were and are known today as Michigan’s Copper Country, and for many years contained the greatest concentration of Finnish-Americans.

The lives of miners were dirty, difficult, and dangerous and frequently made women into widows. For example, when the first iron companies started mining in Upper Michigan in the 1840’s, the iron was mined from open pits:

The miners made holes ten to twelve feet deep in the rock, using a drill and a heavy sledgehammer powered by their own muscles. The holes were filled with black gunpowder which broke the rock into chunks of various sizes...The ore was loaded into cars which were drawn by mules or horses to the railroad. In some places the ground sloped toward the railway, and the heavy cars ran down by gravity, their speed controlled by men at the brakes...Accidents often occurred when the brakes failed and the cars hurtled with ever-increasing speed to their destruction. Frequent accidents were also caused by the premature explosion of the gunpowder and by flying rocks. When a death occurred in these iron mines, it was customary for each miner to donate half of one day’s wages to the widow. (Holmio 133-34)

Copper and coal were mined in deep shafts where the conditions were even more dismal than open-pit iron mining:

‘Besides a physically taxing ten-hour day (six days a week) spent in the shaft mines, some of which reached to depth of more than 2,000 feet below ground level, the miners and laborers were exposed to hazards...Particularly the use of explosives, falling rocks, and cave-ins of
the hanging walls supported by timber resulted in injuries and death...

Ventilation was poor, sanitation was left to the hungry rats, and there was always a danger of fire in that strange, frightening world where 'darkness was ruler and lord.' (Engle 43)

Aside from the perils during the work hours, the Finns that joined the rising unions also put their lives in jeopardy. Unions were one of the few organizations in which Finns were willing to join that were not comprised solely of Finns. Hundreds of Finns were among members of the Copper Country Trade Union that participated in the copper strike of 1913 and 1914 in Upper Michigan, and violence often erupted between strikers and strikebreakers. Serious injuries and death were common outcomes in these confrontations.

Working in the mines offered few chances for Finns to show their skills in horseshoeing, butchering, woodcarving, fishing, or trapping. For this reason, other Finns sought the employment of their woodsmen's skills in the lumber industry. Finnish men soon earned a reputation for being strong, tough, and able to endure the harsh wintry conditions of the north woods. With a team of horses, a lumberjack hauled huge logs to rivers. On the banks of the rivers, rafting crews shivered, chilled to the bone, as they worked in icy waist-deep water to guide logs out to the rafts that carried them downstream to the mills. "Men who were too old to pull a crosscut saw were called
soupbones," and were given odd jobs such as cooking or filling the woodboxes" in the lumber camps. Others known as ‘road monkeys’ threw down sand on icy roads for traction or cleaned up after the horses (Engle 45). Men slept in “huge, drafty, foul-smelling bunkhouses” where the “cots were often so close together that there was not room to walk between them. Men climbed into these ‘muzzle-loader’ bunks from the ends” and were greeted by bedbugs and lice (Engle 45-6). “Although the ethnic slur of the day was ‘dirty Finns,’ ” this was far from the truth. Only their labor made them so, and all traces of dirt were washed and steamed away in their saunas, a Finnish invention and tradition centuries old (Engle 46). The steam rising from the hot rocks was also an effective method of exterminating annoying insects from workers’ clothing.

Other Finns found jobs loading and unloading ore boats, fishing, laying railroad tracks, in factories, tailoring, watch making, and as carpenters, masons, goldsmiths, and blacksmiths. Finnish women and girls found jobs as domestic servants if they did not have a husband or a household to maintain. However, no matter how much their way of life differed from what they had known in Finland, immigrants “continued to draw on the rural symbolism of farm life and its folklore”—in their songs, literature, and holiday celebrations there were references to things such as pigs, cows, knives, and birch ladles
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(Hoglund 24-5). Finnish-Americans “applied rural symbolism in a naturalistic examination of human life and society, which they compared to the physical world with its cycles of birth, growth, and decay” (Hoglund 25).

Before the Finns arrived, Americans probably knew little or nothing about the Finnish people, but they soon developed a stereotypical opinion of Finns, just as they did of other immigrant groups. Finns were described, often in contradictory terms, as “taciturn, melancholic, sober, clannish, patient, racially sullen, even-tempered, ‘more phlegmatic than the Italian,’ ambitious to get on, and too self-contemplative. Most of all...[prone] to drink, fighting, and radicalism” (Hoglund 125). Finns were very self-conscious of the way that they were perceived by Americans, possibly because of the negative criticism they endured when leaving Finland. While a few of these descriptions are accurate (clannish and patient), the Finns in general were a light-hearted group of immigrants. They loved a good laugh and their humor often poked fun at themselves. A quick wit was highly prized among Finns.

Above all, however, a Finn had *sisu*. *Sisu* is a uniquely Finnish concept not easily translated. It defines the Finnish people and their character. It can be described as strength, stubborn determination, and a willingness to fight for a belief. Whatever has to be done, *will* be done—no matter what. “It's the quality that lets them laugh at themselves in the face of disaster...It’s hard-jawed integrity...In short, ...indomitable will” (Rajanen 10). *Sisu* goes hand-in-hand with the headstrong spirit of the *Kalevala*.

The Finns formed strong community ties in America, often becoming self-contained enclaves and ignoring the English language for years. They did not become Americanized as quickly as some other immigrant groups. One of the reasons for their
cohesiveness was that they believed “collective action... would change the new country into the land they had dreamed of” (Engle 59). By working together, they believed they could make America a place where there were no class distinctions, and anyone could own land or pursue the career of their dreams. Since they did not find streets paved in gold, they decided to try to pave their own.

In addition, stemming from the relatively recent emergence as a proud Finnish people, the first generation of Finns in America tried to cling to Finnish culture and traditions with an iron grip. Life at home was centered in the kitchen and, if they could afford it, the sauna. Finnish housewives made mojakka, a fish and potato chowder, and kalakukka, a pie made from bread dough with white fish inside. Rye was the most widely used grain in Finnish-American kitchens, just as it was back in Finland. Almost as necessary as food and shelter was the sauna—it was a retreat after a day of exhaustive labor where grime and weariness was sweated out. Many home remedies for rheumatism, arthritis, colds, and flu involved the steamy environment of the sauna.

The Lutheran church was the center of many Finnish communities in America. Finland’s rural land had been divided into parishes, and the church had long been a center of community activities, both spiritual and political. The temperance movement, closely associated with the church, gained the support of many devout Finns. Reino Kero speculates why the Finns were so active in the temperance movement:
While immigration to America was at its peak, people back home often felt that the greatest danger to the immigrant was the American saloon. The great number who did succumb to alcohol shows that the danger was not wholly imaginary. On the other hand, it should be remembered that many immigrants were from backgrounds where heavy drinking was common. Thus when the Finnish immigrant drank, raised a row and staggered about in an American saloon with a hunting knife in his hand, the surroundings were admittedly new, but the carousing and knives were frequently part of a tradition brought from Finland. Since the immigrant had more money than before, liquor was cheap, and saloons were plentiful in the towns, the temptations were perhaps greater than they had been in Finland. (115-16)

The doors of temperance societies were open to both men and women. Finnish-Americans were all too often told that their worst vice was heavy drinking, and the Finns credited with starting the temperance movement must have agreed. “By 1888 there were so many [temperance] societies that a Finnish central organization was set up”—the Suomalainen Kansallis Raittius Weljeys Seura (The Finnish National Temperance Brotherhood). “Between 1888 and 1902, 161 temperance societies joined the larger association. Though some temperance societies functioned for only a short time and a few were not very active, it is still true that most Finnish cultural activity at the turn of the century revolved around them” (Kero 116).

Yet even within these close communities, there were divisions among Finns. “Finns are by nature individualists rather than mass followers” (Engle 64) and most
immigrants considered themselves as belonging to either the "Church Finns" (or the "Temperance" or "Dry Finns"), or the "Labor Finns." The majority of Labor Finns shied away from formal religious activities because of their radical, socialist views.

These "Labor Finns" were those who belonged to workingmen's organizations, as well as a particular group of social reformers who fled Finland as radical refugees from 1899 to 1905, when the Russia was attempting to tighten control over Finland. These refugees formed the Finnish Social Federation, which helped to establish cooperatives, argued that "control of the state was essential for workers and their economic well-being" (Hoglund 119), and made contributions to the American Socialist Party; however, the political power of the Finnish Socialist Federation was dwarfed because not all of its members were citizens of the United States. In addition, because of Finnish socialism and union activities, many Americans grew hostile against Finns, in turn causing a rift between the conservative and temperance Finns and the Labor Finns (Runblom 235).

Finnish-Americans also established schools, mixed-gender choirs, bands, theatre groups, athletic organizations, and printing presses. Drama was among the most popular of activities. "Practically speaking, all the temperance societies and socialist sections performed some plays. Most of the socialist locals were active enough to sponsor their own drama society. In 1912 Finnish-Americans belonged to 217 socialist
sections; 107 of these could boast of their own drama society” (Kero 124). According to Kero, the performances of these drama societies varied greatly in quality. The very best attained amateur competency, and many were mediocre (124).

In 1896, the city of Hancock in Michigan’s Copper Country became the site of Suomi College—now known as Finlandia University (Suomi = Finland). Established by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (also known as the Suomi Synod), its purpose was to ensure seminary education in America, preserve Finnish culture, and teach the English language to immigrants. In 1958, the seminary separated from the college, and today the university continues to educate students in the Finnish language, as well as providing other liberal arts courses. In addition, it remains the only college founded by Finns in the United States.

In the world of athletics, Hannes Kolehmainen and Ville Ritola were Finnish-Americans who won early twentieth-century Olympic medals in track and field events (Kolehmainen won four gold and one silver medal; Ritola won five gold and three silver medals). Paavo Nurmi, the Finnish track athlete who captured nine gold and three silver medals in three Olympic Games (1920, 1924, 1928), was not a Finnish immigrant. but the Finnish-Americans revered the “Flying Finn” like one of their own and he did much to boost the self-esteem of Finnish-Americans. The Finnish-American Athletic Club in New York even made Nurmi an honorary member.

Another “clannish” organization founded by Finnish-Americans was the Knights of Kaleva and the Ladies of Kaleva. These were secret organizations formed in order to preserve Finnish culture in America. The Knights were established at the end of the 1890’s in Belt, Montana, and the Ladies organization soon followed. At the beginning of
the 1930's it is estimated that they had over 2,000 members. The names of Kavela lodges were derived from the *Kalevala* and Finnish national costumes were often worn at meetings. There would be presentations about Finnish concerns: the *Kalevala*, Finnish history, and Sibelius (a famous Finnish composer) were just a few of the subjects. Although the Kaleva orders readily accepted English as their second language, they were not particularly successful in recruiting members of the second generation of Finnish-Americans.

While most Finns planned to stay in America just long enough to accrue enough money to return to Finland and buy a farm, few were actually able to do so. They did not find the vast riches of their dreams, although many had to admit that they were better off in America than they were in Finland. Here in America, after perhaps a decade of toil, determination, and the staunch will to improve one's life, a Finn could own a home, a good piece of land, and build his own sauna in the backyard.

**II. Finnish-American Literature**

- My thoughts evoke me,
- My mind induces me,
- To set forth to sing,
- My songs to recite,
- To tell my people's stories,
- To sing their ballads.
- The words melt in my mouth,
- The phrases form
- Quickly on my tongue,
- Flow out from between my teeth.

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*Kalevala* 1: 1-10

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These are the opening lines of Finland’s national folk epic, the *Kalevala*. The stories of the *Kalevala* were in the making for more than 300 years in the songs of the Finnish bards, or rune singers, before Elias Lönnrot published his first compilation of the runes in 1835 (a rearranged and expanded version followed in 1849). However, Lönnrot’s Old and New *Kalevala* merely present a small fraction of the colossal body of rune songs. He used only 23,000 lines of the more than 1,270,000 variant runic lines that exist in a 33-volume work, The Ancient Runes of the Finnish People, published by the Finnish Literature Society from 1908-1948 (Pentikäinen xv). Such an impressive body of runes, paired with the Romantic ideologies and Nationalistic movement of the 1830s and 1840s in Finland, helped to establish the Finnish cultural identity and ideals that had lain dormant under the control of Sweden and Russia. By 1900, it was “every young Finn’s duty to study the epic, committing long passages to memory. Added impetus was given to this duty by Tsarist attempts to curtail the scope of Finnish autonomy” (Branch).

The *Kalevala* demarcates the elements of the Finnish worldview: “the origins of cosmic order, man, woman, culture, and society.” It is also “a book about life and death, offering patterns for life experiences and interpretations. It contains episodes of cult dramas...and weddings” (Pentikäinen xvi). While most epics deal with war and heroic deeds, such adventures are not the focus of the *Kalevala*. Like much of Finnish literature, “its emphasis [is] on capturing in words the very feel of life itself” (Impola 10). Past and present, there have been debates on whether the *Kalevala* is myth, folklore, or a history of the ancient Finns. Scholars today tend to reject the notion of the *Kalevala* as history, but after Lönnrot published his compilations, most Finns claimed that the *Kalevala* was true—some extremists of the *Knights of Kaleva* even wanted to replace the Bible with the
Kalevala in the 1910s in America (Kero 120). Thus, the story, characters, and spirit of the Kalevala were an integral part of Finland that lived in the heart of immigrants when they came to the United States.

Let us clasp our hands together,  
Let us interlock our fingers;  
Let us sing a cheerful measure,  
Let us use our best endeavors.  
While our dear ones hearken to us,  
And our loved ones are instructed,  
While the young ones are standing round us,  
Of the rising generation,  
Let them learn the words of magic,  
And recall our songs and legends,  
Of the belt of Väinämöinen,  
Of the forge of Ilmarinen,  
And of Kaukomiehi’s swordpoint,  
And of Joukahainen’s crossbow:  
Of the utmost bounds of Pohja,  
And of Kalevala’s wide heathlands.

Here we are acquainted with the heroes whose exploits are the subject of the Kalevala. The characters of the Kalevala are clearly both mystical and warlike—they employ the use of magic, as well as the sword and crossbow. A sense of ethnic pride exudes from these lines of unaffected verse, in addition to the intense, warm feeling of togetherness and community in lines 21-28. The Finnish-Americans embodied many of these traits in their communities, and their literary endeavors were often influenced by their national epic.

Compared with other immigrant groups, the Finns had an astonishingly high rate of literacy. “In 1880, 97.6 percent of the population [in Finland] over ten years of age were literate” (Holmio 381). “Between July, 1899, and June, 1910, under 2 percent of
the new [Finnish] arrivals [in America] fourteen years old and older could neither read nor write. During the same period over 26 percent of all immigrant nationalities in the same age group were illiterate” (Hoglund 20). This is why Finnish-Americans were soon in need of Finnish language newspapers in their communities—they needed something to read in addition to their copies of the Bible.

The first Finnish language newspaper in America was the *Amerikan Suomalainen Lehti* (The Finnish-American Newspaper). It was founded in 1876 by Antti J. Muikku to serve the Finns of Michigan’s Copper Country, but the number of subscribers remained small because there were few Finns in Michigan at the time—the great wave of Finns was yet to come. It was not long before *Amerikan Suomalainen Lehti* failed. Nevertheless, it did not take long for Finnish immigrants to publish a multitude of newspapers that provided American and Finnish news once their numbers grew.

“Particular emphasis was placed on immigrant affairs, which were covered in front page news and in letters from readers on the inside and back pages. The importance of readers’ letters grew with time, for they provided information about relatives and acquaintances who might be living a continent away” (Kero 132). Two other important sections existed in Finnish-American newspapers—one section inquired about any information on the whereabouts of a lost
friend or family member. The other section contained matrimonial advertisements, some placed in jest, and others placed in earnest. There were fewer Finnish women than there were Finnish men, and men often sought wives through newspaper advertisements.

Some Finnish language publications raised controversies between conservative and liberal Finns, but the publications were important, such as the newspapers published by Finnish-American socialists. "Newspapers showed the way, at a time when Finnish-American socialists were seeking the right paths... Quarrels flared up in newspaper columns. Those who attempted to show the way were sometimes shown considerable appreciation and sometimes subjected to sharp criticism" (Kero 131).

Other kinds of Finnish language literature soon followed the newspapers. Most temperance societies, labor organizations, churches, cooperatives, and Kaleva societies had magazines, newsletters, calendars, or newspapers, as well as lending libraries of their own. Finnish-American newspaper publishers also sold books ordered from Finland. The works most frequently taken out of the libraries were books on Finnish history and novels (Holmio 382). Also available were cookbooks, dictionaries, agricultural handbooks, and Finnish and English language ABC books.
In the newspapers and periodicals, a large portion of what the Finnish-Americans wrote was “designed to, as it were, set the record straight” between the “church Finns” and the “Labor Finns”—they defended viewpoints or refuted the accusations of others (Kivisto 75). Writing also tended to be specialized in scope and ignored the Finnish community at large.

Finnish-Americans also wrote poetry, novels, plays, and short stories. Hoglund gives a concise view of the literature produced by Finns in America at the beginning of the twentieth-century:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finnish publishers in the United States (Kostiaisen 146)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>Works published</th>
<th>% of total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publishers of religious literature</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishers in the temperance movement</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishers in the labor movement</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other publishers</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From about 1890 immigrants had issued original verses, essays, tales, and short stories. In the first years of the new century they even published original novels. But critics were not satisfied: for instance, in 1912 one critic described the first novels as “weedy.” During the decade of World War I and the 1920’s Finns, drawing mainly on immigrant themes, produced most of the original work—novels, memoirs, and histories—which served as the capstone to an independent nature. (48)

John I. Koilehmainen states that there was a constant flow of Finnish language verse that expressed “hopes and fears, joys and sorrows” and, in addition to the overwhelming number of poems, the verse was often quite lengthy. For example, “an exuberant northern Michigan poet celebrated the victory of the Atlantic Mine strikers in
1897 with an opus of 47 verses” (110). To encourage more writing, Finns organized (short-lived) literary societies. Amerikan Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura (The American Finnish Literature Society) was founded in Calumet, Michigan in 1878, initially to publish instructional material for children, as well as religious literature. In addition to original works, they also “published a good deal of literature in translation; Finnish-American editions of the works of Marx, Kautsky, Lenin, and Ingersoll appeared” (Kero 135).

The themes of Finnish-American literature were similar to the themes of other immigrant literatures—reasons for emigration, the hardships endured both in America and in their homeland, and the difficulties and obstacles of settling in a new country where a foreign tongue and way of thinking dominated. Some works incorporated the themes of the Kalevala.

But where are the Finns represented in today’s canon of American immigrant literature? The answer is that they simply are not represented. There are no widely read Finnish-American novels, short stories, or poetry. There are several possible explanations for this drought. First, despite the considerable body of Finnish-American literature that exists from about 1880-1930, very little has been translated into English. In fact, in Kolchmainen’s 1947 bibliographic guide to Finnish-Americans, he lists approximately 100 prose works by Finns—only two of the works were written in the English language. The Finnish language was one of the most prized possessions of the immigrants, partly because the Finnish language was just recently receiving equal and official recognition in the schools and government offices of Finland. For hundreds of years, Swedish was the language taught in schools and used by those in power. As a
result, the Finns in America felt the need to cling to their language as tightly as they could, for as long as they could, and so they were reluctant (though quite capable) of learning English. Secondly, the Finns were later in their arrival than most other immigrant groups and when the urge to share their immigrant experiences was the greatest, it was also the time of greatest pressure to Americanize. The Finns fought this with sisu, and perhaps this kept subsequent generations from translating any novels of merit. Finally, it is quite possible that the best Finnish-American literature is still undiscovered—locked up in old immigrant chests in the corner of a musty attic, or lying under years of dust, yellowing and deteriorating. This was the case with Isaac Polvi’s *The Autobiography of a Finnish Immigrant*.

**III. Isaac Polvi’s Autobiography**

Isaac Polvi was born in the rural village of Polvi in Finland in 1878. He died in 1951 in Ewen, Michigan. The editor of Polvi’s autobiography, Joseph Damrell, is also Polvi’s grandson. At a family reunion in 1978, Damrell’s mother showed him a manuscript that she had found in the process of renovating their farmhouse. This hand-written book-length manuscript was in Finnish and in pencil. It was not dated, and there was no punctuation. Damrell asked Alex Sironen to translate the work, and requested that he do a verbatim translation. Damrell relates what he felt after reading the translation for the first time in the introduction to his grandfather’s autobiography:
...for the first time, I came to know my grandfather more fully. But more than that: I realized that his book made great reading—and its importance extended beyond the potential meaning that it held for me and for his other descendants. The story of Isaac Polvi's life was filled with memorable characters, dramatic events and vivid descriptions of rural Finland and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Moreover, it had an internal structural integrity which seems intentional—as if the author were employing an almost novel-like form... Though an unlettered writer, Polvi's prose had beauty and power—and, I think, a purpose. (vii)

Even with its beauty and power, Damrell was hard pressed to find a publisher for his grandfather's autobiography. Someone suggested to him that he rewrite it—he was reluctant at first, afraid that he would be diminishing its authenticity. He finally took up the task and vowed to remain as true to the original as he could—he focused on cleaning up the grammar and removing repetitious dialogue, i.e. "He said," "I said," "She said" (ix-x). *The Autobiography of a Finnish Immigrant*, by Isaac Polvi, was finally published in 1991, forty years after Isaac's death.

Isaac's boyhood was in post-Feudal Finland. His family did not own the land that they lived on and farmed—a portion of what they grew and earned had to be paid to the owner of their estate every month. Isaac was one of five children. Early in his life, his father left the family and went to America to establish a home for his family. His mother had to do outdoor work during the day and spend all night mending her children's clothes and sewing for others in order to support her family. Isaac's father sent money when he
could to help his family. When Isaac was twelve years old, his mother and all of his younger siblings left to join his father in the United States. Isaac lived with his paternal grandparents, but his grandfather treated him like a slave—"in [his] opinion I was no better than a dog" (40). Isaac left his grandparents' house and begged his way through the countryside for three months. He learned that the poorest of the poor were always willing to help him and feed him if he was honest. The estate owners looked down at him as if he were a mangy dog. These class distinctions soon became apparent to Isaac, and he detested them. At one house that offered him some food and a bed, the man of the house asked Isaac if he would work honestly through the winter for his sister, a widow who was afraid of living alone now that her son had died. Isaac agreed, and he worked honestly and unrelentingly for Sanna. She became a mother to him, and he became a son to her. He skillfully built snares and trapped a plentitude of fowl and fish. Sanna and Isaac wanted nothing, and they were able to sell birds in town for money, which Sanna offered to Isaac since he was solely responsible for their capture. However, Isaac refused because Sanna gave him everything he needed—clothing, food, and most importantly, motherly love. Isaac stayed with Sanna through the winter, but when spring came and the snow melted, Isaac knew he had to return to the village of his grandparents to receive any letters that his family may have sent from America. His mother wrote that she would soon send money for his ticket to America. Isaac, however, thought it best to not tell his mother what he had been doing for the last year because he was ashamed that he had been a tramp for three months—and she had always taught him that if he did not want to reveal a piece of information, it is better to say nothing at all instead of lying.
It was several months before Isaac crossed the Atlantic—during the summer before his departure he worked as a hired farmhand and showed how adept he was in the handling of animals when he tamed an unruly colt that no one else could control:

The boys marveled and... asked me why I placed my hand on the horse’s withers before putting the bit in its mouth. ‘It’s a gesture of friendship to an animal,’ I said, ‘a promise to be a friend. Be friendly to your horse, boys. Don’t jerk it around or swear at it. Speak pleasantly and the horse will surely serve you willingly and well. (86)

He gained the respect of all who knew him and he was known as an honest, hard-working, loyal young man. Before he left Finland, Isaac was amongst people where he observed that there were no class distinctions—everyone was equal.

Isaac immigrated to America on the Urania. When he arrived in New York, he saw a “Negro” for the first time in his life. The tag attached to his coat told officials that Isaac’s final destination was Calumet, Michigan\(^2\). After many long train rides, he finally arrived. It was Election Day—November 4, 1894. His parents had a large group of male boarders who paid ten dollars a month when they could. Many were out of work because of a depression. Isaac’s father was alien to him because he had not seen him in nine years, and his father was unsympathetic towards him—the only thing his father wanted was for Isaac to find a job so that he could help support the family. It was not long before Isaac was working in the copper mines. Isaac

\(^2\) See Appendix A
many accidents and deaths in the mines—one day a slab of rock broke loose from overhead and fell on a man’s shoulder, ripping his arm off. “His heart was exposed and still beating, but not for long. I took hold of him...and his Finnish partner came to help. We dragged him clear first thing, because we knew more rocks would fall” (135). Isaac, too, had several brushes with death, and declared he would no longer put his life at such high risk. Thereafter, he always worked surface jobs—some of them no cleaner than underground mining, however. One summer he worked for extremely good wages emptying the outhouses of the mining company’s houses. The tenants of these houses would offer the men that emptied their outhouses glass after glass of beer, and soon Isaac was drinking everyday. He soon realized that drinking would interfere with his goals in life, and immediately joined The Good Hope Temperance Society.

After the summer outhouse job was over, he traveled all over Copper Country in order to find work. A short time later, he met his future wife, Annu. Isaac became a United States citizen in 1900, and he married Annu on November 9, 1902, and they moved into a flat together. Their son John was born the September following their marriage. By this time, Isaac was working as a blacksmith. He worked this job for sixteen years and earned enough to support his family (which
included a second child). Finally, he saved enough money to begin work on his own log home in the woods. Isaac spent six months in the woods alone, building his home with his own two hands. That is *sisu*—or as Isaac calls it, “intestinal fortitude” (142). His wife and children were finally able to join him, and they lived fulfilling lives in the woods of Upper Michigan.

Polvi’s writing style is simple, but that simplicity is what makes his work so distinctive. The Finns have always considered themselves a “simpler” people, in the best sense of the word. The beauty of his tale comes from its simplicity and its straightforward approach to storytelling, and by no means does the spare language detract from its power, but rather adds to it. The unpretentious language is much like the unaffected verse of the *Kalevala*, “capturing in words the very feel of life itself.”

Polvi’s life story was similar to the story of thousands of Finns—it depicts both rural life in Finland and the immigrant life in Upper Michigan with unflinching honesty. No matter what obstacles arose, Isaac is never afraid, and he holds fast to the morals instilled in him by his mother. Polvi’s work presents the quintessence of *sisu*.

It is fortunate this piece of Finnish and American literary history did not go undiscovered in the Polvi farmhouse. Far too long has the canon of immigrant literature been void of a Finnish voice. The Finns were a minority among immigrants, but their contributions were no less important to American literature than those in the majority. The Finns may have been proud and they may have been stubborn, but like all immigrant groups, they helped to shape America into what it is today. *The Autobiography of a Finnish Immigrant* paints a deeply moving, representative picture of the oft forgotten American Finn and “belong[s] as much to the world as to the Finnish folkloric tradition
and the regional history of the upper Midwest” (Damrell 195). I only hope the recognition this work deserves will grow in years to come.
Appendix A: Pictures

Page:

10 – “Finnish Copper Strike Parade. Finnish immigrants played an active role as strikers in the mining districts in northern Minnesota and northern Michigan around 1910” (Norman and Runblom, between 168-69).

11 – “A Finnish lumberjack in northern Michigan drives a sledge loaded with logs” (Engle 45).

13 – “Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Republic, Michigan” (Holmio, between 228-29).


20 – “Some Finnish American newspapers” (Kero 129).

21 – “Finnish American magazines from the beginning of the 20th century” (Kero 130).


27 – “The steamship Urania, carrying 509 passengers, prepares to leave Finland in 1893” (Engle 37). This is the ship that carried Isaac Polvi across the Atlantic Ocean.

28 – “The Good Hope Temperance Society, 1900. Isaac Polvi is sitting in the front row facing the camera, third from the right, wearing a black hat and a bow tie. Annu, in a white hat and blouse, is looking over his left shoulder” (Polvi 180).

28 – “Isaac and Annu Polvi, a wedding portrait, 1902” (Polvi 161).
Appendix A (continued)

Additional pictures:

(Hoglund, facing page 22)
(Hoglund, facing page 102)
Works Cited


