

JOURNAL OF
FINNISH STUDIES

Volume 20 Number 2 November 2017
ISSN 1206-6516
ISBN 978-1-937875-91-6

LAKES, ROCK, FOREST: PLACING FINNISH CANADIAN HISTORY

Samira Saramo
*University of Turku*¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines uses of landscape in Finnish Canadian autobiographical writing. By framing relationships between people and landscapes as dynamic and interactive, this analysis inquires about the persistence of the Finnish Canadian “landscape myth”—that Finns settled there *because of* the landscape. These life writing narratives are situated within the traditions of Finnish nationalism, Finnish and Canadian settler narratives, and Finnish immigration historiography, yet are viewed as examples of the diverse ways that individuals use, understand, and represent their connections with place and landscape. The article analyzes Nelma Sillanpää’s *Under the Northern Lights* (1994) and Aili Grönlund Schneider’s *The Finnish Baker’s Daughters* (1986), further contextualized by additional Finnish Canadian autobiographical works. Though focused on Finnish experiences in Canada, this work contributes to broader discourses on Finnish Great Lakes identities.

Keywords: Finnish Canadians, autobiography, landscape, place, life writing

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly heard in the Great Lakes region that Finnish immigrants settled there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of the familiar

1 The author would like to acknowledge the financial and intellectual support of the John Morton Center for North American Studies at the University of Turku. Additional thanks go to the JMC Research Network members who provided invaluable feedback on this work in its development and the article reviewers.

landscape. The lakes, rock, and forest may have been a home-like environment for Finnish migrants, but settlement choices are often more complex. The realities of immigration policy, job availability, land-granting schemes, and chain-migration patterns may explain more about the history of settlement patterns.² However, the prevalence and long-term persistence of this “landscape myth” can teach us about the evolving identities and experiences of Finnish Canadian immigrants, and their affective relationships with place. Finnish immigrants have collectively participated in developing this notion, by drawing on landscape in varied and individual ways to shape their identities and to situate themselves in the world. The Finnish immigrant landscape myth can also be tied to a long history, finding voice in nineteenth-century Finnish nationalism and further perpetuated by twentieth-century Finnish North American academic discourse. Regardless of landscape’s role in determining settlement, landscape is an integral and continuing character in Finnish Canadian narratives.

This article examines Finnish Canadian autobiographical narratives as a case study for understanding the endurance and multiple meanings of the landscape myth, and for linking Finnish nationalism with the Canadian tradition of settler narratives. These narratives provide an opportunity to analyze how Finnish immigrants have represented landscape in their own words. While the discourses are situated in a Canadian context, they speak to broader Finnish Great Lakes identities and remind scholars of ethnicity of the integral role landscape plays in shaping and representing immigrant experiences. After introducing Finnish and Canadian landscape nationalisms, the article turns to the uses of place in Nelma Sillanpää’s *Under the Northern Lights* (1994) and Aili Grönlund Schneider’s *The Finnish Baker’s Daughters* (1986), further contextualized by additional Finnish Canadian autobiographical narratives. An interdisciplinary analysis of these sources situates the immigrant writers in the broader production of transnational Finnishness and allows an interrogation of how landscape serves the construction and maintenance of both personal and collective identities.³

2 Key studies about Finnish settlement in Canada include Saarinen 1999; Lindström 1992; Kero 1996; Roinila 2000; and Karni 1981. Important Finnish American studies include Engle 1975; Ross 1978; Karni et al. 1988; Kaunonen 2009; and Kostiaainen 2014.

3 These two works are the most widely available Finnish Canadian autobiographies. The fact that the Finnish Canadian diaspora has produced a rather small collection of published migration memoirs and autobiographies, in stark contrast to the extensive corpus of works by Finns in the United States, merits further study and analysis.

LIFE WRITING AND LANDSCAPE

The narratives are brought together under the umbrella of *life writing*, providing a framework for exploring how individuals have interpreted and narrated their experiences.⁴ Life writing reveals both the conventions and patterns in the narration of experience, and the multitude of individual attitudes, impressions, and representations. In the introduction to *Nordic Landscapes* (2008), editors Michael Jones and Kenneth R. Olwig reflect on key studies of landscape. They position Michael P. Conzen's 1990 anthology *The Making of the American Landscape* as a model because the work is "both lively and personal, as any book about place ought to be" (Jones and Olwig 2008, xii). This line resonates with students of life writing—perhaps no source type can prove more lively and personal. As much as life writing is about the people who tell their stories, these texts are *about* and *of* the places in which these lives are set. In "Reflections on the Historical Landscapes of Finland," W. R. Mead (2008) notes that it is difficult to ascertain how Finns in the past "looked upon the landscape that was the setting for their daily lives" (425–26). However, Mead accepts that "[d]oubtless, it was simply accepted for what it was" (426). Such a conclusion proves unsatisfactory. Finnish immigrant life writing demonstrates that the natural environment serves as an actor in the daily experiences narrated; to gain entry into these narrated worlds, the role of landscape must be integrated into the reading of these sources.

This article primarily utilizes the term *landscape* in its discussion of place. This terminological choice is a nod to the historical uses of "landscape" in the Finnish and Canadian projects of nation-making. However, the fluid definitions of both *landscape* and *place*—let alone *space*—continue to be significant in history, geography, philosophy, literature, and gender and cultural studies, among other disciplines.⁵ Therefore, it is useful to situate Finnish North American landscape within this dialogue. The concept of *landscape* is, as Tim Cresswell has put it, "an intensely visual idea" (2004, 10). The word *landscape* does inherently evoke the act of looking and perspective taking, a notion very successfully explored by Lea Rojola in "From High in the Hills Down to the Marshes: Nation, Nature, and Gender in Finnish Literature" (2009). This actor-viewing-object positioning suggests a one-directional process of meaning-making, which occurs through distance and contrast. Cresswell goes so far as to say, "We do not live in landscape—we look at it" (2004, 11).

4 Key studies of life writing include Smith and Watson 2010; Kadar 1992; Fitzpatrick 1994; Gerber 2006; and Kadar et al. 2005.

5 Of ongoing importance in defining the concepts are Tuan 1977; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1998.

However, contemporary landscape painting, such as the work of Canadian painter Luke Nicol (www.lukenicol.com), vividly reminds us that landscapes are not only viewed and experienced from the vantage point of distant vistas, landscapes are also close, everyday, and raw. In this way, people live in landscapes, and *landscape*, as used in this article, is taken as dynamic and interactive. This conceptualization also acknowledges the liveliness of landscape so powerfully captured in Keith H. Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996).

Landscape is unique to its time and broader place in Finnish immigrant history, as well as to each narrator's sense of identity. Individuals and communities construct landscapes, but landscape also has agency and "communicates to us" (Monk 1984, 23). This article strives to highlight the physical and tangible nature of landscape, as well as people's interactions with their environment. This is a response to works on landscape that take the physical environment for granted. For example, though providing a thoughtful analysis of how a move away from lyric poetry has allowed a deeper expression of Finnish American identities, Andrew Grace's "Landscape and Identity in Finnish-American Poetry" features very little landscape (2007). Grace convincingly demonstrates that the Minnesota landscape was crucial to identity formation, yet the landscape itself is not presented with any agency. Anne Whiston Spirn has argued that landscape is "loud with dialogues" and that only the concept of *landscape* sufficiently captures the "embeddedness" of people and place (1998, 17). Landscape carries, to use Raija Taramaa's words, "history, memories, myths, moods, and smells" (2007, 143).

Kirsten Hastrup argues that the landscape "is not simply a surface, or a stage upon which people play their social roles; it is part of the social space" (2008, 53). As a "social space," then, Hastrup compellingly demonstrates how landscape for the Icelandic is "deeply historicized" and "imbued with emotion" (53–54). In the case of Finnish Canadian narratives, landscape is historically grounded in the tradition of Finnish connections and relationships with nature and also in the settler narratives of Canada. Narrations of landscape following these traditions carry emotional charge, seen in both positive and negative identifications. "Sense of place" is formed through feeling, which involves both individuals and collectives (Rose 1995, 88–89). Landscape is integral to writing about Finnish immigrant sociability. Emotional uses of landscape also highlight the ambivalent roles of both "wilder-ness" and urban landscaping in the immigrants' sense of self and place in Canada. Rojola reminds us that "[l]andscape is always somebody's landscape" (2009, 105). In

Finnish Canadian life writing, landscape finds form and meaning through a complex layering of traditions, expectations, and viewpoints.

USES OF LANDSCAPE IN FINNISH NATION-BUILDING

The Finnish word *maa* refers to land, soil, dirt, and ground, but also to countryside, nation, world, and earth. The natural earth and the constructed world are linked in the Finnish language. Nature and landscape have played an important role in the assertion of Finnish identity and nationalism. While Finnish people's personal and communal relationships with the forest and waterways have ancient roots, nineteenth-century Finnish intelligentsia utilized landscape to claim a Finnish nation and character distinct from the Swedish and Russian. These visions of Finland were commonly voiced through works in the language of nineteenth-century Finland's educated classes: Swedish. Perhaps owing to the challenge posed by the language question, the Finnish landscape came to serve as a powerful tool. This "Finnish" landscape-oriented nationalism, though having its unique characteristics, can also be viewed as an extension of its time's broader Western landscape nationalism, borrowing from French and German naturalism and romanticism (see, e.g., Landon 1999). Though some viewed closeness with nature as a sign of Finnish primitiveness and a lack of culture, and as something to be overcome,⁶ the national landscape, nonetheless, persevered as the dominant symbol of Finnishness. Literature and the visual arts were the primary vehicle for elaborating this image and connection. Perhaps the example best known outside of Finland is the epic *Kalevala*, published in 1835 and expanded in 1849. It tells the tale of the Finnish people and their deep connection to nature, collected orally from Karelian villages by Elias Lönnrot. The agency of nature is vividly portrayed and, as Alvar Aalto noted, in the *Kalevala*, "every element is nature, constantly alive" (Ivask 1980, 5). The impact of the *Kalevala* on Finnish people's sense of self has extended to North America, and Finnish North Americans several generations removed from the Finnish landscape still turn to its imagery to define and reimagine notions of Finnishness in personalized ways.

As with the epic *runos*, Finnish identity and Finnish views of landscape have also been shaped by *Maamme kirja* (Book of our land). Zacharias Topelius (1818–98), scholar of history, theology, medicine, and geography, was closely linked to

6 Östman (2008) has offered an insightful gendered reading of Finnish connections to nature and shown the ways that Finnish historian Väinö Voionmaa (1869–1947) de-emphasized nature in order to depict Finns as manly, rational, and civilized.

prominent Finnish nationalists, including the national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg. Deeply religious, Topelius believed that God had a special plan for Finland, having blessed it in size and beauty (Tiitta 1994, 106). Topelius argued that education had to be “lively” (Fin. *elävä*) and speak to the experiences of contemporary Finns, and he devoted much of his career to writing children’s texts (Tiitta 1994, 106). Topelius’s *Boken om vårt land* was originally published in Swedish in 1875 and the Finnish-language *Maamme kirja* appeared in 1876. It became the school geography reader until the 1950s. By the 1990s, 2,500,000 copies of *Maamme kirja* had been printed in the small nation of Finland.⁷ The influence of the work has been vast.

Maamme kirja introduced generations of Finns to the geography, history, and society of their *isänmaa* (fatherland) through carefully crafted narratives, poems, songs, and images. After the introductory “*Aamulaulu*” (Morning song), young readers were guided to think about the comfort and familiarity of their homes, and their deep love for this place. These reflections of home then led to bigger contemplations about the meaning of *isänmaa*. While it was easy for children to understand their love of home, it was much more abstract to imagine the vastness of nation:

A lot is different there than at our home. The roads are different, the houses are different, the people are different. I might even get lost there, where I’ve never been. No one knows me there and I don’t know anyone either. How can I love a strange land [*maa*]! How can I be happy, cheerful, and familiar with strangers!”⁸ (Topelius [1876] 1934, 8)

As a solution, Finnish landscape and nature is integrated into each component of *Maamme kirja*, making the fatherland as familiar as the mountain ash, birch, berries, and lake of the homestead (Topelius [1876] 1934, 7–8).

The Topelian vision of Finland, as characterized by its diverse landscape, successfully captured the spirit of contemporary geopolitical, cultural, and social developments. As influential as *Maamme kirja* was, its readers, nonetheless, applied their own experiences, local upbringing, and relationships with nature to their interpretations of its lessons. As Reino Kero (1974) has shown, by the 1870s, Finnish

7 Consider that the Finnish population was approximately 2.6 million in 1900, 4 million in 1950, and just under 5 million in 1990 (Miettinen 2009, 1).

8 Translated by author. Original text is the following: “Paljonhan siellä on toisin kuin meillä kotona. Tiet ovat toisenlaiset, talot ovat toisenlaiset, ihmiset ovat toisenlaiset. Saatanhan eksyä siellä, missä en ikinä ole ollut. Kukaan ei minua siellä tunne enkä minäkään ketään tunne. Kuinka saatan vierasta maata rakastaa! Kuinka saatan olla onnellinen, iloinen ja tuttavallinen vierasten ihmisten luona!” (Topelius [1876] 1934, 8).

people were becoming more mobile, with spheres of movement and interaction expanding outward. This mobility allowed people to develop new and varying views of their surroundings. Finnish immigrants in Canada could also be connected to the Topelius landscape and homeland. Many had read *Maamme kirja* themselves at school in Finland, while others discovered it in North America among the precious Finnish books in the family collection or from an immigrant-community lending library. Even if they had had no direct engagement with *Maamme kirja*, parents often passed along ideas about the Topelian Finnish landscape, ensuring that second-generation Finnish immigrants were exposed to this world orientation. The above-quoted passage resounds in an immigrant context. When faced with uncertainties and the challenge of loving a strange land, Finnish immigrants could, again, turn to nature and the landscape to make the unknown *familiar* (used with all its connotations of connection, belonging, and ownership).

LANDSCAPE IN (FINNISH) CANADIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Though Finnish enclaves could be found scattered across North America, the impact of the Finnish presence was most pronounced around the Great Lakes. Northern Ontario and the Lake Superior and Lake Huron regions were home to a significant percentage of the approximately 44,000 Finns who lived in Canada in 1931 (Dominion Bureau of Statistics Canada 1931, Table 4). It is also this rugged landscape that made the Finnish immigrant landscape myth possible. While the Finnish immigrants themselves made their place in these North American environments through an array of strategies and identifications, scholars interested in understanding these migrant communities found a “natural” point of interest in the landscape. Take, for example, Eugene Van Cleef (1887–1983), a U.S. American Professor of Geography at The Ohio State University and an early scholar of Finnish North Americans (American Philosophical Society Archives website). Van Cleef studied Finnish settlement patterns in Canada and the United States and actively correlated landscape in Finland to North American settlement choice. In a 1952 *Geographical Review* article, “Finnish Settlement in Canada,” Van Cleef states, “With few exceptions, the Finns in Canada reside where both the terrain and the climate resemble those of their native land” (253). Making his position clear, he continues, “[t]o be sure, no ‘Canadian Rockies’ rise majestically from Finland’s surface. But neither have large numbers of Finns settled in the Rockies.” Without the appropriate landscape, such a claim suggests, there could be no Finns. Van Cleef’s depictions

empower the landscape with the ability to lure the Finnish people and the landscape myth entrenched its presence in Finnish North American historiography.

Varpu Lindström's study of Finnish Canadian women, first a 1986 York University doctoral dissertation and then published and popularized in 1988 by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, stands as a symbol of a new wave of Finnish immigrant historiography, firmly rooted among its time's social and feminist histories. Already in the third paragraph of *Defiant Sisters*, the Finnish-Canadian landscape overlap is introduced: "[h]abitation is made possible by the Gulf Stream, which has a tempering effect on the Finnish climate. Hence much of the land resembles northern Ontario" (Lindström 1988, 8). Lindström, however, complicates the claims of the landscape myth:

Finnish immigrants were attracted to Ontario because here they could combine wage work with a setting similar to Finland. The women described the clear lakes, the beautiful birch trees, and the moss on the smooth granite rocks. "It was just like home!" But beauty was not enough, and economic considerations superseded aesthetic ones. If, however, the Finns could combine both, [. . .] it was a happy occurrence. (Lindström 1988, 33)

Though demonstrating how practicalities determined settlement, Lindström nonetheless maintains the significance of the landscape's allure, as evidenced through the words of oral history interviewee Helmi Vanhatalo: "I had to see a tree, I could almost taste the smell of a pine tree. I longed for enough fresh water to have a good bath. Eventually it became an obsession" (Lindström 1988, 33). The inherentness of Finnish immigrants' call to the land promoted in the tradition of Finnish nationalism, by scholars of Finnish North America, and in the immigrants' own narrations, then, compounded to strengthen the landscape myth.

To further entangle Finnish North American landscape narrations, the life writing can also be seen to exist within the context of a long tradition of Canadian settler narratives and (settler) nationalist identities that rely on landscape imagery.⁹ Ramsay Cook identifies contrast and the landscape as Canada's two strategies, in the colonial project of nation-building, for establishing its distinctiveness from "Americanness" (1974, 263). Canadian landscape painting, epitomized in the twentieth century by

9 In the Canadian context, most often the contrasting autobiographical works of sisters Catharine Parr Trill (1836) and Susanna Moodie ([1852] 1970) come to mind. Schissel (2004) analyzes American pioneer women's narratives.

the work of the Group of Seven, created the national image that made Canada stand apart from the European tradition, relying on “rich and novel” landscapes (Cook 1974, 270).¹⁰ Claiming ownership of the national landscape through art and literature further served as a tool to legitimate the appropriation of Indigenous lands. Finnish immigrant life writing, like autobiographical works representing a range of ethnic identifications, can be read as attempts to establish a place for the narrators and their community in the broader Canadian or U.S. American national narratives. Many of the life writers and many more in the general population of Finnish immigrants acutely felt language, class, and gender disadvantages in North America; life writing provided an opportunity to work through some of those challenges. Emphasizing contributions to society and oneness with the adopted landscape was an important strategy for claiming North American space.

Without diminishing personal hardships or the impact of outsider status, Finnish immigrants are often able to make such claims by leaning on their white, Christian, European privilege (Kendall 2002). This relative ease stands in contrast to, for example, the black Canadian women writers studied by Sharon Morgan Beckford (2008), who “demonstrate what it means to live in a state of ‘systemic Blacklessness,’ always having to invent and reinvent, assert and reassert the self in relation to place” (464). Similarly, Eleanor Ty (2010) has found that Asian Canadian narratives challenge the landscape expectations established by white, Anglo, European settler narratives.¹¹ The writers studied by Ty “focus on interior rather than exterior scenes, on psychic states rather than on physical landscapes” (163). The Canadian wilderness landscape does not appear as a place of peace or empowerment in their narratives. Access to and intimate knowledge of landscape may be seen as essential to establishing and claiming place identity. The fact that the North American boreal forest and rocky Great Lakes, where most Finnish immigrants settled, so closely resemble the forested environment of Finland that it enables the Finnish immigrant landscape myth further speaks to the privileged position these immigrants held in making place claims on North American history and landscape. This landscape similarity aids Finnish immigrants to implicitly assert a “natural” place in Canada and the United States, which may not befit the experiences of Caribbean, African, and Asian immi-

10 Cook quoting a *Quebec Gazette* art critic in 1883.

11 While Ty’s argument is convincing and her work an important contribution to expanding the diversity of voices representing Canadian immigrant experiences, the article’s “European” counterweight seems to mean only Anglo women. A more nuanced analysis of Europeaness would result in a richer and more complex view of place and belonging in Canada.

grant life writers. "Landscape," as Rojola reminds us, "is not just the land itself but the land seen from a particular point of view or perspective" (Rojola 2009, 105).

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF SILLANPÄÄ AND GRÖNLUND SCHNEIDER

Two Finnish Canadian perspectives are offered by Nelma Sillanpää's *Under the Northern Lights: My Memories of Life in the Finnish Community of Northern Ontario* and Aili Grönlund Schneider's *The Finnish Baker's Daughters*. A comparative analysis of these works is well suited, as the two women came to Northern Ontario within a year of each other, and both eventually made Timmins their home. Both life stories represent fairly typical working-class Finnish Canadian experiences, echoing the historical findings of Lindström (2010), Saarinen (1999), Kero (1996), and others. Sillanpää, maiden name Johnson, was a second-generation Finn, born in Warren, Ohio, in 1917, who moved to Canada as a four-year-old girl. Johnson experienced life in several of Northern Ontario's bush camps and communities, and her life story shows a family on the move in search of work.¹² Aili Grönlund, on the other hand, was born in Turku, Finland, and was already fifteen when her family moved to Timmins from Helsinki in 1922.

While the timing of settlement was the same for both the Johnson and Grönlund families, the life writers viewed Northern Ontario through different geocultural perspectives and from different points in their life cycles. Janice Monk has emphasized the importance of life cycle in shaping perceptions of landscape (1984, 29). Looking back at the age of four, as compared to fifteen, brings up very different types of memories and emotions, and, therefore, the forms of the life writers' reflexive narrative self-positioning vary. Furthermore, it is worth keeping in mind that the life writers' mature adult perceptions of landscape can impact how landscape experiences from their youth are presented.

The two life-writing sources, furthermore, present themselves in different ways. *The Finnish Baker's Daughters*, published in 1986, considers itself an "autobiographical novel," though the author serves as the narrator (Grönlund Schneider 1986, 11). *Under the Northern Lights* was published in 1994 and positions itself as traditional autobiography. Perhaps owing to these differences in perspective and approach, the contrast between Sillanpää and Schneider's depictions of landscape, wilderness, and place proves striking. Yet, even with their differences, the works

12 For more about Finnish immigrant labor transiency, see Campbell 2008; Radforth 1987; Lindström 2010.

collectively demonstrate the use of established tropes in both Finnish and Canadian representations of landscape.

In Nelma Sillanpää's autobiography, the Northern Ontario landscape is ever-present, welcome, and beautiful. The autobiography's title, *Under the Northern Lights*, places her in direct relation with nature. Jennifer Eastman Attebery's (2007) analysis of Swedish American life writers' metonymical self-placement "in," "out," and "under" nature can be extended to Sillanpää's relationship with the landscape (116–18). The lakes, rocks, and forests of Sillanpää's world are described, named, and decorated with adjectives. The scenery is "beautiful," the lakes "gorgeous," and the bays "lovely" (for example, Sillanpää 1994, 9, 12, 13, 19). Elliott Lake, Ontario, is described as a "jewel in the wilderness," which well sums up Sillanpää's view of her natural environment (106). Sillanpää's life story tells of growing up with parents who worked in the bush, and, as a child, she played in the bush camp clearings. The natural environment was very much a part of her upbringing and appears to have made a significant foundational impression. Place-based identity was particularly strong and positive in Sillanpää's case.

This place identity was called into question when she initially moved to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, where she lived for a year as a newlywed after World War II. At first, the foreign landscape signified the major change that she was experiencing. "The scenery was very bleak and monotonous," wrote Sillanpää, "with nothing to see but snow and ice—and a few trees" (1994, 74). The landscape of the Northwest Territories, in its depicted absence, stood in contrast to the richness and abundance of nature in Northern Ontario. The absence of landscape or its invisibility caused by a cover of snow is also employed as a marker of change, difference, and hardship in Sirpa Kaukinen's Finnish Canadian immigrant story, "Ensimmäinen talvi" ("The first winter") (Kaukinen 1979, 46). One of the most striking passages of Sillanpää's autobiography, however, comes as she describes the end of her time in the arctic north, before returning to Timmins:

It took only a winter of snow and bitterly cold weather to make me appreciate the beauty of this land in the spring—the vast territory of rocks and cliffs, the beautiful skies and the deep blue waters of Great Slave Lake. I felt a little sadness when I thought of leaving. I also knew that, were we to stay longer, the land would get into our blood and we would become true Yellowknifers. (Sillanpää 1994, 84)

The emotionally charged imagery of land entering blood is significant. It suggests a fluidity between person and landscape and demonstrates the active role of landscape in making people—both *a* people (Yellowknifers) and a person (transforming an individual). Such powerful imagery leaves unanswered the question of how Sillanpää saw Northern Ontario flowing in her blood.

In the case of Aili Grönlund Schneider, place identity works as an identification *against* her new position and landscape in Canada. The landscape of Timmins is largely absent from the life writing, though the introduction informs readers that the town was “perched on the gold-rich rock of northern Ontario” and that the “wide Mattagami River ran through it” (Grönlund Schneider 1986, 13, 20). These informative descriptions do not display the positive emotional rhetoric of connection so present in Sillanpää’s writing, but instead evoke the powerful, masculine grandiloquence of Canadian nationalist discourse.¹³ Few kind words about the region’s landscape can be found. Timmins and Canada, in Grönlund Schneider’s narration, were “raw” and “backwoods,” and the winds were “fierce” and “beat down” on the forlorn newcomers (14, 20). In fact, in contrast to Sillanpää’s “beautiful Algoma District,” for Grönlund Schneider’s family, her mother in particular, Timmins was only worthy of the name “this place” (13).

However, for Grönlund Schneider, Finnish nature was kind and beautiful and worthy of care. Having left Finland as a teenager, the actual and emotional place value of Finland holds a first-hand position for Grönlund Schneider, who could vividly recall her Finnish home (and, though speculation, perhaps even her school lessons in Topelius’s *Maamme kirja*). For Sillanpää, born in North America, attachment to Finland was established through second-hand transference from her parents and the Finnish immigrant community. Despite Grönlund Schneider’s own frame of reference, her mother’s opinions serve as the narrative’s dialectic between beautiful Finland and detestable Canada, whose shores the family was “dumped” upon (Grönlund Schneider 1986, 17). Mother loved Finland and Helsinki: “She loved the sea, the rocky islands that shielded the city from open water and the long lovely inlets . . .” (14). Grönlund Schneider’s writing does not pronounce feelings toward Finland in the narrative “I.” Beth L. Virtanen (2006) has analyzed Grönlund Schneider’s work as a first-generation immigrant endeavor to preserve Finnish memory and heritage for future generations, which may, in part, account for the positive emphasis on Finnish landscape. However, as Virtanen contends, “no amount of re-enactment can

13 See for example the discussion in Russell 1966.

mitigate the effects of alienation” that Grönlund Schneider’s narrative conveys so strongly (9).

The Canadian outdoors were unwelcoming, and “this place” is depicted primarily from the inside out in *The Finnish Baker’s Daughters*. For example, the primary flora found in the autobiographical novel are the houseplants that create a civilized and respectful air to the family home. The reader is introduced to the flower arrangements on the daily coffee table, and the year-round indoor flowers that Mother carefully tends (Grönlund Schneider 1986, 36, 85). Again, it seems as if only Finnish nature is acceptable, since Mother’s houseplants are grown from seeds sent from Finland (85). It is noteworthy that even the arrival of spring is described from the vantage point of the domestic interior: “After many months we were actually able to see through our windows!” (60). The prominent description of interior domestic spaces offered by Grönlund Schneider places her narrative in a broader tradition of women’s life writing. While women’s life writing often details interior spaces, filling rooms with described furniture, food, and household items, such descriptions are much rarer in men’s narratives (for example, Saramo 2014, 162–63). Veli Eronen’s (2001) autobiography, *Kanadan kutsu* (Canada’s call) compares to *The Finnish Baker’s Daughters* in that both are focused on their family’s daily life in the early phases of Canadian settlement and both are set primarily indoors. However, while Grönlund Schneider’s family home is vividly portrayed, Eronen’s narration offers dialogue and images of people, but the setting remains undeveloped.

NARRATIONS OF WILDERNESS

The Finnish Canadian life writers utilize dichotomized wilderness description, much in the tradition of both North American settler narratives and Finnish writing. The duality of human relationships with wilderness has been much analyzed by scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds, and Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1973) remains an influential work in this field. Wilderness is beautiful, spiritual, and carries connotations of home, but wilderness is also fearsome and dangerous. Nelma Sillanpää’s narrative moves between the two points of view quite quickly. A particular bush camp area was “densely covered with trees” and “thick bush” with “wild animals” and unknown dangers (Sillanpää 1994, 9). However, it was also “a wild and naturally beautiful place” where children loved to explore (though within the safety parameters set out by adults). Sillanpää’s autobiography also demonstrates the differentiation between wilderness and landscape. Another bush camp’s setting keeps young Nelma close to her mother’s cook shack: “I was

too scared to go far because the clearing was very little—and the bush was so near” (Sillanpää 1994, 25). Visibility is an important factor in the construction of landscape (Rojola 2009). This particular wilderness is not appealing because the proximity of the forest does not allow for a comfortable vantage point. The border space between the people’s camp and the unknown is limited. The clearing being “very little” signals the liminal space of the camp on the border of wilderness and constructed landscape.

Just as Sillanpää could fear the forest as a child, Ari Aukusti Lehtinen has elaborated on a broader “landscape of fear” present in Finnish attitudes toward nature (Lehtinen 2008, 478, referencing Tuan 1979). Like Nash, Lehtinen argues—in familiar form—that “domination” has been the response to trying to overcome this fear.¹⁴ Lehtinen writes:

Cultural continuity in Finland has always been focused on the question of the success of living in and off the forests. Every generation has been forced to face this challenge: a realm of necessities caused by conditions in the northern backwoods. The Finnish forest landscape is a mirror of historical experiences, and it reflects and contains the Finnish attitudes toward forest, land, and nature in general. This historical forest ethos, sedimented in the landscape, is a kind of largely agreed and adopted mental orientation, within which human creativity is mainly aimed toward expanding control over the natural environment. (Lehtinen 2008, 463–64)

Lehtinen’s Finnish “forest ethos” of domination can also be applied to the Canadian state’s expansionist mentality, carried out by immigrants, charged with settling forests and plains. Finnish Canadian collective history and many life writing narratives strongly evoke a sense of identity that finds meaning through the immigrants’ *sisu*—conceived of as a uniquely Finnish characteristic of perseverance, determination, and “guts”—in not only overcoming the challenges of wilderness but thriving in the difficult natural setting (on *sisu*, see Taramaa 2007).

In order to overcome wilderness, the presence of other Finns is emphasized in the Finnish Canadian narratives. For example, Grönlund Schneider (1986) recounts the tale of her brothers-in-law setting off through bush and over rivers to find their new homesteading sites (88–91). The two greenhorns are terrified by the wilderness, the ominous night, and by the howling of wolves. On their second day, the

14 For Nash (1973), darkness is a further key determinant of this fear.

men set sail on their small raft. “When they had sailed for what they thought must have been miles,” Grönlund Schneider narrates, they spot a sign of habitation (91). The men yell out “hello” and a man comes to the shore. Grönlund Schneider writes: “‘Hello, hello,’ the man called. Both boys stopped still. From his accent they knew the man was a Finn” (91). This Finnish man rescues the new homesteaders, and readers gain the impression that the Finnishness of the savior is a crucial factor in overcoming the wilderness. The unharnessed wilderness of Pike Lake, Ontario, in the late 1920s, is similarly depicted as being tamed by the presence of other Finns. In the narratives of both Klaus Maunu (2007) and Eini Tuomi, the building of the road in the early 1930s was an immense source of pride; the fact that it was built by the Finns made a significant contribution to its value in place identity (Eini Tuomi interviews with author 2012).

The important position of fellow Finns in landscape descriptions can be viewed as an extension of the historical Finnish *talkoohenki*, defined by Taramaa as the “[s]pirit of cooperation for the common good” (Taramaa 2007, 116). The concept refers to communal work, such as building Finnish immigrant halls and collectively clearing fields, but it is also firmly rooted in the ancient wilderness, where conditions demanded cooperation for survival (151). While *talkoohenki* was practical, it also provided emotional peace of mind. Describing his childhood homestead, quite isolated in the Northwestern Ontario bush, Maunu wrote about the presence of the Finnish Järvi family at the end of the lake, which made the Maunus feel “not completely alone in the middle of the wilderness” (3).¹⁵

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

Just as Finns served a significant role in making the wilderness familiar and accessible, the Finnish Canadian narratives demonstrate the ways that nature served as a part of the social space with strong ties to leisure and community.¹⁶ In particular, trees are linked with sociability in the life writing sources. Sillanpää (1994) describes the tree at the front of the Finnish Hall in Bruce Mines, Ontario, with “heavy branches starting near the bottom—something like an upside down umbrella” (22). She remembers that “many pleasant hours were spent in the shade of that tree by children playing games, adults talking and visiting, or lovers cooling

15 Translation by the author. Original text: “ei sitä ihan yksin keskellä korpea oltu” (Maunu 2007, 3).

16 This contrasts with the narratives of Asian Canadian writers, for whom “[n]atural landscapes are not represented as recreational spaces or places to commune with nature, but places of hard work” (Ty 2010, 169).

off between dances” (22). Sillanpää also fondly recalls trees at the Finnish co-op’s Idle Hour Park in Timmins, where time was spent enjoying friends’ company on the benches beneath the trees (44–45). While Sillanpää’s descriptions speak to her own personal memories of these trees and their surrounding landscapes, her depictions can also be read as a collective commemoration of this space. The trees stand as a symbol of an idyllic Finnish immigrant collective past that once was. The use of trees as a marker of social space can also be found in Grönlund Schneider’s narrative. However, again, the idealized past is portrayed through Finnish landscape, not Canadian. Grönlund Schneider (1986) narrates Midsummer “walks amongst white birches on velvety paths of fresh green moss,” where people “made young, lifelong promises of friendship and fell in love” (61). This description of positive, vivid, and lively Finnish nature serves as a contrast to the lack of activity in Northern Ontario at *Juhannus*. In these descriptions, the natural setting, and trees in particular, are an integrated and active part of the narrator’s “memory world” (Armstrong 2004).

Though humans were to take charge of nature, there is always a lamenting of wilderness lost or landscape altered. Sillanpää (1994) remembers the whirring of the new generator, introduced at a childhood bush camp, seeming foreign and unnatural in the quiet of the comfortable wilderness (24–25). Likewise, she narrates distress and sadness when a favorite outdoor space, also an important site of the Finnish immigrant community, is turned into a parking lot (99). It should have been, in Sillanpää’s view, turned into a park; the natural landscape would have paid proper homage to the value of the place’s past. With common ambivalence, for all that it brought to Maunu and Tuomi, the Pike Lake Road took away some of the idyll of the community (Eini Tuomi interview 2012).

CONCLUSION

Burt Rairamo’s autobiographical short story, “A Sauna Junket at Lake Wilcox,” provides a first-person narration of a “Thursday evening, July 1959,” when six Finnish Canadian youths cruised from Toronto to the Finnish immigrant saunas on Lake Wilcox (Rairamo 2000, 64). The story presents young Finnish masculinity as urbanized and modern, but in a not-so-remote natural setting and in the company of fellow Finns, the young men find their peace. Rairamo’s story concludes:

As the bright moon appeared high above Lake Wilcox and lowered its silvery moon-beams across the small lake, thus ended the sauna outing for a group of immigrant teenage boys in the late 1950s. We were eagerly

experiencing life in Canada but much of it still within a Finnish context although the inevitable changes were seen and felt coming to us all, to some faster than to others. (Rairamo 2000, 69)

Nature, with the shift from day to night, guides Rairamo's characters from boisterous fun to introspection. In the outdoors, the narrator feels the competing pulls of a Finnish upbringing and tradition and the Canadian present.

Rairamo's description typifies Finnish immigrant writing and demonstrates the assertion of an emerging Finnish Canadian identity. Commenting on the prevalence of saunas, birches, and lakes in Finnish North Americans' writing, Nyman (2010) contends: "While the references to some of the markers of identity may appear cliché-like for a reader approaching them from a Finnish perspective, in their own North American context they are rather markers of difference specifying the Finnish identity and its particular characteristics" (99). In their life writing, Finnish Canadians represent nature in ways unique to their individual perspectives, but they also draw on both North American and Finnish ways of approaching the landscape.

Maamme kirja introduced Finnish children to proverbs that could help to make sense of one's place in the world; many are nature analogies. One such proverb reads: "One's own lands are most beloved / one's own forests most pleasing" (Topelius [1876] 1934, 178).¹⁷ The proverb speaks to belonging, familiarity, and to the Finns' home in nature. By utilizing landscape in their life writing and collective history-making, Finnish North Americans have claimed a place in their adopted homeland. If you travel to the Great Lakes region today, it will not take long to hear that Finnish immigrants moved there because the land is just like in Finland. This "myth"—or immigration simplification—empowers the landscape to pull people in and suggests an essential synergy between Finns and nature. Through narrations of landscape, Finnish immigrants and descendants express diverse identities and reveal their personal relationships with lakes, rock, and forest.

17 Translated by author. Original text: "Omat maat on armahimmat / omat metsät mieluusimmat."

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