

Raija Taramaa, *Stubborn and Silent Finns with 'Sisu' in Finnish-American Literature. An Imagological Study of Finnishness in the Literary Production of Finnish-American Authors* (Oulu: Acta Universitatis Oulienis, 2007), 207 pp., ISBN 978-951-42-8272-7

Immigration has in recent years become a major topic of debate in the United States. The current study, with its focus on Finnish immigration to the U.S. and the ways in which a sense of Finnish ethnicity was created and maintained there, reminds us that immigration and ethnicity is nothing new in American history.

The Finns were a part of the migration waves from Europe that reached American shores from around 1870 to the beginning of the Great Depression, when some 350,000 of them immigrated to the United States. In 1930 the Census bureau recorded some 140,000 Finnish immigrants in the country. The close of the immigration meant that the size of the community declined, and in the 2000 census recorded some 21,000 Finnish immigrants in the U.S. At the same time, however, the bureau also asked the question of the ethnic background of the American people. Some 620,000 individuals indicated that they were of at least partial Finnish ancestry background. These figures suggest that the Finnish-American community today is largely composed of American-born children, grandchildren and beyond of Finnish immigrants.

One of the key questions for all American immigrant and ethnic communities is the way in which their identities are maintained and changed. The main question in this book deals with the sense of Finnishness that exists in the Finnish-American community today, and in particular how it is expressed in the works of five American authors of Finnish background. The study takes its point of departure in an "imagological" approach towards ways in which both national and ethnic identities are produced. This model allows the author to isolate traits that are seen as typically Finnish, and to examine the ways in which they have been transplanted into a Finnish-American cultural context.

She also provides a good overview of how a Finnish-American community was constructed around the turn of the century 1900, paying particular attention to the cultural expressions of that community. The ways in which Finnish immigrants in the U.S. came together as a group is also seen in the light of the larger forces of assimilation, acculturation, and cultural pluralism. Included here is a very useful analysis of the growth of a Finnish-American literature, as it began with the publication of Finnish-language newspapers in the 1870's, but eventually developed into a larger ethnic foreign-language culture.

Taramaa's main empirical analyses are based on six texts from the 1990's by five authors of Finnish background. Three of the authors are women – Mary Caraker, Lynn Laitala, and Paula Robbins; the remaining two – Lauri Anderson and Joseph Damrell – are men. All of the authors come out of different geographic and social parts of the Finnish-American community, and their stories are set in such typical Finnish-American areas as the Pacific Northwest, the Minnesota Iron Range, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and Fitchburg, Mass. They all write in English, although most of them in some ways relate to the Finnish language and regret its loss. The authors certainly

identify with their Finnish background and with the histories of their communities. In her imagological analysis of the elements of Finnishness in the works of these authors, Taramaa underscores several dimensions, namely "sisu" (or Finnish stubbornness), diligence, cleanliness, helpfulness and honesty, reticence, drinking habits, religiosity, and love of nature. Not all of these traits appear in all of the works, and different authors place different emphasis on them. Nevertheless, the author argues that these dimensions of Finnishness have been culturally mediated over time and appear as significant markers of Finnishness in these texts. She also, quite convincingly, argues that these expressions of contemporary Finnish-American ethnicity should be seen as a "symbolic ethnicity" following the line of thinking of Herbert Gans.

Rajja Taramaa has written an interesting analysis of the ways in which a sense of Finnishness has survived in the United States up to the present time. Her results fit in the larger picture of the continuing significance of ethnicity among European-origin groups in the U.S. today. Taramaa points to some traits that might be seen as specifically Finnish – such as "sisu." But by pointing to elements such as honesty, helpfulness, and religiosity, her results also underscore the commonality of ethnicities in the U.S. today. In that way, Taramaa's work points to the possibility for further interesting comparative perspectives.

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