



SOFIA KOTILAINEN

Literacy Skills as Local Intangible Capital

The History of a Rural Lending Library c. 1860–1920

Studia Fennica
Historica 21

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Preface

People's libraries constituted an essential element in popular enlightenment work carried out by supporters of the Finnish national ideal in the countryside in the nineteenth century together with the establishment of elementary schools and the activities of organizations and associations that promoted national values. Since there was no universal compulsory education in Finland at the time, all voluntary and even charitable activities aimed at educating the common people were held in high esteem by members of the higher social groups. But what did the poorer elements of the agricultural population think of all this, and how did they receive these endeavours? To what extent did the enlightenment work produce results that led to an increase in functional reading and writings skills in the remote countryside? In this book I address these questions and others by examining the birth and life of a people's library in rural Central Finland.

This research was carried out as part of a Finnish Academy doctoral research project (The Benefits of Literacy in Everyday Life: The impacts of improved literacy on the opportunities for social advancement in remote local communities [c. 1800–1930], 2011–2014). I am grateful for the funding I received and for the working space provided for me for the duration of the project by the Department of History and Ethnology of the University of Jyväskylä. I further thank the Publishing Committee of the Finnish Literature Society for finally approving the book for publication. Many thanks are likewise due to the editor-in-chief of the *Studia Fennica Historica* series, Professor Pasi Ihalainen. I also thank the publishing coordinator Kati Romppanen and the publishing editor Eija Hukka for their seamless cooperation in preparing the work for publication. In addition, I owe a debt of gratitude to all the archives and libraries that I have visited during my research work. I further thank Jari Järvinen, who drew the maps 1–2 for the book. My warm thanks also go to Gerard McAlester for his expert language editing of the research.

Rauhala, Kivijärvi 1/4/ 2016
Sofia Kotilainen

1. Introduction: A Library for the People?

Have the books on popular lending libraries already been written and read?

The birth of the Finnish lending libraries examined in this book is connected with a long-term Western European trend that had been continuing ever since the time of the Renaissance. It was this trend, which saw the creation and reinforcement of the rural population's enthusiasm for reading¹ (and the desire of people of the higher classes to strengthen it for popular educational or nationalist reasons) that made the lending libraries necessary.² The European libraries of the eighteenth century were typically subscription libraries. In Europe, the ideal of public libraries that were freely available to all sections of the population gradually spread from Britain to other countries.³ In France, municipal libraries had been established in the aftermath of the Revolution and were part of its heritage.⁴ Although the history of libraries goes back well into the Middle Ages in Britain and Ireland, there too public lending libraries intended for all social classes only became common in the course of the nineteenth century. In Britain, municipal libraries funded by local taxation were established after the Public Libraries Act (1850). In the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), legislation on public libraries was enacted considerably later, in the twentieth century, although these countries had begun to provide financial support for libraries before the laws were passed.⁵

Public libraries were created in all the Nordic countries at about the same time, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were modelled on the public libraries in North America, for which the development of libraries in Britain had in turn served as a model. In the mid-nineteenth century, the libraries in the United States, too, were still 'social libraries',⁶ until the first municipal libraries supported by tax revenues were founded in the late 1870s. On the other hand, the libraries intended for the

1 Lyons 2010, 119; Mäkinen 1997, 15–19.

2 Black 1996, 45–46; Karjalainen 1977; Mäkinen 1997.

3 Chartier 1987, 215; Martino 1990, 854–859; Skouvig 2007, 224; Torstensson 1996, 12, 22.

4 Barnett 1973; Markiewicz 2000, 17.

5 Black 2006b, 25–26; Leedham-Green & Webber 2006; Table 1.

6 Crawford 2007; Shera 1949, 51–126.

common people gradually changed from charitable works into institutions for self-improvement.⁷ The Public Library Movement came into being in the mid-nineteenth century in Boston, where public ownership and free use of the library for all were implemented for the first time.⁸

Training in librarianship commenced in America in the course of the nineteenth century, and Melvil Dewey developed an American cataloguing and a classification system, thereby advancing the profession of librarian in a more scientific and professional direction from the 1870s on.⁹ The American public libraries were open free of charge to everyone and were maintained by public funding. Usually their operations were also regulated by legislation. These same principles were adopted in the Nordic countries, where public libraries were born out the traditions established by church libraries (going back to the seventeenth century), reading societies (beginning in the eighteenth century), people's libraries (the forerunners of public libraries, established from the beginning of the nineteenth century on) and elementary school libraries (established in Finland usually in the latter half of the nineteenth century), and they continued the activities of these earlier local libraries, which were generally intended for the use of the common people.¹⁰

There are many rural public libraries in Finland which, after the First, or at the latest, the Second World War, became libraries owned and funded exclusively by the municipalities and intended for the use of all their inhabitants. However, many of them still preserve books from the end of the nineteenth century, although they perhaps show a little wear and tear and the patina of time. Some of them are from even earlier decades. Why have these older collections survived in the modern libraries? Because the history of Finnish public libraries is usually considered to have begun already in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the days when the first lending libraries, or people's libraries, were founded in the countryside, the modern public libraries have considered it to be totally natural that these old collections, which are often separately located from the library's main collection of books as an 'older layer', should be preserved. And although the operations of some of the old popular libraries did not necessarily continue without a break into the middle of the twentieth century, the collections of these old libraries are usually reverently conserved as a reminder of the continuum of the library's activities into modern times.

When working at a summer job in my home parish library about fifteen years ago, I came across such a collection of old books. Its existence was not exactly 'news' to me because at that time I already knew something about the history of libraries in Finland. But when I examined the collection more closely, it brought in a concrete form a fresh perspective on the history of the library of my home community. At the same time, it shattered the simple

7 Held 1963; Rubin 2004, 273–274.

8 Vatanen 2002, 12; Shera 1949, 157–181.

9 Garrison 1979, 5, 106; Rubin 2004, 439–443. In the nineteenth century, the practices of German scholarly libraries provided a model for libraries in the USA too. Vatanen 2002, 27.

10 Eide 2010; Byberg 2009; Mäkinen 2009g, 109–114; Rubin 2004, 284–285; Torstensson 2009.

and consistent picture of the development of the library institution that I had previously formed from general historical descriptions: the view that Finnish libraries were founded towards the end of the nineteenth century and that they now exist as the product of a triumphal progress that lasted almost 150 years. An examination of the library in question¹¹ and a closer scrutiny of earlier research literature on the history of libraries in Finland showed that many such projects in fact failed: libraries fell into disuse and were founded again; collections were lost; and dreams of educating the people were shattered.

In retrospect, the creation and development of Finnish lending libraries would on the surface seem to have been a great success. After the latter half of the nineteenth century, books written in the vernacular language (Finnish) in an endeavour to promote a national awakening and to encourage an enthusiasm for reading were made available in increasing numbers to the Finnish-speaking people, to whom the Lutheran Church had for centuries taught the rudiments of reading literacy in their own mother tongue. At least one library was soon founded in every parish. As predecessors of the national public library institution, the parish popular libraries gradually paved the way for a dense and uniform network of libraries,¹² which by the end of the twentieth century covered the whole country and whose services were free to all citizens.¹³ Education progressed concomitantly with the founding of libraries and promoted the aims of popular enlightenment. In any case, the tale of the birth of the lending libraries, which was initially the product of free improvisation, was moulded by the educators of the people in the nineteenth century into a success story. Their objective was to create a real mass product: 'A library for every village!' was the slogan.¹⁴ Particularly earlier historical research largely, and a little uncritically, repeated the national myth with its slightly fictitious elements, that the would-be enlighteners of the people created.¹⁵

11 I became interested in the history of this lending library already at the turn of the millennium. This work is based on my proseminar thesis in Information Studies (2005) and my presentation at the SHARP conference 'Book Culture from Below – The Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing' in Helsinki, Finland, 17–21 August 2010. This book is part of my postdoctoral researcher's project funded by the Academy of Finland, 2011–2014: *The Benefits of Literacy in Everyday Life: The impacts of improved literacy on the opportunities for social advancement in remote local communities (c. 1800–1930)*, which I started to plan already in 2008, when I wrote the first versions of my research plan.

12 Mäkinen 2009f, 426–430, 432.

13 Subsequently, of course, the virtual data networks of the Internet have annihilated the idea of a library bound to a built concrete space and geographical location. The development of the Internet has been compared with the revolution caused by the development of printing in the fifteenth century. Darnton 2009, xiv.

14 Werkko 1879, 246.

15 On the other hand, a positive development in recent years has been the examination of the history of lending and parish libraries also from more microhistorical perspectives than was previously the case and also the problematization of the historical development in academic theses, studies of local history and other works. See for example Määttä 2014; Ojanen 2011.

But was everything really that easy and simple in the middle of the nineteenth century and the decades that followed? The old book collection of my municipal library only served to arouse more thoughts and questions in me. Where ultimately did the books come from, and what does their existence actually tell us? Many general historical representations simplistically describe a straightforward continuum between the development of the libraries of the late nineteenth century and those of the twentieth century without taking into consideration that perhaps we do not yet possess all the information about the lending libraries that might be available. Were all the small libraries that were established in rural villages towards the end of the nineteenth century identical to each other and equally successful, in the same way as the later public libraries founded after the passing of the Act on People's Libraries (1928), which created a unified national library institution with guaranteed funding from the state? And what about the founders of the lending libraries? Did they all hold convergent opinions about the function of the libraries? And what were the attitudes of the users to the libraries? After all, it was for them that the libraries were founded and maintained.

I claim that there are innumerable important details which we still do not know about the success story of lending libraries in the Nordic countries. There was also a 'grey area', an examination of which may uncover numerous reasons why literacy skills did not always automatically expand rural people's informational capital or enhance their social status. These details may help us to question earlier assumptions, open up new viewpoints and inspire interpretations of various phenomena connected with library history, offer more specific explanations for them and provide an opportunity for conducting more international and transnational (considering interaction between individuals, groups, organizations and states across national borders) comparisons in this field. To these ends, I take a local community as a case study in an examination of the early history of the lending library institution in northern Europe and particularly in the Nordic countries. In other words, I examine how the first lending libraries were founded in outlying rural parishes, why they were founded and why they did not always initially succeed in their aims. This story forms a kind of counter narrative to the traditional view of research on people's libraries, which believes in a fairly linear progression with diligent popular educational efforts automatically producing a better educated and better behaved common people, who would be able not only to utilize their new knowledge in their own lives but also to serve their nation with devotion and obedience.

The history of literacy has been widely and internationally studied for several decades, but only lately has the significance of these skills for people's everyday life been the object of increased attention in microhistory and the history of mentalities.¹⁶ There were considerable differences in the individual readers' levels of literacy and their opportunities to exploit their reading skills in practical life. These differences partly arose from the different ways in which reading literacy was defined in different times and the level of skills

16 Blommaert 2004; Jarlbrink 2010; Lyons 2013; Sulkunen 1999.

that those who taught the rural people to read expected them to attain in any particular age. Rather than accepting the idea of a 'triumphal progress', the success of the library institution in its task of popular enlightenment should be called into question and problematized more often, for example with regard to the quality of the people's reading and writing skills or their opportunities for using a library.

The birth and development of reading in Finland and of the concomitant public library institution during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was certainly successful when viewed in retrospect.¹⁷ The Finns have become accustomed to the fact that since the 1970s the comprehensive school has guaranteed a general and universal basic education. Since the beginning of the 1920s, the elementary school, which preceded it, also offered almost every child a compulsory general education which ensured that pupils were at least literate and possessed all the other basic skills that were regarded as important in those days. But, in practice, the opportunities for rural people to obtain further education in the middle of the twentieth century were not yet as good as they came to be at the end of the century. In earlier decades and centuries, the differences between the classes (estates), the sexes, and the different areas of the country were considerable in terms of literacy skills and indeed of education generally.¹⁸ However, from the point of view of the study of library history, we need to examine the less successful aspects of the past in order that our overall view of it should not remain too narrow.

Consequently, it is necessary to explicate the story of the birth of the lending library studied here using the methods of microhistory. It constitutes only a minute part of the history of the Finnish and European library institution together with those of thousands of other popular libraries, but it still opens up a perspective that allows for the framing of wider questions and global comparisons. The history of the life of the lending library studied here includes stories about the belief in the future of a farmer's orphaned son, the enthusiasm for reading of a crofter's wife, a young rural police chief¹⁹ who was born in the parish and had received a little more education and was encouraged by his family to take up library work, the municipal leaders' efforts to take care of the community's affairs when the culture of local administration became more written, and of a noblewoman who was familiar with world literature and her daughter, who brought enlightenment to the common people in a region where traditionally members of the upper classes had not lived. But why should others than enthusiasts of local history

17 One reflection of its continued achievements is the brilliant results of Finnish students in the PISA studies of the OECD in the early 2000s. Linnakylä & Arffman 2007; Sahlberg 2011. Consequently, the news that the literacy of the whole population is very young in Finland may come as a considerable surprise in view of the excellent success it has produced in the PISA rankings and especially in the students' native language skills.

18 Heikkinen & Leino-Kaukiainen 2011; Kettunen & Simola 2012.

19 This term is used in this work to represent the post of *nimismies*, for which there is no exact equivalent in English. The duties of the *nimismies* included not only those of a law enforcement officer but also those of a bailiff and public prosecutor as well as other administrative functions.

be interested in details of this kind? What significance do they have for the history of the library institution?

As will become apparent later in this book, all these details are connected to the more general history of lending libraries because in the nineteenth century all over Europe nationalist ideology created an important foundation for popular education. The higher social classes and groups emphasized the importance of education (at least of a kind that was suitable for the common people) and of training together with the official use of the vernacular language as prerequisites of citizenship. In Western Europe and North America, 'ordinary people', in other words the majority of the population, began to acquire functional literacy skills in the nineteenth century, often only in conjunction with the advent of compulsory education. In earlier twentieth-century research, libraries were often regarded as institutions that promoted popular education and as a form of charitable work whose aim was to enhance people's quality of life and increase their intellectual capital. In national historiography, this has been associated with pride in the nation's skills and its ability to educate itself. But what if these goals were not achieved? Is there room in research on library history for findings that contradict the old paradigm? And is it even possible to consider the failure of the endeavours for popular enlightenment?

What is exceptionally and extremely interesting about the library chosen as the subject of this research is that in practically no way did it represent the 'success story' but was rather an example of a glitch in the endeavours to enlighten the people. In this work, in which I study the development of one Nordic popular library into a modern public library and the way it was received by the local population, I compare its operations and fate by the means of literature with those of other libraries of the same kind elsewhere in Europe. A comparative approach is very necessary in library research because it helps us to discern statistical similarities in some phenomena and cultural or historical differences in others. Comparisons between several areas can reveal significant differences between local communities and force us to question previous generalizations made on the basis of research limited to just one country or nation.²⁰ In this study, I therefore combine global aspects of the history of libraries with local history because the comparative method is generally best suited to interrelating the micro- and macro levels.

An historical study of the activities of a local library offers a unique view of the effect that the usage of the collection had in increasing the functional reading skills of the local population. By functional literacy skills I mean that the inhabitant of the countryside in the nineteenth century was able to read and write and possibly also possessed the basic arithmetical skills (adding and subtracting) in order to perform the requirements that society and everyday life imposed on him or her as a seeker and interpreter of information. Functional reading skills means that a person can understand, interpret and assess what he or she reads, and reading is not limited to

20 Haupt 2007, 709; Melin 2005, 55.

the rote learning of written texts, as was often the case when the Lutheran Church required that the parishioners should know at least the main articles of faith (by heart).²¹

The history of the Finnish people's literacy skills is a fascinating story set in a period that saw a transition from a mainly oral culture into a written one. This took place at a time (the nineteenth century and especially its last decades) when other great economic, political and ideological changes were taking place. During that period, various nationalist and popular educational aspirations were intertwined with factors connected with the nationhood of the Finnish people. In 1809 Finland, which had earlier been a part of the Kingdom of Sweden, was annexed into the Russian Empire as a consequence of the Napoleonic wars. The political and geographical position of Finland between Sweden and Russia created a unique situation, which, among other things, affected legislative matters, popular education and the development of the Finnish language during the nineteenth century.²² The promotion of literacy became one of the major factors in the formation of the nation.

The position of the peasants in the Nordic countries had traditionally been very independent, and ever since the Reformation the Lutheran Church had encouraged them and their family members to acquire reading skills and also supervised their ability to read. Lutheranism brought with it a new attitude to popular literacy because it regarded it as doctrinally important that the people should be able to peruse the teachings of the Bible and other important religious texts in their own mother tongue.²³ In the Nordic countries, the Lutheran Church had taken responsibility for teaching the common people to read ever since the time of the Reformation, and this had led to the existence of small local collections of devotional literature for the people to read. In practice, however, the task of teaching small children to read fell to the families at home.²⁴

However, literacy as defined by the church was mainly limited to learning the most important articles of faith by heart, and few possessed the ability to write before the end of the nineteenth century. While the church regarded this level of literacy skills as sufficient, it does not correspond with the conception of functional literacy as defined by later scholars.²⁵ The Nordic concept of literacy was also different from the main European one, for example, in that reading and writing skills were distinguished from each other right up to the late nineteenth century in the popular education provided by the church. This had a significant impact, making the development of functional reading

21 Leino-Kaukiainen 2007a, 420–423. See below for a more detailed discussion of the concept of functional reading skills.

22 Häkkinen 1994, 47–55; Jussila 1999; S. Kotilainen 2015a. For English research on the development of the Finnish written language in the 19th century, see also e.g. Lauerma 2013; Saari 2012.

23 Appel & Fink-Jensen 2011; Häggman 2001, 2. The following sections deal with the concept of literacy in greater detail.

24 Hyyrö 2011, 327; Mäkinen 2009b, 31–33.

25 Häggman 2001, 6; Leino-Kaukiainen 2007a, 422.

literacy slow and causing the expansion of the ability to write to come late. These were not seen as particularly necessary skills for the rural people.²⁶

There was more work for educators in some parts of Northern Europe because there was little active literacy for example among the majority of the Finnish population before the middle of the nineteenth century. It should be noted that Finland's administrative language was Swedish, an inheritance from the country's former dependence on Sweden, and although the most important legal documents and religious works were translated into Finnish, the amount of literature available in the vernacular was scant.²⁷ The people's libraries became important instruments for the dissemination of literature in the countryside as well, where the acquisition of new literature and reading matter was more difficult.

In the Nordic countries, the people's libraries of the nineteenth century and the later public libraries were preceded by local collections of books and parish libraries, which were taken care of by the church parishes and other local agents. There were also some subscription libraries, especially in the towns. A similar development was also typical elsewhere in Europe. For example, in German-speaking regions, fee-charging libraries (*Leihbibliotheken*) had played a significant role in disseminating literature.²⁸ For example, in France, too, traditional religious and ecclesiastical book collections later formed the basis of the collections of public libraries.²⁹ The advent of public libraries often came about in conjunction with elementary education and popular enlightenment.³⁰ However, Finland differed from many other countries of Western Europe and United States in that popular education, universal compulsory education and also public libraries and the legislation regulating them had all been realized several decades later there than in those countries.³¹

In Finland the popular libraries acquired a special position as part of the national awakening, which was inspired by nationalism and Finland's position as an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. The language question became a crucial issue in popular educational endeavours since the reformers wished to replace the traditional language of administration, Swedish, with the people's own language, Finnish. Initially, the Russian authorities looked on the renunciation of the language of their former enemy (Sweden) with favour because it separated the Finns from their former mother country and bound them more closely to the empire. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was still very little literature written in the vernacular in Finland, although the majority of the population spoke and read only Finnish, which is quite different from the Scandinavian languages. However, some typical Enlightenment literature such as agricultural and

26 Matti Peltonen 1992, 93.

27 Häkkinen 1994, 79–102, 146.

28 Martino 1990.

29 Barnett 1973, 100–101.

30 Chartier 1987, 209–210; Manley 2003; Mäkinen 2009g, 111–115.

31 Hanska & Vainio-Korhonen 2010; Heikkinen & Leino-Kaukiainen 2011; Hoare 2006.

This book studies the "grey area" of the success story of rural lending libraries in the Nordic countries through the activities of people's libraries in one area of Central Finland, in the parish of Kivijärvi and its neighbouring parishes. The study explores the influence of social, cultural, geographical and economic phenomena, such as the spread of revivalist movements, on the reading habits of the local population and reveals interesting reasons why the establishment of elementary schools and popular libraries and the growth of functional literacy did not automatically increase the informational capital of the common people of remote regions or lead to their social advancement.

The combination of collective biographical and (transnational) comparative methods with rarely utilized original sources in this study is innovative and has not been used before in Finnish historical research on functional literacy and popular libraries.

This book is primarily intended for academic professionals, but it can also be used as a university textbook.

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