



Book Review

Sofia Kotilainen
*Literary Skills as Local Intangible
Capital: The History of a Rural
Lending Library c. 1860–1920*

Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society
2016, 368 pp.

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This book by the Finnish historian Sofia Kotilainen studies what she describes as “the ‘grey area’ of the success story of the rural lending libraries in the Nordic countries.” The aim is to provide a better picture of this story by focusing on the development of one particular library in a remote region, how this library was received by the local population and how it affected the increase of informal capital of common people. The main focus is on a local lending library in the church parish and later municipality of Kivijärvi in central Finland, which existed between the 1860s and the 1910s.

Kotilainen describes this as an innovative study based on a methodological experiment, which has never been used before in Finnish historical research about functional literacy and popular libraries. It is based on three approaches. The main perspective is microhistory and the history of mentalities and the analysis is based on a collective biographical method. By using many different sources such as the preserved documents and books from the library, the archives from the church parish including the registers of baptism, marriage, funeral and confirmation records, other archive material that provides information about people and conditions in the

local community and the Finnish-language press, she writes what she calls the “life history” of the Kivijärvi library. However, a comparative perspective is also applied. Kotilainen compares this local library with the development of library activities particularly on other places in the neighbouring area, but also in other parts of Finland and—to some extent—in the other Nordic countries.

The first empirical chapter (Chapter 2) analyzes the foundation of the library in Kivijärvi and discusses the reasons behind the formation and development of this local library, linked to the development of the parish of Kivijärvi and of lending libraries elsewhere in Finland. Chapter 3 focuses on the promoters of the library, how the librarians were picked out and how the activities were organized and financed. This chapter also discusses the role of the fennoman ideology for the development of the local library.

Chapter 4 focuses on the book collections and gives a detailed presentation of the different genres and works found in the library, linked to the book market, the revivalist movements and the initiatives during this period for popular education. Chapter 5 is about the users of the library: their gender, age and social class, and which books they borrowed. It also discusses how the level of literacy and geographical distances affected the use of the local library and the ownership of and access to books more generally. Kotilainen also creates some local user biographies.

Chapter 6 puts the social, cultural, economic and geographical factors

together, into a more comprehensive picture of the library and its users. It also describes the end for the lending library in Kivijärvi, related to the development in Finland of a modern public library system during the 20th century. Kotilainen's overall conclusion is that the local library of Kivijärvi significantly increased the informational capital of only a few members of the local community. However, functional literacy as a social practice offered new possibilities for the most able individuals to be active in the local society.

Without any doubt, this is a very impressive study. Kotilainen's book is an important contribution to the Finnish and Nordic research in library history, and the fact that it was written in English is also important, since previous research was often published in Finnish. Kotilainen offers a new opportunity for international readers to get a good picture not only of the development of the 19th Century popular libraries, but of the overall development in Finland regarding for example literacy, book-market, popular education and public libraries.

However, I also find Kotilainen's research design, which has resulted in Kotilainen presenting practically every single detail linked to the local lending library activities, somewhat problematic at times. In addition to the library of Kivijärvi, she also thoroughly presents and discusses other libraries in the neighbouring area, and the situation as a whole in Finland. There is a lot of often very detailed information for the reader of this book to take in, which sometimes makes it difficult to keep to the main theme and to distinguish the important patterns. Sometimes there are simply too much details. There are also quite many repetitions of information. Some of these problems would have

been solved with minor cuts, changes in the disposition and more headings. I also think the important conclusions should have been emphasized and discussed more thoroughly.

Finally, I find the comparative approach regarding the Nordic context implemented in a less consistent manner. The book does not reference all relevant Nordic research. For example: Nils-Åke Sjöstens PhD-thesis about Swedish parish libraries, *Sockenbiblioteket: Ett folkbildningsinstrument i 1870-talets Sverige* (Linköping 1993), would have provided a basis for good comparisons, but it is not mentioned at all.

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