TEEMA-ARTIKKELI

BACK TO REALITY: FINNISH CANADIAN NARRATIVES OF LANDSCAPE AND PLACELESSNESS IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY

This article examines Finnish Canadian narratives of the Canadian landscape as a site of ambivalence and unfamiliarity. Attention is paid to the ways in which unfamiliar landscapes can foster placelessness and a negative sense of place. While some migrants experience the Canadian landscape as familiar and comforting, others perceive it as disappointing and alienating. The article also discusses Finnish migrants' preconceptions of Canada and how these expectations were challenged over time. The article has been grammar checked with Copilot.

Keywords: Finnish Canadians; landscape narratives; sense of place; placelessness; migration

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Copper Cliffin maisemia. Kuva: Pälsi, Sakari 1920–1929. Museovirasto.

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Introduction

During the early twentieth century, tens of thousands of Finns migrated to Canada in search of work and the opportunity to build a new life. For migrants arriving in a new environment, the landscape is among the first aspects of their surroundings that they encounter. This article examines Finnish Canadian narratives of landscapes that challenge preconceptions and appear contradictory and alienating. Finnish Canadian accounts of unfamiliar landscapes reflect a negative sense of place and experiences of placelessness.

A sense of place is an individual's personal and emotional relationship to a location. It does not necessarily imply a feeling of belonging; rather, it refers to an emotional attachment to a place, which may be either positive or negative. (Manzo 2014, 394.) Placelessness, on the other hand, involves a feeling of detachment from one's environment and a lack of belonging within it (Relph 1976). As a result, some migrants found it more difficult to develop place attachments in their new country.

Landscape can be understood both as a physical environment and as a place imbued with culturally and socially constructed meanings. It refers not only to a geographical area but also to the ways in which people perceive and interpret it through sight, sound, smell, and other sensory experiences. Landscape is always a matter of perspective, shaped by both material and cultural dimensions. Rather than a neutral object, it reflects the subjective meanings, experiences, and values of its perceivers. (Raivo 2002, 89–91.)

I approach landscape both as a place of observation and as a narrative construct. The Canadian landscape refers not only to the physical environment in which Finns settled but also to the landscape as imagined, interpreted, and represented in Finnish Canadian narratives. As such, a narrated landscape is a continually evolving assemblage of experiences, memories, mental images, and meanings.

This overview is based on the themes of my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, which examines Finnish Canadian narratives of multilocal home and landscape between 1900 and 1939. In my research, I connect representations of landscape to narratives of a multilocal home. I have examined various materials from songs and obituaries to memoirs and novels, but in this article, I have utilized only Finnish Canadian letters, newspapers and periodicals, stories, poems, and travel letters.

The construction of preconceptions

Finnish migration to North America is regularly associated with a specific and rather positive landscape myth. The myth rests on the idea that Finns settled in North America, and particularly in the Great Lakes region, because its natural environment resembled that of Finland (see, for example, Saramo 2017). However, political and economic factors, such as employment opportunities, played a significant role in the decision-making process (Kero 1997, 14). In addition, many newcomers already had friends or relatives in the Great Lakes region, both in Canada and the United States, which made relocation to the area a natural choice. As Varpu Lindström has noted, finding employment in a landscape resembling that of Finland was certainly beneficial, but not the primary reason for settlement. (Lindström 1988, 33; see also Saramo 2017, 62–64.)

Substantial numbers of Finns also established communities in other parts of Canada such as in British Columbia where they encountered mountainous passes and rugged terrain. While the Rocky Mountains impressed Finnish settlers with their grandeur, magnificence, and majesty (see e.g., KKS 2 1903, 42–43), the vast mountain scenery unfolding on all sides also appeared stark and desolate to the Finnish migrants (e.g., CU 15.11.1917, 2). The ways in which Finnish migrants perceived the Canadian landscape were often marked by ambivalence. According to Saramo (2017), the same landscape could evoke fascination in one individual and intense homesickness in another.

However, the landscape myth did not emerge in a vacuum. Representations emphasizing similarities between Finland and Canada are deeply rooted in primary sources and impossible for the researcher to overlook. (For instance, see JLK-VLM 4.11.1923; H-E 27.7.1935.)

Finnish Canadian narratives of landscape were grounded in traditions learned in Finland, where people had come to identify with a particular kind of landscape (Saramo 2017, 58–59). Finnish tradition emphasized for instance the national romantic imagery of lakes and forests (Ridanpää 2024, 200, 208; 58–59; Granö 2004, 114–115; Raivo 2002, 91–92). Migrants could domesticate an initially unfamiliar environment by locating recognizable elements in the surrounding landscape, thereby making them feel more familiar and homelike (Saramo 2017, 61). Migrants attempted, particularly in their letters, make sense of their new surroundings by drawing attention to similarities between the landscapes of Finland and those of the new environment.

However, private letters, travel accounts, and photographs contributed to the formation of preconceptions of the Canadian landscape. For instance, the Finnish explorer Sakari Pälsi's travel letters published in *Suomen Kuvalehti* (1927) played an important role in shaping perceptions of the Canadian landscape. His writings did not reinforce narratives portraying Canada as a landscape reminiscent of Finland and pleasantly familiar to Finnish migrants, but rather, highlighted what he perceived as deficiencies in the Canadian landscape. (See e.g., SK 10.9.1927, 17; 1.10.1927, 13–14.)

Preconceived notions influence the formation of a sense of place. However, it may also develop in connection with a location that an individual has never personally visited. In such cases, photographs, written accounts, and other representations of the place play a role in shaping this attachment. (Manzo 2014, 394; Cresswell [2004] 2015, 22–23.) Positive images and preconceptions, such as the beauty of the Canadian landscape and the abundance of its natural resources, may contribute to the formation of a positive sense of place even before a migrant arrives in the country. When expectations based on prior assumptions collapse, the disappointment can be intense.

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Beyond preconceptions: Narratives of first impressions and unpleasant landscapes

Finns often held positive preconceived notions of Canada, not only of its landscapes but also of its economic opportunities. According to Reino Kero (1982, 13–14), opportunities for economic advancement were often exaggerated, leading some migrants to develop almost utopian expectations regarding their prospects in North America. Some Finns expected to encounter large, prosperous cities and even skyscrapers upon their arrival because steamship companies had portrayed Canada similar to the United States. (LI 28.3.1936, 5.)

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Although large cities existed farther inland, many newcomers first encountered Canada on the rocky Atlantic coast of the East, where reality often fell short of their expectations. Finnish Canadian narratives suggest that positive preconceptions of Canada began to unravel already at the ports of entry. As major gateways for Finnish migrants, Newfoundland and Labrador and Halifax provided many newcomers with their first impression of the Canadian landscape. For some, this was marked by disappointment and disbelief:

> Tuollainen kyläkö tämä satamakaupunki onkin?! Katsokaas tuotakin rakennusta! Hankoniemen sataman varastohuoneetkaan eivät ole noin kurjan näköisiä!
> (LI 28.3.1936, 5.)
>
> So this is what the port city looks like, a mere village?! Just look at that building! Even the warehouses at the Port of Hankoniemi are not as shabby as that!

The quotation above comes from a story published in 1936 that recounts a Finnish migrant's arrival in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The initial impression of Halifax was a shock, a dismay. Landing on Newfoundland's rocky, barren coastline likewise raised feelings of apprehension. As Sakari Pälsi observed in *Suomen Kuvalehti* in 1927: "Few countries can startle their visitors quite the way Canada does by posting Newfoundland as the guardian at its gateway". (SK 17.9.1927, 17.) Eastern Canada appeared modest and impoverished, and the landscape failed to match expectations of a wealthy nation (TYV 1.1.1934, 9–10).

The austere scenery conveyed the realization that securing a livelihood in the new country would not necessarily be easy. Accounts of shock upon arrival reflect a negative sense of place and a difficulty in experiencing a sense of belonging in the place where they were about to settle.

Finnish migrants frequently highlighted differences between Finnish and Canadian landscapes, often depicting Finland in more favorable terms (FL 31.7.1936, 4; 15.7.1938, 3). Many longed for the familiar landscapes of their former home. For instance, Finnish summer was a source of nostalgia, as the season was not perceived to be as enjoyable in Canada (OL-IL 17.2.1915; AH-MM 27.6.1934). The narratives reveal a sense that something essential was missing from the Canadian landscape. Sometimes it was something as simple as a familiar birch tree in the yard (CV 1.9.1939, 8). The absence of familiar features, even seemingly minor ones, often reflected feelings of placelessness.

Some of the criticism was harsh, and the Canadian landscape was even perceived as ugly, threatening and frightening (e.g., KJ 1907, 93–95). Working conditions in Canada were often dangerous, and many Finnish men lost their lives in mining and forestry accidents (Lindström-Best 1988, 52). In hazardous working conditions, the landscape was portrayed as gloomy and threatening. Mining and logging areas were described as lifeless environments where people spent time primarily out of necessity (YP-SP undated letter). A particularly prominent narrative of fear was associated with the Canadian wilderness across provinces, encompassing both its visual landscape and its soundscape (e.g., CV 1.5.1933, 8). For example, the storm wind whistling through the trees and the eagle-owl's call, which resembled the distressed voice of a human, contributed frightening elements to the portrayal of the wilderness landscape (TV 1.1.1933, 13).

Elements of regret are also present in landscape narratives: why wander through the wilderness of a foreign land when one could have done the same in Finland (e.g., ME 1.2.1929, 3–4). The narrative did not describe Canada as a genuinely unpleasant place, but rather as an unfamiliar one. Even when the landscape was magnificent, the Finnish migrant remained an outsider within it, as Aku Päiviö expressed in his poem "Canada".[1] This theme of the foreign land recurs in the narratives discussed above, reflecting the immigrant feelings of alienation and placelessness.

Disapproval towards a new place can be interpreted as an expression of longing for the homeland that has been left behind (Sallinen 2004, 98–99). Attachment to a new place was not always disclosed in letters sent to Finland. Recipients were not necessarily expected to welcome accounts of their loved ones having grown attached to a new place. (Saramo 2018, 167.)

Shifting understandings of landscape

The Canadian landscape received particularly shifting description in the writings of the Finnish author and journalist A. B. Mäkelä. In 1901, Mäkelä relocated to Malcolm Island (Vancouver, British Columbia) to join an utopian settlement of Sointula – founded by Finnish migrant Matti Kurikka – and served as a lighthouse keeper until his death in 1932 (see Salomaa 1967, 209–236). Mäkelä's descriptions of the landscape were marked by ambivalence. Western Canada emerged as both majestic and unsettling, a landscape that differed profoundly from the one he had left behind. (See e.g., TK 1913, 72.) Yet after arriving in Sointula, he recognized affinities between Finland and his new Pacific island home (Saikku 2007, 12). In the poem "En Suomehen palajakaan" ("I Shall Not Return to Finland"), he wrote that when looking upon Sointula, he saw Finland before him (KKS 2 1903, 37–39). In other words, Mäkelä saw a landscape that he could regard as home.

Mäkelä eventually rejected the idea that the Finnish and Canadian landscapes were inherently alike (KJ 1907, 37). The familiarity that newcomers perceived in the environment was, he argued, deceptive. The mountainous terrain of British Co-

1 Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Canada. Finnish Organization of Canada collection (1881-1983).

lumbia ultimately brought the misguided "back to reality, reminding them where they were" (KJ 1907, 93). As the preconceptions surrounding the landscape were gradually dismantled, migrants were better able to understand where they were not located.

Culture shock is not confined to encounters with new places; it may also be experienced by those who return to the former place of home (Petrisalo 2004, 77). As time passed and his experiences accumulated, Mäkelä's way of perceiving the Canadian landscape changed considerably. He came to realize that, at first, he had viewed the Canadian landscape through a longing for his Finnish home (TK 1913, 72). The Canadian environment, which had initially evoked feelings of anxiety, gradually became a source of enchantment. When visiting Finland, Mäkelä discovered that his experiences in Canada had transformed the Finnish landscape before his eyes. The towering mountains and the roaring North Pacific had made Finland appear flat and insignificant by comparison (see e.g., KJ 1907, 32–33, 37.) The transformation in Mäkelä's representation of the landscape reflects a profound shift in his sense of place. Upon returning to Canada, Mäkelä felt that he had come home (TK 1913, 73). Regardless of their expectations, Canada was not Finland, yet for many migrants, including Mäkelä, it eventually became a place of attachment.

The towering mountains and the roaring North Pacific had made Finland appear flat and insignificant by comparison.

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Conclusion

The Finnish Canadian narrative of landscape is characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. For some, the Canadian landscape was a source of comfort when it resembled Finland, but also a reminder of displacement when it appeared unfamiliar, alienating and unpleasant. Unfamiliar landscapes reinforced feelings of placelessness and distance from home, and landscapes perceived as unpleasant, even ugly and disappointing, often contributed to a negative sense of place.

Positive and negative experiences are not mutually exclusive; rather, they represent different layers of the same narrative tradition. The Canadian environment could be described as familiar and Finland-like, offering migrants opportunities to develop a strong and positive sense of place. At the same time, the same landscape could appear strange, overwhelming, and even threatening, causing feelings of placelessness and insecurity. These contrasting representations were shaped not only by the physical environment itself but also by migrants' expectations and personal experiences.

While familiar environmental features helped many migrants make sense of their new surroundings, experiences of migration also revealed the limits of the landscape myth. Encounters with unfamiliar landscapes, economic hardship and dangerous work often challenged preconceived notions of Canada and forced migrants to renegotiate their relationship with place. The negative portrayal of the Canadian landscape reflects the migrant's unfulfilled expectations, regrets and longing for home. Narratives of unfamiliar landscapes often convey experiences of placelessness, making it challenging for migrants to feel a sense of belonging in their new surroundings.

The expression "more than meets the eye" describes the contrast between the migrant's preconceptions and initial impressions of Canada and the more nuanced understanding that emerged through engagement with the landscape. The trajectory of migrants' perceptions demonstrates that sense of place was neither fixed nor immediate. Instead, it developed through ongoing interactions between memory, experience, imagination, and the material environment. In this process, migrants gradually came to understand not only where they were, but also where they were no longer.

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