

Anne Heimo  
Mikko Pollari  
Anna Rajavuori  
Kirsti Salmi-Niklander  
Mikko-Olavi Seppälä  
Sami Suodenjoki

## Matti Kurikka – a prophet in his own country and abroad

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Matti Kurikka (1863-1915) is a multi-dimensional and controversial character in Finnish history. He was a playwright, a journalist, a socialist, a Utopian and a Theosophist, as well as a speaker for free love and women's rights. Those involved in the research project *Fragmented visions. Performance, authority and interaction in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Finnish oral-literary traditions* (funded by the Academy of Finland 2014-2017, [www.fragvis.net](http://www.fragvis.net)) singled out Matti Kurikka because his life concretizes both ideological tensions and performative practices in late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Finland. Members of the project team presented their research at the FinnForum XI conference in Turku, focusing on the ethnic and transnational aspects of Matti Kurikka's career. Mikko-Olavi Seppälä concentrated on Matti Kurikka as a playwright; Sami Suodenjoki charted his political shipwreck in 1899; Anne Heimo described his time in Queensland; Mikko Pollari covered his unsuccessful return to Finland in 1905–1909 and his multi-phased transnational career; Anna Rajavuori discussed "kurikkalaisuus" as a label for dubious policies and ideals in the Finnish labor movement; and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander focused on Kurikka's last years and how he is remembered in the US.

### Playwright Matti Kurikka

Matti Kurikka's debut play *Viimeinen ponnistus* ("The Last Struggle", 1884) remained his most

popular and only successful dramatic work. This folk play depicts the coexistence of the Finnish and Russian peoples of Ingria under the common oppressor, and was frequently performed in Finland before the country gained its independence in 1917–1918.

Kurikka's later plays concern the conflict between high ideals and the social world that victimized women in particular. Influenced by Scandinavian radical writers Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, he adopted the realist literary program and started to portray the social problems associated with city life. Having attacked the hypocritical sexual morals in *Aili* (1887), he introduced proletarian protagonists in his next play *Äärimmäisessä talossa* ("In the Outermost House", 1889). At the same time, he had difficulties finding theatres in which to perform his new work.

Adopting symbolist aesthetics and Tolstoyan pacifism, Kurikka expressed anticlerical, Christian socialist sentiments in his biblical drama *The Tower of Babel* (Baabelin torni, 1897), which flopped at the Finnish Theatre.

Kurikka also directed plays for some workers' theatre clubs in the late 1890s. He gave his last play *Kulttuuri-kukka* ("The Flowering of Culture", 1899) to the theatre of the Helsinki Workers' Association, which honored him as a founding father. Featuring an idealistic factory manager, the tragedy built on suspense between the owners and the workers, but failed in performance.

Although Kurikka only managed to write one successful play, he succeeded in his role as a martyr to the workers' movement. In stressing the class-based nature of art and art institutions he paved the way for workers' theatres, which became very popular and influential in early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Finland.

### The first political shipwreck

The spring of 1899 has been pinpointed in Finnish historiography as a crucial period in Finland's national history on account of the Imperial Manifesto that launched a series of integration measures. In the wake of this manifesto, Matti Kurikka also took his place in the canon of Finnish historical celebrities by causing a scandal that shook the national public sphere.

The source of the scandal was Kurikka's editorial in the workers' newspaper *Työmies* ("The Working Man") on 3 March 1899. In it he criticized a mass petition, later known as the Great Address, which was concurrently being organized by Finnish nationalists to oppose the Imperial Manifesto.

Although Kurikka was hardly a proponent of imperial integration policies, he argued that the working class had no reason to support the petition because its upper-class collectors had so far shunned all democratic reforms in Finland. Because members of the Finnish ruling class had not even bothered to involve workers' representatives in the planning of the petition, Kurikka outspokenly encouraged workers not to sign it.

Kurikka's editorial turned him into a scoundrel in the eyes of Finnish nationalists. The nationalist newspapers rushed to condemn Kurikka and *Työmies* for viewing the petition through class-biased lenses when the common struggle against Russification should have overridden any class interests. Many writings labeled Kurikka an unpatriotic henchman of the oppressive Russian government, who failed to understand Finnish identity and legal

## Matti Kurikan lähtö.



### Ilolaulu Matti Kurikan lähtiäisiksi.

Oi on Kurikka koria,  
Työväen johtaja soria,  
Kommunismiin kuljettaja,  
Yhteiskunnan hävittäjä!  
On hällä ryhtiä rutosti,  
Julkeutta julman lailla,  
Tuoda tuumansa esille,  
Miettehensä maailmalle,  
Mustan valkeaksi vääntäin

Oman mielens mukaan kääntäin,  
Lakimme ei hälle kelpaa,  
Eikä kansan hoitajamme. —  
Olo outo, valta vieras,  
Aate arveluttavainen  
Kurikan on kummallisen . . .  
Nyt hän lähti rannoiltamme  
Vesiltämme väistelihe,  
Jää hyvästi, elä palaja,  
Pysy poissa ilman ikäsi!

Kurikka's political shipwreck was depicted in the comic magazine *Matti Meikäläinen* (4.8.1899) with images and poetic verses referring to Kalevala and Finnish mythology. Kurikka is leading the boat of "Kaleva's Descendants" (*Kalevan kansa*) to an unknown destination. Source: National Library's Digital Collections. (<http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/aikakausi/binding/1002313?page=2>).

order due to his Ingrian ethnicity. Some papers even implied that the government had paid him off to undermine the national struggle. These implications were further boosted by the fact that some conservative Russian newspapers praised Kurikka as a hero who was protecting the Finnish proletariat from nationalist incitement. Patriotic students threw him out of a premiere at the Finnish Theatre on 15 March 1899. However, he declared that it was, in fact, the working-class audience that had been cast out of the national theatre.

The turmoil around Kurikka had long-standing significance for the Finnish labor movement. On the one hand, the attacks of the bourgeois press radicalized the movement, as many of the leaders viewed them as blows to the whole organized labor force and therefore aligned themselves with Kurikka. On the other hand, his actions caused long-lasting

ruptures within the movement. Numerous labor organizations in other cities and rural areas disliked the excessive militancy of Kurikka and the labor association in Helsinki, which led to disagreements over ideology and tactics in the constitutive meeting of the Finnish Labor Party in the summer of 1899. These disagreements continued long thereafter and contributed to Kurikka's highly disputable reputation.

On the whole, Kurikka's scandalous editorial raised crucial questions about how the labor movement should react to the Russification policies and to collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the national struggle. These questions remained acute for years to come. As far as Kurikka was concerned, it constituted a political shipwreck that pushed him to leave the politically oppressive atmosphere in Finland and seek new opportunities abroad.

### Endeavors under the Southern Cross

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Queensland was still a self-governing colony of Great Britain in desperate need of labor, and the government campaigned actively to attract new migrants, especially from the Nordic countries. When Matti Kurikka resigned from his post as chief editor of *Työmies* in April 1899 he became aware of the opportunities Queensland offered and began to plan the founding of a Finnish colony for "Kalevan kansa" (People of Kaleva). Throughout the spring and summer he promoted his idea of living in a society in which all were equal and all activities were shared.

Kurikka arrived in Brisbane on October 2, 1899. Some 200 Finns migrated to Queensland in the following months, about 80 of them being followers of Kurikka. In Brisbane he soon came to realize that things were not as he had expected. In particular, there were few or no job opportunities for non-English speakers like the Finns. To his dismay he also found out that workers in Queensland were not organized. In late December he and fifty or so of his followers travelled to Northern Queensland to work on the construction of the railway line from Mareeba to Chillagoe. However the work was so hard and the living conditions so bad in the middle of the bush that after six months of continuous misery the community decided to split up. Kurikka and most of his followers were townfolk who were not accustomed to hard labor. He was also accused of poor leadership and of being a ladies' man.

Kurikka continued his journey, arriving in Canada in August 1900 having been invited by Finns from Vancouver. However, before leaving Queensland he wrote a bitter letter to the press about his experiences there. He expressed his deep disappointment in Queens-

land's workers, whom he regarded as drunks, uncivilized and hostile towards foreigners.

Some of Kurikka's followers left for Canada with him, whereas others moved to Image Flats situated about 100 kilometers north of Brisbane in the region now known as the Sunshine Coast. Several Finnish families had settled in the area a few years earlier to farm sugar cane. Kurikka's supporters founded the "Asiainedustusseura Erakko" ("The Hermit Society for the Promotion of Affairs") in 1902 to advance the welfare of the small community. The society also published a handwritten newspaper *Orpo* ("Orphan").

Kurikka did not forget his compatriots in Australia and wrote them letters, of which some were published in *Orpo*. When the society split up in 1904 some of his followers decided to join him in Canada.

### From Prophet to Pariah

Matti Kurikka's career as a working-class activist spanned three continents: Europe, Australia and North America. His main areas of activity were Finland, where he spread his ideas in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then again from 1905 to 1909, and North America, where he resided first in 1900–1905, and then again from 1909 until his death in 1915. His career followed a similar path in both places: he was first hailed as a true champion of the worker's cause, but his status changed when the Finnish and Finnish-American labor movements began to associate themselves with the principles of international socialism.

The first signs of Kurikka's decline in Canada became evident in 1904 when the journal *Aika* ("Time"), which was published in the Utopian Sointula community ("Place of Harmony") led by Kurikka was discontinued, and a few months later Kurikka himself was banished from the community. Undaunted, he established a new colony, Sammon Takoijat ("Forgers of the Sampo"), which he soon left to embark on a lecture tour with the aim of rescuing Finnish-American workers from the so-called "bread-and-butter socialists". He faced fierce opposition, and in the fall of 1905 he crossed the Atlantic back to Finland.

Matti Kurikka returned to Finland just before the General Strike of 1905. Ideological differences in terms of views and goals had arisen between him and the Social Democratic Party of Finland during his absence. In fact, relations were already so strained when he attended the 1906 Party Conference in Oulu that the Party had no practical alternative than to expel him. Kurikka left the scene before the vote, which ended his career in the Finnish labor movement.

However, the adjectival form of his name, 'kurikkalaisuus', was still used within the labor movement to describe dubious ideas or policies of party operators, such as nonalignment with the goals of the class struggle, ideological inconsistency, or unreliability in terms of party practices. Kurikka's followers could be legitimately excluded from the party's activities after the party meeting in Oulu. They were seen as a similarly disruptive force and a threat to the united labor movement on the local level as Kurikka had been on the national level. Wilho Itkonen, for example, who had been working as a traveling agitator in Central Finland and was known as a follower of Kurikka and a Theosophist, was dismissed. The district organization of the Social Democratic Party also forbade the local associations from giving Itkonen an agitation mandate because he was strongly associated with Kurikka.

After a brief moment of glory during the General Strike of 1905, the downward spiral of Kurikka's political career continued. The leadership of the labor movement dismissed his views, which led him to establish his own newspaper, *Elämä* ("Life"), and eventually his own party, Sosialistinen reformipuolue ("The Socialist Reform Party"). Kurikka led his party to the first parliamentary elections of 1907, but suffered a crushing defeat. Nevertheless, he continued his attempts to achieve a prominent position in Finnish politics until the summer of 1909, when he returned to North America to work as the editor of *New Yorkin Uutiset* ("The Finnish New York News").

Kurikka found out the hard way in both Finland and North America that a movement striving towards unified ideology and organization had no room for individual ideological interpretations such as his theosophical socialism. In both cases he was demoted from prophet to pariah, from an acknowledged leader to a dissenting figure representing an aberrant version of socialism.

### Contradictory stories on Matti Kurikka's last years and his death

Matti Kurikka spent his last active years in New York, finally retiring to his farm in North Stonington, Connecticut. As a speaker and the editor of *New Yorkin Uutiset* he had a strong influence in the Finnish immigrant community. His second wife Hanna followed him with their two young daughters. The infant Maire died soon after their arrival, and the marriage ended in separation and acrimony concerning the custody of their surviving daughter Auli.



Matti Kurikka's grave in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn. He is buried in the same grave with two other members of the secret order "Kalevan Ritarit" (Knights of Kaleva). The figure on the top of the grave is the symbol of Kalevan Ritarit. Photo: Kirsti Salmi-Niklander.

Kurikka's death has been the subject of contradictory stories. According to one account he died on his farm while cutting a tree or clearing the brush. However, another story that has lived on reflects the eyewitness account of Suoma Tuuppo, Kurikka's colleague at *New Yorkin Uutiset*, claiming that Matti Kurikka was found dead on a bench in a park in New York after a party among the Finnish community. Two death dates are mentioned: October 1 and 4, 1915.

Digital sources and local-history research conducted by Burton Jernstrom and Art Jura have provided new information on Matti Kurikka's last years and his death, however. *Norwich Bulletin*, a local Connecticut newspaper, published a small item of news on 1 January 1916 that listed all sudden deaths in the region during the past few months, based on the coroner's reports. Among the deceased was Matthias Kurikka, who was reported to have died in North Stonington of a cerebral hemorrhage on 1 October. Burton Jernstrom obtained Kurikka's death certificate, which states that his body was found by his neighbor William Rinne.

Apparently, Matti Kurikka had plans to establish a new Utopian community in Connecticut. He had purchased 80 acres of land in Voluntown, Connecticut a few months prior to his death. He also tried to persuade Finns in New York and from Finland to join this new community. Encouraged by Kurikka, many Finnish families moved from New York to rural Connecticut to raise poultry and to live a peaceful country life. Activists of the Finnish American Heritage Society, based at Canterbury Finnish Hall, are currently maintaining the local Finnish heritage and taking care of the archives of



the Imatra Society in New York. Kurikka's farm in North Stonington is part of the local cultural heritage, even though most of the original buildings have now been replaced. The image of Matti Kurikka driving along country roads in his car, with the wind blowing in his longish hair, is still alive in local oral history. Kurikka's life could be depicted as a series of failures and shipwrecks, but he never gave up his dreams.

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### Writers

- Anne Heimo, University Researcher, Department for Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Mikko Pollari, PhD Candidate, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere.
- Anna Rajavuori, PhD Candidate, Department of Political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, Academy Research Fellow, Department for Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Mikko-Olavi Seppälä, University Researcher, Department for Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Sami Suodenjoki, Post-doc Researcher, Department for Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki.