

Timo Orta

The Present and Future Culture of the Australian Finns



Before tackling the subject of Finnish Culture in Australia, I must insert a caveat. This has to do with the fact that I make no claims of basing this paper on any hard established facts, but am rather expressing personal views. And these views are by necessity based on observations gleaned in a most unscientific manner. If we keep this in mind, I don't think I'll be short-changing you too much.

A long-serving pastor at the Finnish Church in Stockholm once remarked: "The Finns did not migrate to Sweden for worship reasons." This observation he made after the low attendance rate in his church had been criticized. I think we could adapt this view to cover cultural aspirations as well. Consequently we can say that the Finns did not migrate to Australia for cultural reasons. Neither did they base their decision to leave Finland on religious, political or idealistic considerations. I'm not excluding these cases completely, but it is my feeling that they would form a minuscule portion of the migrants.

The Finns migrated for very materialistic reasons, indeed, although they were many and varied. Some went in the hope that they would find the Economic Pro-

mised Land, others went in the hope that they would be able to earn enough money to return "in style" to Finland plagued by unemployment. And then there were those who went purely "for the hell of it".

No matter what the original reason, there are now 9000 – 14000 Finns in Australia. And it doesn't seem very likely that this number will appreciably increase in the near future. The last large wave of Finnish migrants arrived in 1968–70. This means that even the newest Australo-Finn is an Ozzie of 20 years' standing. Age-wise this means that there are very few people under 40, who have experienced life in Finland as an adult. Married migrants, who had young families when arriving, would be in their fifties. When we add to these people the earlier wave of migrants from the mid-1950's, we are looking at a relatively aged population. I think this is a very important factor to consider when looking at the kinds of cultural activities the Australo-Finns engage in.

The Finns have often been compared with other nationalities from Northern Europe. Because of cultural, linguistic and geopolitical reasons the Estonians and Latvians have often been used as comparison. In so doing, however, an important fact has been overlooked. Because of the political reasons for the Baltic "migra-

Timo Orta, MA, MSocSc, Sydney, Australia

tion", i.e. the Estonians and Latvians were not voluntary migrants, but rather displaced political refugees, the Baltic communities in Australia (and elsewhere) can be said to represent a reasonable cross-section of those peoples. As a visible result, all social classes and practically every educational stratum are represented. This cannot be said about the Finns, among whom university, or even high-school graduates are rare. This is another factor we need to consider when viewing Finnish cultural endeavours in Australia.

Judging from the above it would be fair to say that cultural endeavours did not rank very high on the Australo-Finn's list of priorities. But somehow cultural activities did nevertheless emerge and develop. I think we can thank two agencies for that: the Lutheran Church and the Finnish Societies. These two have in the main been responsible for the preservation and propagation of Finnish culture in Australia. And at times this has happened in spite of their efforts, because very often time and energy has been misspent on the most typical of Finnish pastimes: petty and useless bickering. And this has taken place both between the various groups as well as inside them. Often it seems that the Finns are hell-bent on realising the maxim: "Wherever there are three Finns living in the same town, they have at least two Finnish societies".

Quite often, however, various groups have been able to rally around the same banner, and then the results have been impressive. A good example outside the cultural field is the Finnish Resthome in Queensland. But there are cases of fruitful co-operation in the cultural field, as well. In Adelaide the Lutheran and Pentecostal churches have combined with the local Finnish society to form a Radio Committee which runs a very professional

Finnish hour on Radio 5EBI-FM. Unfortunately this is not the case in all capital cities, where the local Finnish hour has become a very controversial and hotly debated issue.

The groups engaged in cultural activities today are: 1) Finnish Lutheran congregations, 2) Finnish societies, 3) Finnish radio programmes, 4) Finnish "Saturday Schools", and 5) Finnish newspapers.

The Lutheran congregations as a group (and organized into the Suomi Conference) are the oldest agency engaged in the propagation of Finnish culture. They are the legatees of the Finnish Seamen's Mission which assumed since its inception in the 1920's a much broader cultural profile than of simply providing spiritual care for seafarers. One result is that the congregations' activities have always included music – both sacred and temporal – performed by choirs, soloists and instrumental groups. Other activities have included drama, poetry readings, showing of Finnish films and videos, promotion of Finnish decorative and culinary arts, etc. In these latter activities there has been considerable overlapping with the Finnish Societies, and on many an occasion there have been joint ventures.

The activities of the Finnish societies have usually centered around a "Suomitalo". This focal point of the local club is usually the fruit of years and years of hard and unstinting voluntary labour – and considerable financial outlays. They are the venues for most activities of the local clubs: concerts, dinner-dances, folk dancing, lending libraries, and other social functions. The local clubs also have their own Finnish baseball teams. Due to the peculiar Finnish nature of this game, it may even be called a cultural activity.

The Finnish radio programmes are usually joint ventures between the various Finnish groups. The Finnish hour

can be heard in all capital cities and some provincial centres. In Melbourne and Sydney they are part of the government-owned Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and the programme-makers are paid honoraria for their work. Elsewhere the programmes are produced by local Radio committees who often have to pay for the required air time. Lately much criticism has been levelled against the SBS programmes, as the listeners have felt that they do not have adequate input in programming decisions.

A second type of joint venture between the Lutheran Church and the local Finnish clubs are the Finnish Ethnic Saturday Schools. Here these two bodies took the initiative in organising local so-called Ethnic Education Authorities to run language and culture courses for children of Finnish origin as well as interested adults. These schools which operate only a few hours a week, are financed by student fees and government grants. The first schools were started 7–8 years ago, and the initial enthusiasm was truly promising. In most capital cities the first term enrollments varied between 50 and 80 pupils. But after it became clear to the parents that no great or dramatic results would be forthcoming without active parental involvement, enrollment numbers dropped radically. They now hover around the dozen-mark in those few schools still operating.

The most active and visible signs of Finnish culture in Australia are without doubt the two bi-monthly newspapers: *Suomi-News* and *Finlandia-News*. The former has been operating since 1926, when it was founded in Melbourne as the newsletter of the Finnish Seamen's Mission. Thus *Suomi-News* is the second-oldest non-English newspaper in Australia. It is now fully owned by the Lutheran Church of Australia and is run

by a Board and an Editor elected by the Suomi Conference of the LCA. It is now published in Melbourne. *Finlandia News* was founded as the result of a typically Finnish, bitter and unforgiving argument, and operates as a privately-owned company. Although the *FN* presents itself as the "non-religious" alternative to *Suomi*, it has close ties with the Pentecostal movement. *FN* is published in Brisbane. Both newspapers have recently begun to print up to two pages out of 16 per issue in English in order to reach those people, who are interested in Finnish culture, but lack sufficient Finnish language skills. There have been some very tentative attempts at discussing a merger, but these have foundered on the different outlooks between a non-profit idealistic paper and a paper run purely for commercial profit reasons. At present both papers receive operating grants from the Finnish government and *Suomi-Seura*. It is doubtful either paper could continue without these grants.

If we were to draw up an organisational chart of the various providers of Finnish culture in Australia, we would get a most impressive picture. We would see congregations, clubs, language schools, radio programmes. And we would see two long-established newspapers with their own loyal readerships. But when we would scratch the surface of this picture, we would find the paint very thin, indeed. We would find a very small nucleus of people shouldering most of the responsibility. And we would find that those same people are getting older. Why is this so? What has happened to the generation, who came to Australia as children, or were born there? When we try to answer these question, we stumble on perhaps the saddest fact of Finnish cultural endeavours in Australia. I'm referring to the lack of continuity. Again we might ask: "Why is this so?" The

answer, I think, lies in the pig-headed insistence on the use of Finnish as the sole means of communication. The introduction of English has been resisted to the bitter end. Somehow the Australo-Finns have come to equate culture with the ability to speak and understand Finnish. This language-skill has been made the sole pass-word for cultural participation. It has effectively removed all those of Finnish decent, but without a working knowledge of the language, as well as those of

other ethnic origins, who have married into Finnish families or have some other reason for being interested in matters Finnish. This development has taken place both in the congregations as well as in the clubs. There are very few exceptions. A good (or should we say bad?) example of this cultural tunnel-vision was the initial strong outcry against the English pages in the Finnish newspapers, when these pages were first introduced. Some cancellations of long-held subscriptions even resulted.



Fortunately, attitudes seem to be changing. And this is witnessed by the growing numbers of young adults with families which take part in the two main annual events: Suomi-Päivät and Suvipäivät. But in both these events parallel youth and children's programmes are run in English. This may be the way to turn

around this negative trend and foster a renewed interest in the Finnish culture among Australo-Finns. We may be able to reach those landmen we have not yet completely lost track of, but I'm not so optimistic about reaching those Australo-Finns, who have already lost contact with their cultural heritage.