

ENGLISH LIFE FOR THE FINNISH WIFE



Vieno Kennedy, BA (Hons), has a particular interest in the subject, as she is literally also part of the "sample", being herself married to an Englishman. She has lived in England for the past 15 years, but hopes to return to Finland.

Introduction and methodological Basis for the Study

This article is based on a study which was done earlier this year as part of my final year's work towards a BA degree. For this study I interviewed 25 Finnish women married in England, although one has since become a widow. These women lived in south-eastern England, and all had been in England for at least eight years. The results of the study are specific to this group, and not be applicable to other Finnish women in England, particularly those who live in other parts of the UK.

There are not large numbers of Finns in Britain. In 1981¹ there were 4000 - 5000 native-speaking Finns in Great Britain. According to the Finnish Embassy's estimate, about one thousand Finns live in and around the London area. The Finns in Britain are mainly women married to various foreign nationals or single young women who have come to learn English, to study, or to work

primarily as au-pairs or auxiliaries in hospitals. A significant number of Finns, who bring their families with them, also work for limited periods with various Finnish companies. One reason why the Finns in Britain tend to be mainly women is that only women can get work permits as au-pairs: other work permits for men or women are very difficult to get. Of the women in this study (64 %) had academic or professional qualifications, some acquired in England. If employed full-time, they were usually doing work that corresponded to their training, even though slightly less than half had not chosen full-time employment. About 70 % of the interviewees were well past their twenties on arrival. About half the women had initially come to England intending to stay only temporarily, to learn the language or to widen their horizon, while about half had come specifically to marry.

Almost all the women said that their husbands were not typical Englishmen. They were often somewhat aloof from

their own culture, and about 40 % had no close relatives, or had little or nothing to do with them. Like the women themselves more than half the husbands had worked abroad, often in several countries, before marrying. Several husbands also understood Finnish, even if they were not always able to speak it. Three husbands had a special interest in Finland, and had qualifications in Finnish language and history which they needed in their professional work. Almost all husbands took interest in Finland and Finnish culture, and some were involved in Anglo-Finnish work. There is quite a high divorce rate among Finnish women who have married in England³, Although the divorce rate is also high in Finland. Often when Finnish women divorce in England, they marry another Britisher rather than go back to Finland.⁴

The research method for the study was adapted from the so called New Paradigm

research which differs in many ways from the methodology of classical social research. It is a form of knowledge that Chin⁵ calls "selectively retained tentatives", rather than a set of "findings" or "data". There is no one "truth", no simple continuum between "error" and "truth". Objectivity does not exist independent of the perceiver.⁶ Accordingly, I did not set out to appear as an objective, value-free "researcher": my aim was to have encounters with people which would not seem like research interviews at all, but occasions where people could talk about something which was of major importance in their lives. I did not use a questionnaire, but asked open ended questions about how people generally made sense of their lives in England, I was ready to follow whatever issues were important to the people I interviewed. From a wide variety of issues in the original study I have chosen for this article to explore two subjects, friendships



Hannele Branch (in national costume), a founder and a director of the Finnish language Saturday School in London among the crowd during centenary celebrations of the Finnish Seamen's Mission.

with the English and integration and adjustment, for this article.

Friendships with the English

What I especially sought to know was whether the interviewees had made close friends with the English and whether they were able to share personal matters and problems with them. Reasons for not making English friends will be discussed in this context.

Considering that London has a reputation for being a difficult place to establish human relationships, and that the women have had to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries, a surprisingly large 48 % of the interviewees claimed that they had made close friends with English.⁷ Overall 78 % of the less qualified Finns had made close friendships with the English, while the corresponding frequency for women with academic or professional qualifications was only 37 %. This suggests that it may be difficult for the Finnish women with higher levels of training to find English women on their intellectual levels.⁸

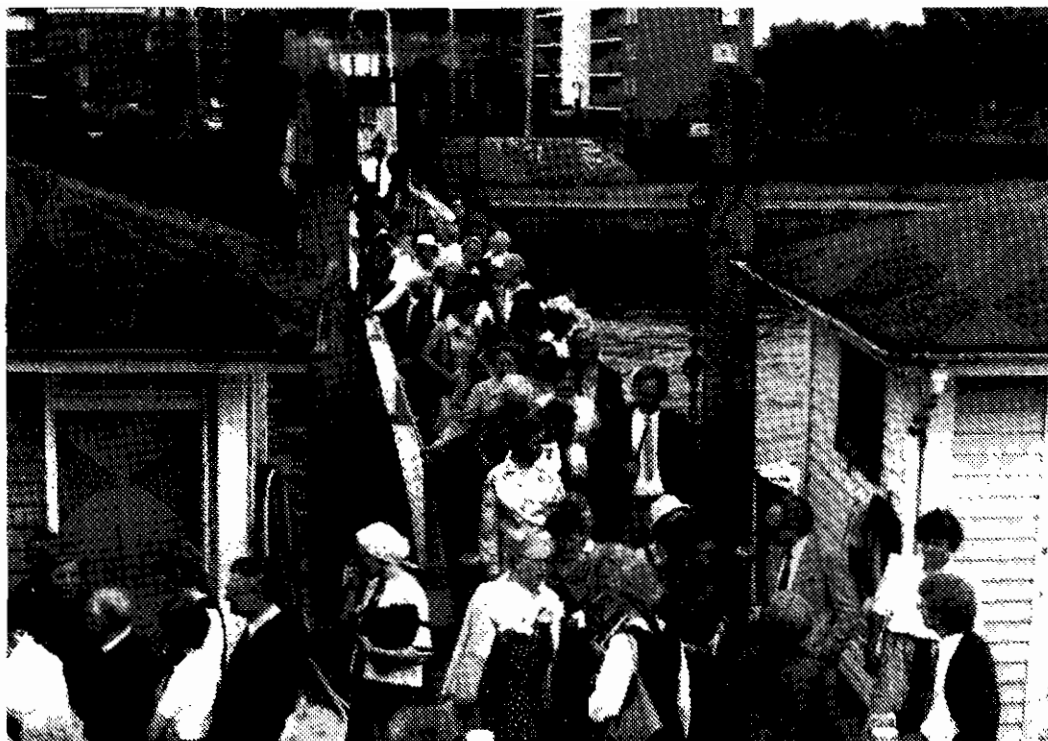
Having a full-time job was no advantage in making English friends. In fact women who were housewives or had some part-time involvement had made slightly more close friends than the women in full-time occupations. Of course, the interviewees in full-time occupations had a higher percentage of professionally qualified women for whom it was more difficult to make English friends. This may have to do with the way different classes behave in England. Professional colleagues seldom become close friends with each other, for them friendships are usually formed in clubs or the like. English workingclass women, however, often want to work so that they can get out of the house and make friends rather than can money.

Several interviewees observed that in England it is not possible to make friends quickly, but that, once made, English friends had become "most cordial", or "loyal", or "as good as the Finns". Often the Finnish women were not particularly interested in

making friends with the English, as their view was that the English middle class people are empty, particularly the suburban housewives, who were most often thought to be "superficial" and "unenlightened". Of course many sophisticated English born Londoners themselves find little attraction in suburban life. What is interesting is that most of the Finns interviewed seemed to reject these suburban attitudes, even though they themselves lived in London suburbs. The English who do make friends with the Finns are themselves often atypical and either in some way distant from their own culture or unusually open to new influences.

Generally, it was felt that the English were helpful, kind and easy to get on with on an impersonal level, but comments like "the English are reserved", or "they avoid being personal" and "they want to keep their distance" were part of a theme that came through many times. Several women explained that it was possible to make some progress with the English women, but just as they were about to become close, friends, the gate was closed. Sometimes it was felt that the reason why the women had difficulties in making English friends was that the Finns were not good at small talk, which the English would interpret as being unfriendly or even abnormal. Small chat or constant talkativeness is much a part of English social interaction, and there needs to be a readiness to engage on the level of light-hearted, flippant verbosity for some time before a closer acquaintance can be made, of the level ever moves to a more personal or serious mode at all.

It was usually very difficult for the Finns to understand the English, or to come to terms with the English ethos. Several women felt that usually it was not possible to talk with them in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner, as it was important to use the English social code. Code-oriented behaviour includes not showing one's real feelings, especially anger, avoiding confrontations and saying anything directly. Thus it



Part of the queue of Finns waiting for a river trip.

is not so much what you say that is important, but how you say it. The reason for these attitudes may well spring from three very basic traits in the English "national character":⁹ fear of being embarrassed; fear of causing embarrassment; and fear of burdening anyone with problems. Especially attitudes, to ward the human body, physical closeness and nakedness are very different in the two cultures.

The difficulties in making close friends with the English may also have to do with the fact that the English usually do not mix easily outside their own class or outside their own boundaries. Being a foreigner always implies a boundary.

Some women who said that they had made close friends with the English also said that they did not need to be particularly close with anyone, but several others admitted that, as one woman put it, "Really there is nothing like another Finn to talk to or to make friends with". A woman who said

initially that there was no difference between the English and the Finns later came to profess: "My relationships with the English are ultimately detached. What the Finns do touches me much more: they make me both more sad and more happy. I don't react to the English in the same emotional way." Assuming most interviewees would agree, this means that whatever friends the women may have made with the English, there was yet another level of closeness for most of them among other Finns. Generally, ethnicity has a major impact on informal interaction among immigrants.¹⁰

Integration into English society and adjustment to living in England

This section discusses two concepts which, although related, have a difference in meaning. Integration is a process where by an individual begins gradually to feel part of a society and merges with it, assimilating its

values and ways of behaving. However, a person can be adjusted or content without being integrated, as was the case with several interviewees. My criteria in assessing adjustment were that a desire to live in Finland or an indication of continual difficulty in adjusting to the English way of life counted as being not adjusted.

Most interviewees said that they were not particularly interested in the English culture, or they had no need to become integrated into English society and feel part of it. Therefore, although there was often a certain feeling of being an outsider, it had not caused any concern among most of the interviewees. On the contrary, it was a feeling most women actually liked. Several women said that they were happiest in an anonymous environment; or that they felt free just because they were foreign and not part of the English society.

However, at times the free feeling of an outsider also had its price. A woman who had come to England to escape her engagement, reflected now, twenty years later, that her carefree existence was somewhat artificial. She said: "Living in England is a soft option; you don't have to try anything. Life in Finland is more demanding, but also more real." Three other women felt that matters passed them by or seemed irrelevant and not to be taken seriously.

One of the difficulties particularly at the beginning of their marriages was that many women were dependent on their husbands. Often the women had given up their careers, had no relatives and few or no friends of their own, and had to live through their husbands. This was a phase when it was difficult for them to get hold of life and adjust. The sense of isolation was particularly acute for women with small children living in the suburbs. The interviewees' difficulties were not all due to living in England, but could also have occurred if they had become housewives in Finland and had to leave their careers, or had moved to an unknown area.

Most women, (84 %) lived in their own

house with a garden, and several of them said that it gave them a feeling of purpose and rootedness. Often the women also had a touch of Finland in their English houses, and had adopted a blend of English and Finnish seasonal customs. An important factor in adjustment was also the area where the interviewees lived. Those who seemed most satisfied were attached to their area and many had lived there all their married life.

For most interviewees the precondition for not feeling dispersed or separate in England was to have active ties with Finland, which most women, (84 %) visited regularly, many of them several times a year. Almost everybody said that they did not miss Finland, but most added that they would do so if they did not visit Finland often. What most people missed about Finland was its nature rather than its people, because simply by keeping in touch with friends and relatives had kept the people side satisfied.

The importance of strong roots for immigrant populations is argued by Murphy who says that many disorders are caused because of weak roots in the immigrants' native countries.¹² Nearly all the interviewees were deeply rooted in Finnishness. They had clear identities as Finns, and an awareness of where their roots were. This clearly was a source of strength, as one well-adjusted woman said, "I derive my strength from the fact that I feel myself to be Finnish. This is my honour, and I have no desire to identify with the English."

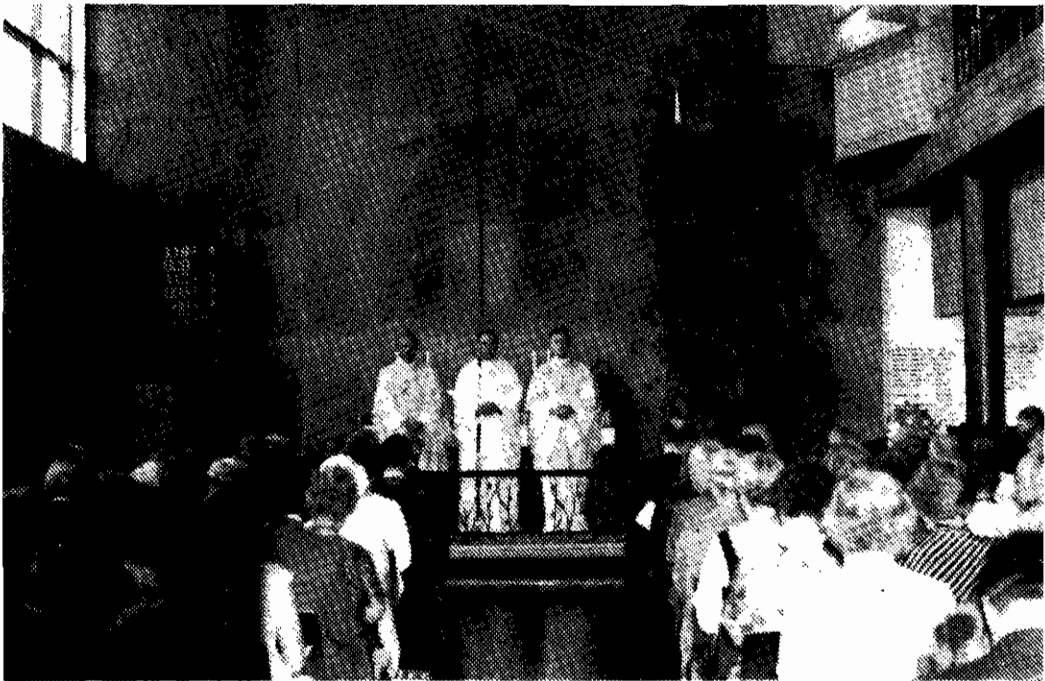
However, there were also a few equally or perhaps even better adjusted interviewees who had little or no desire to strengthen their roots. Some of the women (16 %) said that they were not particularly interested in visiting Finland, and two interviewees did not identify themselves as pure Finns any more.

About two thirds of the women said that if they were to lose their husbands, they would stay in England, not only for the sake of their children, but for their own sakes.

Considering that about half of the interviewees had felt alienated in the Finnish culture, it can be observed that the overall feeling of contentment in life among the interviewees had gone up since coming to England, or one woman summed up, "In Finland I felt that I didn't belong, and feel the same here, but with the difference that life in England feels lived." Several women were happy both in Finland and in England but on the whole it seemed that those who had felt alienated in Finland were happy in England, and those who were not happy in England had not felt alienated in Finland. This study bears out, Benedict's point, that people's potentialities do not always coincide with the type of behaviour selected by their society, and that these individuals could do well and be supported in another culture,¹¹ was born out by this study.

One of the most important factors about life in England for the interviewees was that they had found a new sense of freedom, had

felt that in England they could be more of what they really were had be able to have more fun out of life. About 70 % of the interviewees felt that the elements of oppressiveness and authoritarianism in the Finnish culture, were its major drawbacks. This was also the reason why so many women had felt alienated in Finland. Also many of those who were not aware of havin been restricted in Finland felt more free in England. Similarly Hofstede's cross-cultural comparison of authoritarianism or "tolerance for uncertainty" seems to support the view that Finland is more strict and pedagogic, whereas England is a "looser" society: there are fewer written rules, more tolerance and relativism, etc. ¹³ It is possible, then that England typically attracts a Finn for whom absence of freedom and mental space were difficult problems in Finland. England seems to be particularly suitable for such Finns, because the environment does not dictate, interfere or impose its norms on anyone.



Two scenes in the church during the Centenary of the Finnish Seamen's Mission in London earlier this year.

The English were felt to be lenient and philosophical instead of looking at issues in black and white terms. Once the Finns get used to England's "inferiority" to the dirt and the general slovenly state of affairs, they often begin to enjoy themselves, because mental freedom more than compensates for the lack of order.

The ideal type of Finnish woman to live happily in England seems to be someone who was alienated by Finland's cultural authoritarianism who has maturity and professional qualifications, who has had work experience in Finland, and who has come to England because of marriage. These women, although aware of cultural differences and often even critical of English life in many respects, had been able to accept the differences, to regard the difficulties as a challenge, to find other rewards in their lives which more than compensated for the loss of Finland.

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Suomalainen aviovaimo englantilaisessa yhteisössä

Isossa-Britanniassa asuu vain 4000-5000 suomalaista. Suurin osa on naisia, jotka ovat avioituneet Englannissa. Tätä artikkelia varten haastateltiin 25 suomalaisnaista, jotka ovat naimisissa englantilaisen kanssa ja ovat asuneet Lontoossa tai sen liepeillä vähintään kahdeksan vuotta. Tutkimuksessa esitetyt mielipiteet heijastavat tämän ryhmän mielipiteitä, eivätkä vastaa muiden kokemuksia Ison-Britannian muista osista.

Melkein puolella haastatelluista oli läheisiä ystävyys-suhteita englantilaisten kanssa. Yleensä englantilaisiin ei tutustuttu nopeasti, mutta ne, jotka olivat saaneet aikaan läheisiä ystävyys-suhteita heihin, kokivat englantilaiset "hyvin sydämmelli-

siksi", "uskollisiksi" tai "yhtä hyväksi kuin suomalaiset". Akateemisen koulutuksen saaneet naiset pystyivät luomaan huomattavasti huonommin läheisiä ystävyys-suhteita englantilaisiin kuin ne, joilla ei ollut akateemista koulutusta. Englantilaiset naiset koettiin usein pintapuolisiksi. Akateemisesti koulutetuilla naisilla ei myöskään ole niin usein tilaisuutta ystävyystyötovereittensa kanssa, koska englantilaisessa yhteiskunnassa eri sosiaaliluokkiin kuuluvat eivät yleensä ystävyystoistensa kanssa.

Useimmat suomalaiset naiset olivat sitä mieltä, että englantilaiset välttävät henkilökohtaisella tasolla liikkuvia tai väkavia keskustelunaiheita, ja sen sijaan ylläpitävät kevyempää sävyä keskustelusaan. Englantilaisen luonteen ymmärtäminen on usein vaikeaa suomalaiselle, joka on tottunut mut-

kattomampaan ja suurempaan kanssakäymiseen. Englannissa on tärkeämpää se, miten jokin asia sanotaan kuin se mitä sanotaan. Myös monet niistä, joilla oli läheisiä ystävyyssuhteita englantilaisiin sanoivat, että heidän suhteensa toisiin suomalaisiin on henkisesti kiinteämpää. Niinkään keskustelunaiheet suomalaisten kanssa olivat henkilökohtaisemmalla tasolla.

Vaikka suurin osa haastatelluista ei tuntenut kuuluvansa englantilaiseen yhteiskuntaan, he kuitenkin tunsivat viihtyvänsä Englannissa. Useimmat nauttivat irrallisuuden tunteestaan, joskin muutamille siitä oli muodostunut ongelma, sillä "leikki-elämä" Englannissa tuntui joskus epätodelliselta.

Yleensä viihtyvyyden tunne oli lisääntynyt

Englanttiin tulon jälkeen, ja noin kaksi kolmasosaa haastatelluista oli sitä mieltä, että he eivät mahdollisesti yksinkään jäätyään muuttaisi Suomeen. Kuitenkin melkein kaikille kiinteät suhteet kotimaahan ja säännölliset Suomen vierailut olivat yksi viihtymisen tärkeä edellytys.

Melkein kaikki haastateltavat olivat tunteneet itsensä vapaammiksi Englannissa kuin Suomessa, jossa he olivat usein kärsineet henkisestä ahtaudesta, auktoriteettiuskosta ja asioiden yleisestä mustavalkoisesta arviointitavasta. Tämä oli saanut noin puolet haastateltavista tuntemaan itsensä vieraantuneiksi Suomesta. Englantilaiset sen sijaan koettiin suvaitsevammiksi, ja englantilainen yhteiskunta vapaamielisemmäksi.