

Between Nostalgia and Modernity: Competing Discourses in Travel Writing about the Nordic North

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Abstract – In travel narratives by 19th-century visitors, the Nordic North generally emerges as pre-modern and uncivilized. Yet the most widespread view of the Nordic countries today is that they are socially progressive, liberal, and politically advanced. The connection between present-day socio-political discourses and cultural discourses of the past thus seems to be very weak or even absent. When a micro-perspective is applied, however, it becomes clear that the idea of a northern modernity has a long history. Current interpretations of the region as a site of progress do not break with previous depictions but constitute the continuation of a counter-discourse that was always present. Nineteenth-century works frequently contain both images of fairy-tale forests and descriptions of modern cities, and sometimes manage to combine the idea of the demanding, masculine-coded North with a view that foregrounds women's emancipation and opportunities in society. To function as an alternative and an inspiration, however, the region needs to be modern in a different way than London or Paris. It could be said that the modernity the Nordic North was made to represent in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century built on the same features that led to nostalgic interpretations of the region.

Keywords – Nostalgia, modernity, gender equality, religious revival, 19th-century travel writing

Introduction

In 19th-century Anglophone travel writing, presentations of the Nordic North generally emphasize either the region's geographical distance from the European centres or its lingering connection to the past. A classic image is the picture of a Norwegian forest in Thomas Forester's *Norway in 1848 and 1849*.¹ In line with Romantic ideals, the

¹ Forester 1850: facing 366.

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picture shows a man dwarfed by grandiose nature and suggests an understanding of the North as a space that inspires awe and moves people closer to themselves and to God. The insignificance of the man in relation to the high mountains and trees surrounding him invokes the sublime, and the sense of remoteness in the scene suggests the exploration paradigm, where the North is perceived as a blank space, open for inscription. The absence of technological equipment implies a nostalgic pattern that places the region in a rural past that may be figured as Arcadian or uncivilized, depending on the describer's point of view. The idea that the Nordic North is nature, not culture, persists in promotional material to the present day and the pictures in 21st-century tourist brochures frequently follow patterns similar to Forester's illustration (see for example Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir in this volume). Yet the most widespread view of the Nordic countries from the mid-20th century onwards is that they are socially progressive, liberal, and politically advanced. Instead of representing the past, the area is frequently regarded as pointing towards an enlightened future, not least where gender politics is concerned.



Figure 1. Spectacular pictures of sublime nature are common in 19th-century travel writing about the Nordic North (Forester 1850: facing 366).

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in the interplay between resilience and adaptation when it comes to regional development, particularly in the social sciences where the focus has been on community development, economic change, and sustainability. The issue raises slightly different questions from a humanities' point of view, since in culture, old models are surprisingly vital, not least because canonized and popular texts and pictures continue to be circulated. Because of their continued presence, historical cultural paradigms influence present-day understandings, as the photos of deep Northern forests and magical waterfalls in the tourist brochures illustrate. In comparison, the connection between the socio-political discourses of the present and the cultural discourses of the past seems to be very weak or even completely absent. Given the resilience of the older models, the question is whether current interpretations of the Nordic North as exemplary modernity constitute a break with previous depictions or whether there is a long-standing relationship between the competing discourses of nostalgia and modernity in northern description.

Ancient Modernity

For an English or American 19th-century commentator, modernity would probably have meant rationality, industrial progress, democratic ideals, and social reorientation. Pre- or non-modernity would have been associated with myth and superstition, a rural lifestyle, feudal governing principles, and stable social codes. In comparison with the European centres, the characteristics of the Nordic countries would have clustered on the pre-modern side. Philosophical ideas about northernness complicate the picture, however. Remnants of Montesquieu's, Winckelmann's, and Mallet's climate-based arguments were still in operation throughout the 19th century, and would have supported a view of the North as masculine and rational and the South as feminine and artistic (on Mallet, see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume). For Anglophone visitors, the dichotomy between the industrial North and the idyllic/aristocratic South of both England and the U.S. would also have played a role.² A mental association between northernness and progress would have been close at hand, and it is in a sense quite remarkable that nostalgic

² Tebbutt 2006: 1134.

images of the North became so prevalent, since philosophical-political ideas persistently pointed in the direction of modernity and progress.

Nevertheless, the rural character of much of the Nordic North invited nostalgic interpretations that were continually reproduced due to the intertextual nature of the travel genre. Elizabeth Jane Oswald's description of her travels in Iceland from 1882 provides a typical example:

The way was chiefly through green pastoral valleys, and I generally stopped at the farms and shared the life of the people. It was as if one had stepped out of the restrictions of modern life into a simple Arcadia.³

The perceived absence of culturally and socially determined distinctions and categories means that the northern periphery offers a freedom not available in the centre, and at the same time as she highlights the pre-modern character of Iceland, Oswald uses her narrative to criticize what she terms "the crowded uniformity of modern life."⁴ The relief from the demands of modernity to be found at faraway locations is a common theme in travel writing and characterizes what Chris Bongie terms "exoticizing exoticism."⁵ Macro-level discussions of northern travel writing normally emphasize such positive exoticism and the concomitant Arcadian, North-as-nature paradigm in foreign constructions. When a micro-perspective is applied, the nostalgic model is revealed to be far less universal, however. Nineteenth-century travel texts frequently contain both images of fairy-tale forests and descriptions of modern cities, and sometimes manage to combine the idea of the demanding, masculine-coded North produced by the exploration paradigm with a view that foregrounds women's emancipation and opportunities in society. Although civilization and modernity are generally thought of as metropolitan phenomena, the aspects of civilization critique present in travel writing may locate modernity in the periphery instead. Occasionally, texts about the northern periphery also describe a political modernity rarely acknowledged in narratives about

³ Oswald 1882: 178.

⁴ Oswald 1882: 237.

⁵ Bongie 1991: 17.

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southern spaces. In apparent contradiction to her praise of the escape from modernity offered through Iceland's Arcadian character, Oswald suggests that politically, the country is actually more advanced than Britain because of the liberated position of the Icelandic woman in the 19th century and historically.⁶ Like many of her contemporaries, Oswald takes part in a dominant, nostalgic discourse that contains and constantly clashes with a counter-discourse about northern modernity. The focus of this counter-discourse was increasingly the more liberal gender norms in the Nordic countries.

There consequently seem to be several simultaneous but contradictory movements from the centre to the margins of Europe: a nostalgic movement from the depressingly modern back to a simpler lifestyle with clear value systems and stable moral codes; a parallel, radical movement away from the modern, but stale and stagnant, centre, to an elsewhere still on the verge of its future; and a movement away from a centre that perceives itself as modern to a periphery where the historical precedents for this modernity can be found. In all these cases, the difference between the European centres and the peripheral North is a matter of their respective places on a modernity scale, but the meaning attributed to the positions are radically different.

The complexity of these modernity discourses has meant that most investigations into foreign images of the North have concentrated on its qualities as natural landscape and historic preserve, and the fact that even in the 19th century the Nordic countries could inspire modern developments in the European centres is rarely discussed. To function as an alternative and an inspiration, however, the region needed to be modern in a different way from London or Paris. The modernity represented by the Nordic North in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century was to a great extent a kind of ancient modernity, based on Viking-age customs, romanticized history, and the ideals expressed in medieval Nordic literature. In effect, 19th-century Anglo-Saxon visions of the modern North largely built on the same features that led to nostalgic interpretations of the area.

⁶ Oswald 1882: 50.

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The introductory poem of Rosalind Travers's travel book *Letters from Finland, August, 1908–March, 1909* captures a typical combination of nostalgia and modernity:

Leave the South! O, leave the weary golden shore
Of the Midland sea,
Where a thousand ships have touched before;
Come away with me
To a place of wide untravelled waters,
Silvering the leagues of sombre wood,
Where the lake-nymphs and the river-daughters
Dance all night along the shining flood.

Leave the South! for she is mournful with the weight
Of remembered years;
Lapped in ancient splendours, dim and great,
Wrought of time and tears.
For the dark earth that nourishes her flowers
Hardly veils the ever-watchful dead.
The purple vine and cypress in her bowers
Are memories of passion and of dread.

But the North lies all open to the morrow
From the fells to the strand;
Her clear morning wakens, free of sorrow,
On a timeless land.
Dreamily the pines sway in slumber,
Careless is the singing charm
Of the brook, which the grey stones cumber
With a heavy arm.

Till the lake-water ripples to the falling
Of low wings in flight,
And the woodland hears a whispering and calling
Through the brief, golden night.
Lightly, from each rock-cleft and hollow,
Little people of the stones slip forth,
Weaving spells, which the wanderer must follow
On and on, through the glamour of the North.⁷

⁷ Travers 1911b: no page numbers.

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The poem conveys the idea that the South is old and played out whereas the North represents the future (the “morrow”). The countries around the Mediterranean are burdened by too much history, while Finland, in this case, looks forward. In apparent contradiction, however, northern nature is represented as unexplored and numinous, and mythical features are highlighted.

Analogous ideas can be found also in domestic 19th-century literature, and a similar contradiction informs Fredrika Bremer’s tale *The Midnight Sun* from 1848 where northern Sweden is presented as the primary reason for the country’s vitality at the same time as Bremer stresses its underdeveloped, uncivilized character.⁸ Domestic and foreign interpretations interacted, and apart from being known as a feminist forerunner, Bremer was Sweden’s most internationally famous author at the time. Her descriptions were therefore likely to influence foreign expectations on the factual as well as the symbolic level. The travel writer Susanna Henrietta Kent who visited Sweden in 1877 thus concludes her narrative with a quotation from *The Midnight Sun* that brings out the combination of romantic, feminized nature and possibilities for renewal that, for her, characterizes Sweden:

My beloved’s form is tall; great are the contrasts which she presents; from her feet, which are bathed by the Baltic waters, which are caressed by carpets of flowers, up to her crown, on which sits a diadem of wedge-like ice-rocks, and over which flame the northern lights. Unexhausted and inexhaustible is the treasure of wisdom which she possesses, and which she preserves in her silent woods and in her soundless deeps. And perhaps the Great Creator placed her so aside on the earth, so far up in the north, that, longest of all countries, she might husband her original strength, and when her sisters of the South have grown faint with the conflict, with the over-stimulus of culture, she may breathe upon them a renovating spirit of life.⁹

In Bremer’s and Kent’s works, as in Travers’s poem, the North functions as a source of newness precisely because it is untouched by

⁸ Bremer 1848: 6–7.

⁹ Kent 1877: 223–24.

the excesses of civilization, which means that nostalgic and modern patterns coexist in the representations. There is consequently no clear break between the images clustering around the Nordic North in the 19th century and those beginning to emerge in the latter half of the 20th century. Myths, history, or untouched nature can be integrated in a nostalgic narrative as well as in one focusing on newness and social progress, and the exploration paradigm highlighting the undiscovered nature of the North paradoxically enables constructions that foreground its modernity. There is nothing inherently old or new about the region, and despite the forces of modernization characterizing the 19th century, the role the North is made to play is only partly determined by actual conditions. An equally if not more important factor is the describer's position and purposes. As Andrew Wawn makes clear, the Victorians referred to the Viking North to support such divergent agendas as

patriarchal family values and female suffrage; social Darwinism and social engineering; extension of the franchise and *Führerprinzip* centralism; constitutional monarchy and republicanism.¹⁰

The ideological flavour of northern description is patently unstable.

Nostalgic Modernity and Religious Revival¹¹

Besides its reputation as an industrial region, northern England was known as a landscape of religious dissent, and the Nordic North has a similar history of independence in relation to the state churches.¹² Via the imaginative link between religious free-thinking and personal liberty, the dissenters could be seen as forerunners of political modernity and, in the Scandinavian context, their demand for religious freedom could be traced back to Viking-age parliamentary democracy as practiced in the Icelandic Althing. In this way, liberal and early socialist ideas could be provided with a northern pedigree that, by way of circular reasoning, located modern political

¹⁰ Wawn 2000: 32.

¹¹ The discussion in this section draws on Hansson 2009, although from a different perspective.

¹² Tebbutt 2006: 1134.

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developments in the past. In England as well as in the Nordic countries it was theological, not political, differences that led to the establishment of the dissenting churches, however, and their members were driven by deep faith and a strict adherence to Biblical doctrine that stood in contrast to notions of political radicalism. The tension between nostalgia and modernity therefore becomes particularly noticeable in descriptions of the religious revival movements in northern Scandinavia and Finland. On the one hand, representations of devout peasants function as nostalgic reminders of a rapidly disappearing past for Europeans uncomfortable with the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. On the other hand, the same image serves as an illustration of a new social order with individual conscience and individual choices as its lodestars.

In Sweden, religious meetings outside the state church were against the law until 1858, and especially the pietistic movement called *Läsare* or Readers received a great deal of attention in travel narratives from the early 19th century onwards. In line with the nostalgic view, the members of the movement were shown as representatives of old-fashioned piety, but the fact that they consistently broke the law was often understood as a subtle attack on central power and a manifestation of liberalism. Their democratic principles and forms of worship primarily attracted farmers, workers, and servants rather than the more privileged segments of society, which meant that for an outside observer, these groups were frequently understood as politically progressive.

The U.S. travel writer Bayard Taylor delivers the opinion that the Readers represent democracy and liberty and even suggests that they may transform Sweden from an old-fashioned, almost feudal kind of society to a modern, democratic nation:

The present movement, so much like Methodism in many particulars, owes its success to the same genial and all-embracing doctrine of an impartial visitation of Divine grace, bringing man into nearer and tenderer relations to his Maker. In a word, it is the democratic, opposed to the aristocratic

principle in religion. [T]he Läsare [...] will in the end be the instrument of bestowing religious liberty upon Sweden.¹³

The recurring descriptions of curtailed religious freedom suggest that many travel writers advocated a religious liberalism that contrasted with the political imperialism their home cultures represented. The philanthropist and social reformer Charles Loring Brace was particularly interested in tracing the history of American virtues in the ancient North:

To an American, a visit to the home of the old Northmen is a visit back to his forefathers' house. A thousand signs tell him he is at the cradle of the race which leads modern enterprise, and whose Viking-power on both hemispheres has not yet ceased to be felt.¹⁴

There is a metaphorical transference between a puritanical, Christian ideal and the myth of a rough, forceful northernness in Brace's text, and the idea of the invincible Viking hovers over descriptions of the revivalists' power of resistance against State decrees. Like Taylor, Brace suggests that the religious movements make the North a site of liberation and modernity. Relating a conversation with a man he meets in northern Norway, he writes:

"The main thing in it all, sir, is what you in America will understand—we want the Church utterly kept apart from the State."

It would be presumptuous in me, as yet, to give a judgment on this remarkable religious movement. But from all evidence thus far, I fully believe it is a natural vigorous protest against the state Church, accompanied, of course, with much fanaticism.¹⁵

Brace is writing for an American readership and, like most travel writers, he applies the value system of his own culture to what he experiences. His pronounced purpose of locating the origins of

¹³ Taylor 1859: 429.

¹⁴ Brace 1857: iii.

¹⁵ Brace 1857: 86.

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American ideals of liberty in the old North thus sometimes changes into its opposite and becomes an attempt to squeeze Nordic conditions into an American paradigm. Although the North is the original home of the freedom model, it has now been transplanted to the United States where it is integrated in Protestant ideology:

Our great principle in America—as we believe, the principle of Protestantism—is that the conscience must be free; that liberty is the true atmosphere of the soul, and without it, religious life withers and dies.¹⁶

As Brace sees it, the Scandinavian revival groups offer the only hope for the North to regain a lost, true Christianity—and with it, the lost Viking virtues of liberty and independence.

The liberal principles connected with the revival movements included a considerably more progressive attitude to the role of women. In several cases, women appeared as preachers and importantly, the religious movements stressed a personal relationship between God and the individual, which meant that in matters of faith, women could not be ruled by anything except their own conscience. Women and men were seen as equal before God, and in this, 19th-century religious revivals, across Europe, can be understood as emancipatory. Evangelical fervour interacted with a growing feminist awareness also through the demand that everyone should be able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, which required raised levels of literacy and paved the way for better education for women. In addition, the movements provided impulses for wide-ranging philanthropic work, mainly organized and carried out by women, and it became socially and morally acceptable for women to use, for instance, their literary talents in the service of religion.

The Irish travel writer Selina Bunbury was one of the many women able to carve out a literary career by supplying material to religious tract societies and produce wholesome books for family consumption. Despite her ardent belief in religious freedom—especially for the Irish Catholics she hoped to convert with her writings—she is ambivalent in her comments on the revival

¹⁶ Brace 1857: 278–79.

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movements in Sweden. On the one hand, she welcomes the modern views represented by the new religious groups, but on the other, she fears that they constitute a threat to the unity of the country:

There is a double movement going on—a forward, impulsive one, in which both the political-liberal party and the evangelical-religious one may bear a share—it is true that in all, of what are termed onward movements, they become combined. There is also a retrograde tendency, less strong and less visible, but very sure. Were liberty of dissent allowed, we should soon see the results of both. The issue would probably be fatal to the Swedish Church; and in the present enforced submission to its doctrines, laws and practices, there is at least that good which results from the repression of outward infidelity, and absence of the distracting, life-wasting squabbles which bear the name of Controversies.¹⁷

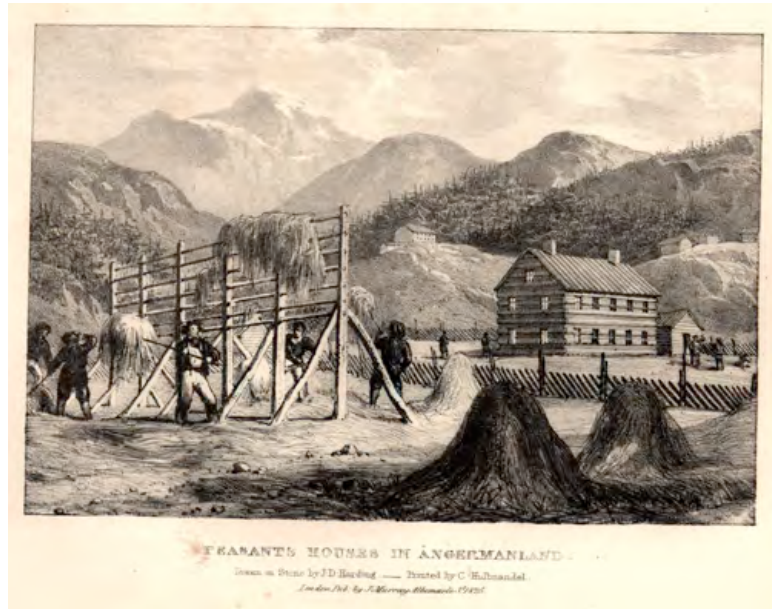


Figure 2. Rural landscapes were often interpreted nostalgically by visitors from more industrialized countries (Brooke 1828: 572).

In the end, Bunbury seems to prefer a world order that is less democratic, but more stable, than the one advocated by Taylor and

¹⁷ Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 279.

Brace. Whereas the Americans seem to come down firmly on the side of the religious revivals as symbols of liberty and modernity, Bunbury at least partly views them as a threat to stability and perhaps also to a nostalgic image of the North. In many cases, the religious movements led to the destruction of folk customs that were considered immoral in the light of the new piety, and in this respect, at least, it could be said that she was correct in her fears.

Arcadian Gender Politics

With the rise of the middle class around and after the Enlightenment, what was defined as proper femininity was exiled from the public sphere of state affairs to the domestic, private sphere. Since modernity was associated with the public, it was generally gendered masculine.¹⁸ One attribute of the non-civilization or natural character of the European peripheries, however, was that the public sphere was seen as insufficiently developed. In foreign understandings of the northern margins there is thus no clear dichotomy between public and private, official and domestic realms, and as a result, no clear space reserved for women or reversely, that women were barred from. During her visit in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, Selina Bunbury therefore describes herself as occupying a considerably more public role than her position as an Evangelical middle-class woman would have allowed at home. Describing how she was asked to give her opinion of whether there would be war between Sweden and Russia, Bunbury notes that her foreignness provides her with an aura of expertise: “He thought, I fancy, that as I was a foreigner, I must possess universal knowledge: therefore he begged to ask me—if Russia would make war on Sweden!”¹⁹ Bunbury’s public role on this occasion is made possible by her outside position, but also by her and her audience’s view of Sweden as a socially undeveloped country where it is acceptable for women to voice political opinions. Sweden allows Bunbury to be modern because the country is itself pre-modern: “Few lands are more backward in the mechanical, as well as in the fine arts, than Sweden is,” Bunbury writes,²⁰ summarizing its

¹⁸ Felski 1995: 16.

¹⁹ Bunbury 1856, vol. II: 95.

²⁰ Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 14.

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character as “agricultural and pastoral.”²¹ The country’s “mechanical backwardness” inspires nostalgia for an England now destroyed by mechanical developments:

Would these people be happier or better if a great factory received them, congregated amid the roar of steam machinery? Here it is impossible not to turn back with a yearning our Manchester men would despise, to the times of spinning wheels and weaving looms in the cottage homes of Great Britain.²²

According to Linda M. Austin, the English cottage became as an “icon of public memory” in British 19th-century imagination, forging a communal identity that built on “an idea of nation founded on an endangered rural capitalism and revived under the aegis of the country’s commercial and imperial ventures.”²³ In Austin’s analysis, it is particularly in the final decades of the century that the cottage emerges as a national, nostalgic symbol in Britain,²⁴ but the idea that a visit to a foreign country also includes a visit to an environment in the past is common in travel writing through the 1800s. To the extent that nostalgic symbols were bound up with questions of national identity,²⁵ it might also have been easier for people who did not subscribe to the collective identity being created to consume the “English” cottage and its equivalents elsewhere. The rural memory emblemized in the cottage could still be accessed in the North where it was safe from the ravages of industrialization as well as uncluttered by ideological baggage: a visit to northern Europe allows a kind of apolitical nostalgia, as it were.²⁶ Thus Sweden can occupy the symbolic role of an Arcadian past in Bunbury’s travel narratives precisely because she views the country as deplorably backward in comparison to England. The nostalgic paradigm can further contain her representation of Sweden as a place where she can enjoy a public role she is barred from at home, since it is based on a similar

²¹ Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 15.

²² Bunbury 1856, vol. II: 215.

²³ Austin 2007: 126.

²⁴ Austin 2007: 126–127.

²⁵ Austin 2007: 126, 138.

²⁶ Tebbutt 2006: 1126.

understanding of the country as underdeveloped. The pattern is more in conflict with her accounts of the progressive gender politics of the Scandinavian countries, however.

The ideology of separate spheres was predominantly a middle-class phenomenon, and Rita Felski notes that it “was undercut by the movement of working-class women into mass production and industrial labour.”²⁷ Women in paid work, like women with money to spend on consumer goods, are signs of a modern femininity that develops throughout the 19th century, she argues. Ignoring the class aspects of the matter, Bunbury comments that women are “the true workers of Sweden,” since they “draw sledges to market, and drag heavy loads of wood over the frozen waters.”²⁸ Whether buyers or sellers, these Swedish women perform on the public arena of the market and function as signs of modernity in the text. In her combination of romantic story and travelogue *Evelyn, or a Journey from Stockholm to Rome*, Bunbury addresses the situation for middle-class women more specifically by making the Swedish character Evelyn defend women’s right to fulfilling work:

In England [women] are excluded from many departments they can fill in other countries; and surely the trade of governesses is most frightfully overdone. If a woman, therefore, possess talent, and use it as a woman should, why should not the talent be recognised, more especially on account of the difficulties which belong to her class?²⁹

Evelyn is a fictional character from a different country than Bunbury, and by using her to express more radical ideas, Bunbury can make it seem as if she herself remains within the boundaries of proper, even conservative ideas of femininity. Because of her Swedishness, Evelyn is exempt from the conventions that apply in England and can be used in the narrative as a representative of a modern outlook absent in the centre of Europe but present in the peripheral North.³⁰

²⁷ Felski 1995: 19.

²⁸ Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 59.

²⁹ Bunbury 1849, vol. I: 228.

³⁰ A few of the comments in the section about Selina Bunbury have previously appeared in Hansson 2003.

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In *Life in Sweden*, Bunbury suggests that the Swedish divorce laws almost make it worth a woman's while to get married:

"Why was she divorced?" I ask.

"Her husband was a tyrant", is the answer.

Perhaps our lawyers would get more employment if this plea held good in England.³¹

In a similar way, Elizabeth Jane Oswald comments on the easy divorce procedures in Iceland both in the past and the present in her book *By Fell and Fjord*. In ancient times, she writes, "a few angry words or a slap on the cheek"³² were sufficient grounds for divorce, and even at the time of her visit in the early 1880s, "the Icelanders are at liberty, like other Lutherans, to divorce each other, for what seem to us small causes, such as mere incompatibility of temper."³³ Although Oswald presents the religion of the Nordic countries as an important reason for a more liberated approach to marriage, she traces its history back to Viking times. The tension between modernity and nostalgia becomes very noticeable in her narrative since she draws on myth, saga and folklore to give historical precedence to desired developments in gender politics at home. Describing conditions in the "days of the sagas,"³⁴ she stresses women's power and freedom:

After a woman had been once married, whether she was a widow or divorced, she became a free agent. The married woman was, from the earliest times, the true household leader, the queen or companion of her lord. The sagas tell of the same freedom of the wife in her own sphere, and association with her husband's life and pursuits, which is the ideal of wedded life now in this country. She was not, like the Greek wife, doomed to a narrow life in her own side of the house apart from the interests of the men; still less was she like the plaything of the Eastern harem; and old age did not deprive her of her influence, while it added to her dignity. Her words

³¹ Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 305.

³² Oswald 1882: 49.

³³ Oswald 1882: 50.

³⁴ Oswald 1882: 50.

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were often then held sacred, her influence grew paramount, as one to whom the gods had imparted a more than human wisdom.³⁵

To throw further “light on the position of the women of the north in the early middle ages,” Oswald translates a portion of *Egil’s Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, foregrounding the great freedom and social rights the Icelandic women enjoyed.³⁶ As opposed to most 19th-century travelogues, novels, and treatises about Iceland, hers is “a book of heroines rather than heroes,” as Andrew Wawn notes.³⁷ Her descriptions acquire extra weight since she views the Icelanders as the “Scandinavian ancestors who have made Great Britain what it is” by passing on the ideal of political freedom.³⁸ The progressive conditions for women in Iceland are given legitimacy through their saga origins, and her text consistently invites the conclusion that the same conditions should apply in England since the countries are ideologically linked.

Nevertheless, stories of the old North are not inherently politically liberal, and Viking culture is sometimes also used to support a patriarchal outlook, as in *The Viking: A Novel* (1879) by Margaret Cartmell (M. R.). The narrative flirts with alternative models of womanhood, but reinstates conventional gender constructions at the end when the main character Eric wins his bride and “the wild daughter of the ocean was conquered at last!”³⁹ His beloved submits completely, and admits that she has been foolish not to accept his authority before:

Suddenly Rhunmelda, colouring deeply, said: “Eric, dost thou remember once telling me that I could not rule the Northmen, that I was not strong enough to do so. I want to tell thee that thou was right, and that I failed!”⁴⁰

³⁵ Oswald 1882: 50.

³⁶ Oswald 1882: 186.

³⁷ Wawn 2000: 306.

³⁸ Oswald 1882: 36.

³⁹ Cartmell 1879: 258.

⁴⁰ Cartmell 1879: 258.

The ideological content of the North is exceedingly versatile, and was put to a variety of uses by 19th-century Anglophone commentators.

Alongside stories of masterful Vikings and nostalgic images of northern Europe as a rural Arcadia, and sometimes even integrated in such works, there were consequently presentations where the region emerges as a social and cultural counter-space, a modern alternative characterized by social reform and a new gender order. This circumstance has received considerably less attention from critics, partly, perhaps, because the study of travel writing has been mainly informed by post-colonial theories that have rather focused on expressions of imperialism and condescension in the texts. The suggestion of a counter-space seems to be an important difference between narratives about England's colonies and descriptions of peripheral but independent regions, however. Colonies are more likely to be viewed as extensions of the colonizing centres and therefore insufficiently civilized in comparison. Peripheries, on the other hand, are unattached to the European centres, with their own distinctive backgrounds and histories, which means that they can be presented as alternative spaces where varieties of modernity can be found.

Literary Modernity

The view of the Nordic countries as politically radical was strengthened in the period 1870–1890 through the artistic and literary developments described as “the modern breakthrough.” Literary iconoclasts like Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Ola Hansson, and Laura Marholm were both admired and fiercely attacked for their daring treatment of controversial issues and their aesthetic innovations. In *A Doll's House* (1879), for instance, Ibsen criticizes 19th-century marriage norms and creates one of the first feminist heroines in drama. His plays were important inspirations for the New Women writers of the 1890s, and in George Egerton's (Mary Chavelita Dunne) stories a northern setting often becomes symbolic of an unconventional way of life.⁴¹ In her book *Through Finland in Carts* (1897), the travel writer Ethel Brilliana Tweedie devotes considerable space to Minna Canth's feminist play *The Worker's Wife*

⁴¹ O'Toole 2008: 130.

(*Työmiehen vaimo*, 1885), and quotes information from a Finnish publication called *Women and Women's Work* where it is stated that

here in Finland, as well as in Scandinavia, the female authors have been, since the middle of the century, deeply influenced by the problem of the emancipation of the women, which forms such a prominent feature of modern society. This problem has been introduced into several works of fiction, and has been treated at greater or less length in many treatises, essays and pamphlets. The first Finnish authoresses who wrote on the subject of the emancipation of women were Fredrika Runeberg and Adelaïde Ernroth.⁴²

Although most of the Scandinavian and Finnish late 19th-century writers would probably have rejected the feminist label and lived far from gender-equal lives, they were frequently seen as representatives of sexual liberty and created expectations of a corresponding social modernity in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, the modern lifestyle possible in the North is not always figured as an effect of a more advanced society, but often depicted as the result of its opposite. Discussing Egerton's short story "At the Heart of the Apple," Inga-Stina Ewbank shows that Norway emerges in the text as "a world of natural morality, untrammelled by artificial social conventions, a pre-lapsarian world."⁴³ Egerton produces a "feminist version of Pastoral" through her descriptions of Scandinavia, where the Arcadian is a prerequisite for the modern.⁴⁴ The figure of the New Woman is usually defined through external characteristics linked to the metropolis, but placing her in the periphery, as in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Egerton's stories, foregrounds the importance of a change of mentality rather than a change of external circumstances in the matter of gender politics. In this way, the location of the metropolitan New Woman in a landscape normally understood as Arcadia forces a re-examination of the relationship between place, modernity, and gender codes.

⁴² Tweedie 1913: 180.

⁴³ Ewbank 1999: 18.

⁴⁴ Ewbank 1999: 19.

Finland: Numinous Nature and Exemplary Modernity

In various ways, all the Nordic countries were used to illustrate a modern outlook in Anglophone travel writing, but in the early 20th century, Finland emerges as the country with the most progressive gender ideas and a symbol of sexual-political modernity. As one of the first countries in the world, Finland granted the vote to women in 1906, and in 1907 the first women were elected to the parliament. Sylvia Borgström MacDougall traces the progressive Finnish views on women's emancipation to the Middle Ages in her travel book *A Summer Tour in Finland* (1908):

The oldest document in Finland [...] is an edict on parchment for the protection of women in Karelen (Eastern Finland); dated 1316. No wonder women of the present day have such privileges in Finland, if they commenced to clamour for their rights at such an early date!⁴⁵

Elsewhere in the text she makes clear that “clamouring” for rights is more necessary in England than in Finland where women already have all the rights of citizenship. Since the Suffragettes and the idea of the New Woman met with considerable resistance at home it was important to provide an example that worked and to show that women's new roles in no way compromised their femininity:

Women are engaged in seemingly every branch of work, with the result that meetings of “suffragettes” and women demanding their rights are unknown in a country where women are students in the University, clerks in the banks, in the post-offices, and in business houses, and where women not only have their vote, but can be elected members of the Diet. Yet with it all they are not in the least overbearing; indeed, for the greater part, they are exceedingly modest and womanlike. As I landed, one of the recently elected women members of the coming Diet was pointed out to me in the crowd. She was well-dressed and young-looking, with keen, deep-set eyes and a pleasant smile, and in no way resembled

⁴⁵ MacDougall 1908: 31.

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the grotesque caricatures of the women members of the Finnish Diet in some English journals.⁴⁶



Figure 3. New Women were usually depicted as unfeminine in the English popular press ("The New Woman at the Duke o' York's," *Punch* 1896: 208).

Finland is presented as far more modern and progressive than England, where women do not have the vote and are barred from both educational institutions and many lines of work. By referring to the medieval document in the university archives MacDougall gives Finland's claim to modernity in this respect a long history, like Elizabeth Jane Oswald, who saw the origins of women's condition in Iceland in saga and folklore.

The female member of parliament described in the passage is one of the first things Sylvia MacDougall comments on in her travel book, and in the first decade of the 20th century the emancipation of women in Finland becomes a standard theme in foreign accounts. The English writer Rosalind Travers visited Finland soon after MacDougall, in 1908 and 1909, and even before her arrival, she makes clear that the issue of female suffrage will be important in her

⁴⁶ MacDougall 1908: 5.

narrative. As an evening entertainment onboard the ship taking them to Helsinki, a Miss Celia Travers is “going to utter a few words on Woman’s Suffrage,” and this fellow traveller is later identified as the narrator’s cousin.⁴⁷ She is described as a Suffragette, and Travers quotes her saying that she will visit Finland because there, women have achieved suffrage: “I’ll go to the only civilized country in Europe, the one where women have got their full rights. Let me pay a visit to Uncle Keith in Finland.”⁴⁸ Like Oswald, who created a link between Iceland and England on the grounds of historical ideological connections, Travers establishes an ideological link based on family relationships. If the originally English “Uncle Keith” can live in a country where women are politically emancipated, so can the Englishmen who still remain in their home country.

From the great number of letters that Travers later wrote to relatives and friends in Finland, it is difficult to work out whether she was really accompanied by a cousin on her journey, and in the narrative Celia rather functions as a way for the author to include views and opinions that she may not have been completely convinced she would like to advocate in her own voice. Celia and her admiration for the Finnish parliamentary system become ways for Travers to use northern practices to further political causes at home without having to take full responsibility for the ideas, in a similar way to how Selina Bunbury used her fictional travel companion, Evelyn, sixty years earlier.

Later in life Travers became a Socialist and married Henry Mayers Hyndman, the controversial initiator of the first Socialist organization in England, the Social Democratic Federation, in 1881 and the founder of the first Socialist journal, *Justice*, in 1884, as well as the founder of the National Socialist Party, a small leftist party without right-wing leanings. In the notice about their engagement in *The Times*, Travers is said to take a deep interest in Finland and in the Russian revolutionary movement.⁴⁹ She was instrumental in making conditions in Finland known to the English reading public before the First World War, but she also used Finnish examples to agitate for

⁴⁷ Travers 1911b: 5.

⁴⁸ Travers 1911b: 5.

⁴⁹ “Engagement of Mr. H. M. Hyndman” 1914: 5, col. F.

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votes for women, as in the article “The History of Women’s Suffrage in Finland” published in *The Englishwoman*, a monthly journal dedicated “to further the enfranchisement of women,” as its subtitle states.⁵⁰ In her travelogue, Finland becomes the model example of modernity for England to emulate. The usual relationship between the civilized centre and the backward periphery is thus reversed in her narrative, at least where questions of gender equality are concerned.

In *Letters from Finland*, Travers includes descriptions of politicians and politics that are clearly intended to produce an image of the country as a democratic example. This was also how the book was received. The *New York Times* reviewer concentrates on the mentions of female suffrage and particularly recommends it to women readers:

FINNISH LETTERS; Make Admirable Reading and Characterize the Country Ably

There are several reasons why women should read this book. First, it illustrates the most intelligent manner of visiting a country and a most human way of recording impressions. Second, it has a great deal to do with the question of suffrage—not from the conventional point of view, but from a sympathetic understanding of the political significance of the problem.⁵¹

The reviewer continues to mention examples from Travers’ text where female suffrage is a central theme:

On the thoroughfares one meets with female members of Parliament, and, save in the army and in the Church, there is not a vocation denied to the women. The question of equality is an all important one with them, while the questions of unions are just as imminent as in this country.⁵²

The review thus concentrates on the social and political sections of the text and mainly disregards the natural and exotic features. The

⁵⁰ Travers 1911a: 246–55. See Bristow 2006 for a brief presentation of the journal *The Englishwoman*.

⁵¹ “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

⁵² “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

headline statement that the narrative characterizes “the country ably” suggests that by the first decade of the 20th century, the nostalgic image of the Nordic North was slowly being replaced with one where the North represents modernity. The reviewer concludes that the Finnish people have radical opinions, just like their neighbours in Sweden and Norway: “And from what the author says we infer that the Finns, like their neighbours in the Scandinavian countries, are a people with advanced ideas.”⁵³ The Nordic countries are regarded as a coherent cultural and political region where there are no particular differences between the individual countries. As a result, the entire North emerges as the site of modernity in the review, in contrast to only a few decades before when a nostalgic paradigm would have been dominant.

Travers’s travel book, however, transmits both nostalgic and modern images. On one level, *Letters from Finland* emphasizes Finland as the site of progress, democracy, and modernity, but on another level, Travers returns to romantic ideas of a simpler, mythical, and mystical North. At the same time as she depicts Finland as one of Europe’s most modern countries, she draws nostalgic pictures that build on the epic poem *Kalevala*, the mysterious, deep forests and the entrancing summer light. Immediately after describing the female member of parliament she calls Hilja Raunio, she sketches a nostalgic-romantic picture that can only with great difficulty be reconciled with the examples of political progress she has just mentioned:

Did you not imply that I should find these Arctic forests indeed “woodlands lorn,” quite empty of nymphs and elves and naiads, and all such beautiful necessary creatures? Oh! how mistaken you were, for this simple northern land is the very home of wood-magic, and dryads and oreads have been honoured here since most ancient times. [...] Yes, certainly I have seen them! Have I not spent three weeks of fair weather in these island woods? and pray, what am I a poet for, if the nymphs of forest and river are not more visible, as well as more pleasing to me, than a fragment of mycetozoa, for instance.⁵⁴

⁵³ “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

⁵⁴ Travers 1911b: 66–67.

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Figure 4. Lennart Forstén's picture of the Finnish city Tampere (Tammerfors) captures the tension between nostalgia and modernity, with the forest and the factory chimneys side by side (Topelius 1845: facing 64).

Although there is certainly a gradual development throughout the 19th and early 20th century from representations of the North as Arcadia to representations where the Nordic countries represent social Utopias, this is no clear-cut process. Instead, it is a matter of interaction and tension where the North is made to represent an uncertain modernity that also always contains its opposite.

Conclusion

Closing her narrative, Sylvia MacDougall writes:

Finland is very young and very old. "Progress" is now her battle-cry. But in her heart the deeds of her forefathers are still remembered—pioneers of a race of honest men and brave women.⁵⁵

A slippage between representations of the North as mythological/natural space and socially progressive/organized space

⁵⁵ MacDougall 1908: 312

characterizes many 19th- and early 20th-century narratives about the Nordic countries where nostalgic images are refigured to fit with ideas of modernity and the distant past is reinterpreted to serve the needs of the present. The location of progress and newness in the geographical periphery is a reversal of imperialist rhetoric that admits the existence of a non-metropolitan modernity. This modernity is sometimes seen as an effect of the absence of such signs of modern life as urbanization and industrial progress, where liberty and equality can flourish in Arcadian spaces that are untouched by hierarchical social organization. On other occasions it is understood as the still surviving influence of folklore and ancient customs, as in Elizabeth Jane Oswald's Icelandic narrative, and on yet other occasions it is a logical continuation of utopian discourses where the North provides an alternative precisely because it is removed from the centres of social and political influence. In the end, the understanding of the region as lost Arcadia or egalitarian Utopia is less a matter of image and counter-image than necessary aspects of each other.

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