

Derek Fewster: *Visions of Past Glory. Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society 2006, 555 S. (=Studia Fennica Historica; 11).

This is a lavishly illustrated and richly documented study of the ways in which the proponents of a specifically Finnish national consciousness chose to interpret the past. It spans the years from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the 1930s, with particularly detailed coverage of the period from the middle of the nineteenth century to Finland's emergence as an independent state in 1918. One of the book's strengths is the variety of sources used to demonstrate how images of a constructed ancient past were taken up and incorporated in a wide range of social, cultural and political activities. The Finnish scout movement, for example, adopted the tight-fitting *patalakki* or skull-cap (erroneously but consistently misspelled here as 'scull-cap') as its headgear during the inter-war years. The skull-cap was one of the first visual markers of a Finnish past, documented as early as 1692, but made into a national garb during the nineteenth century. As Fewster suggests, at the same time as this piece of headgear was falling out of use in the 1840s and 1850s, "the *patalakki* of the national imagery was already becoming a marker of true spiritual Finnishness and would outlive by far

the original whim of fashion which once made it part of early modern dress in Sweden." (p. 91) On the evidence of this work, dressing up in the presumed habiliment of the ancestors seems to have become a national obsession during the first half of the twentieth century. It is a pity however that Fewster did not also consider architecture and design, which would have offered a broader range of motifs and images.

It is also regrettable that he did not look at the ways in which the commercial world drew upon the imagery of an imagined past. After all, ordinary Finns were rather more likely to have bought boxes of Sampo matches or purchased insurance from a company with a name chosen from the *Kalevala* than to have visited a theatre to see actors dressed up as ancient Finnish warriors. And not everything seems to have been permeated with such images; sport, for example, seems by and large to have steered clear of the past as inspiration. Fewster's rather remorseless cataloguing of the (mostly visual) images of nationalism might have been balanced with a consideration of other aspects of the national

make-up, such as the legacy of nineteenth-century religious revivalism.

The author contends that the work of creating a vision of a uniquely Finnish past was largely completed before independence. The artists and antiquarians of the “golden age” of the nineteenth century gave way to popularisers such as Aarno Karimo, whose tales of the national past, *Kumpujen yöstä*, fired the imagination of a generation of young patriots during the middle decades of the last century. What Fewster has to say about this period is interesting, since relatively little has been written on the popularisation of Finnish nationalist imagery. He notes the shift from the rather peaceful ancient Finn conjured up in the nineteenth-century to the bellicose defender of the homeland in the racially conscious world of the 1920s and 1930s, though in shifting the focus almost entirely to what he sees as ‘banal’ nationalism he avoids the more controversial subject of scholarly preoccupations with race and living space. He argues that nationalism had become “a self-evident banality”, a rather worn-out obligation in sharp contrast to the demands of planning the future of the nation. His assertion that the concepts of modernism, progress and development “were central to the cultural and political scenes of the 1920s and 1930s” (p. 312) is provocative, but not really proven. The proponents of modernism in literature and the arts faced con-

siderable hostility, not least because many were on the “wrong” side of the language boundary. Even the architects and designers who did most to create visions of modernity did so consciously within a very Finnish milieu. Eliel Saarinen’s plan for a monumental Kalevala House, which is briefly dealt with here, is an interesting but unfulfilled example of the balance between traditional and modern, of which the leading twentieth-century Finnish architect Alvar Aalto proved to be a master.

Fewster is heavily indebted to the work of his teacher and mentor, Matti Klinge, and he has also drawn heavily upon the findings of other students of Finnish nationalism. He is by instinct and inclination a cataloguer, rather than a theoretical analyst, even though he pays due regard to the writings of the principal gurus in the study of nationalism. The main strength of this book is a meticulous record of the construction of a Finnish antiquity by those determined to ensure that the nation should have a past. It now seems *de rigueur* for Finnish theses to be lavishly illustrated, and provided with generous appendices and good indexes, a far cry from the cramped texts of yore. The illustrations here are particularly good, though one wonders if it was necessary to provide *so* many: one spear-wielding actor clad in cross-garters and smock is in the end very much like another. The text could also have been reduced by a third

without too much loss; the repetitious quality of the pictures is regrettably true of much of the writing as well. The non-specialist will undoubtedly learn a great deal from this book about the creation of a past, but will not find it easy to place this process within the context of Finnish history in general. Although this is primarily a study of the culture of nationalism, rather than of Finnish historiography, more space might have been given to the debates of historians over Finland's past,

and there ought certainly to have been greater coverage of the disciplines of archaeology and ethnography. A more serious reservation is that the nuances and differences within the Finnish nationalist movement, and between that movement and those who adhered to the Swedish cultural inheritance as a foundation of their national identity, are not clearly outlined.

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