

J. V. Snellman as the nation's scriptwriter

Opening presentation of the J. V. Snellman Bicentenary Jubilee
Kuopio Music Centre, 3 January 2006, 6 p.m.
Docent Raimo Savolainen, General Secretary of the Jubilee

Right Honourable Minister of Education, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent years, in fact almost every two years, we have seen a succession of jubilees celebrating the figureheads of Finnish nation-building. In 1998, 2002 and 2004, we celebrated the jubilees of Zachris Topelius, Elias Lönnrot and J. L. Runeberg. Today, we turn to Johan Vilhelm Snellman, whose bicentenary will give us the opportunity to examine his life's work, and to broaden and deepen our understanding of culture as a potential nation builder.

The theme of the jubilee is Culture, Snellman's belief in the power of culture forming part of his legacy to us. A comprehensive and diverse programme will offer everybody the opportunity to experience this. The programme has been heavily influenced by Snellman's multitalented nature, long life, rich social network, wide geographical mobility and his historical context. Seminars, exhibitions, concerts and many other events will make Snellman's life accessible to Finns, allowing us to appreciate his significance today. Citizens will be shown the roots of their nationhood, and will see the meaning of culture in a new light.

Snellman's career traces the development of society in the Finnish Grand Duchy in all its diversity. During the 75 years of his life, the multitalented Snellman became known in many guises: he was involved in student politics, recognised as an eminent European philosopher, and travelled to view the culture of numerous European cities. He was engaged as a headmaster, a newspaper editor, a professor of philosophy, a senator managing government funds and a member of the diet, and held many positions of trust in cultural and economic organisations. He was also a husband and father. Snellman managed many of these roles simultaneously.

Through Snellman's life, we can feel the spirit of an era. His rich social network brought together many essential elements of the political, governmental, economic and cultural history of the time. He worked alongside all of our nation's key figures of the 19th century. Snellman knew several leading Finnish, Swedish and Continental scientists, writers and civil servants. Many prominent figures featuring in the history of Finland were his personal friends. He also worked closely with several Finnish and Russian high-ranking civil servants in the Russian emperor's inner circles.

The key events of the Finnish Grand Duchy bore links to Snellman's life. His working life spanned the reign of four rulers in Finland, while he spent his early childhood in the restless Stockholm of Gustav IV Adolf. His family later returned to Finland, which Alexander I had annexed to Russia. During the productive period of his life, Snellman changed from a silenced campaigner for truth during the times of Nicholas I to an imperial adviser and high-ranking civil servant in Alexander II's favourite administration. On the eve of Alexander III's succession to the throne, Snellman was no longer required for governmental positions of trust, but owing to his life's work, a national awakening was already well underway.

Geographically, Snellman covered much ground in Finland and overseas. He was born in Stockholm harbour onboard his father's ship and spent his childhood in Södermalm in Stockholm and later in Neristan in Kokkola, Finland. Snellman attended grammar school in Oulu and continued on to higher education, which he began in Turku Academy and completed at Alexander University in Helsinki, where he also made a start on his research career. Following a rift with the University, Snellman first lived in Uusikaarlepyy for a year and then moved abroad. After working for two years in Stockholm, he devoted a year to visiting a succession of European university cities. Upon his return to Finland, he embarked on a career as a newspaper editor in Kuopio. Snellman finally returned to Helsinki where, after a

quiet period lasting a few years, he was promoted to the highest positions of the University and the Senate. During this time, he spent his summers in Vihti and Kirkkonummi. In the imperial court of St Petersburg, Snellman took the lead in decisions on important national issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The claim that Snellman wrote the script for a nation is based on the notion that in his work he merged the roles of diligent researcher, profound thinker, open-minded innovator, energetic campaigner, and a learned and fearless man of action. All this becomes evident in this collected works.

Throughout his activities, Snellman campaigned systematically and confidently to elevate the status of the Finnish nationality and language, which he saw as the foundation for the country's economic and social development. He was convinced that if Finns failed to develop governmental and cultural self-awareness, they would become a dying nation. Consistently following his programme, Snellman strived to implement it wherever conditions were favourable. His convictions are manifest in his entire collection of literary works, through which Snellman conveyed the message of the power of culture, despite the opposition of the establishment and harsh critiques of his closest friends.

Preparations for Snellman's bicentenary jubilee have a rich basis. For the first time, the intellectual capital of the 19th century is available for everybody to explore in the form of Snellman's collected works, both in the original language with scholarly notes, and in sound, modern Finnish. In addition, the first biographical study will be published on the basis of these works. However, this mine of information on the intellectual life of the 19th century cannot be taken for granted.

It has taken 20 years of hard work to create the image of Snellman as the nation's scriptwriter through his collected works. Led by the Prime Minister's Office, a complete scholarly and critical edition of Snellman's published and unpublished work, "J. V. Snellman Samlade arbeten", was published in the original language only at the end of 1998. This version replaced an original-language edition issued a hundred years earlier, whose publishers did not undertake thoroughgoing academic or critical research, since the editing was guided mainly by the likely levels of interest in each text: texts were removed from their context, abridged and improved, and not all of the necessary material was yet available.

The problems that Snellman's literary estate created for his image as a writer and portrayer of an era were deepened when the deficiencies, interpretations and misunderstandings of the previous edition were transferred to the Finnish translation, published in 1929–1932. This situation was only rectified in recent years when, led by the Ministry of Education, the 15,000 sheets in the original language were translated into Finnish. Now, very fittingly at the beginning of the jubilee, modern readers will be able to identify common ground between our era and Snellman's work. With Snellman able to speak to all Finns, it will soon become evident that his ideas remain valid. Snellman's conclusions remain sound, regardless of the times.

Delving deeply into the roots of our nation comprises the ideal launch for this jubilee. Thanks to a scholarly and critical edition and excellent translation and research work, this is open to everyone by reading Snellman's collected works. The old Snellman mythology will be corrected, enhanced and changed. Rather than studying Snellman piecemeal, we will be able to create a full-sized portrait.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Perusing the collected works, it is clear that the common thread linking Snellman's many roles lies in his progress from empiricist to visionary, from someone who spoke out to a practical implementer of his ideas.

Snellman drew inspiration from his childhood and youth, and the period he spent at school in the seafaring culture of northern Ostrobothnia. Snellman's life illustrates the words he once spoke to a group of students' parents: "That which has been planted in the delicate soul of a child, cannot be destroyed. ...In this way, as a loving father or gentle mother, you not only make a difference to your child, but to humankind." His father, a ship's captain, and his mother, who came from a ship-owning family, gave their son the best inheritance possible: a thirst for knowledge that can cross oceans. Snellman's family had been members of the wealthy bourgeoisie of the Ostrobothnian coastal towns since the 17th century. Material wealth brought by the shipping industry, and the resulting intellectual culture, created the opportunity to educate the young.

Snellman's early childhood, spent in the capital city of a fading superpower, was overshadowed by Sweden's defeats in the Napoleonic wars, the end of the Gustavian era, and the removal from power of the old ruling family. In this situation, the Snellman family's thoughts turned to their home county, Ostrobothnia, and the favourable conditions that had developed in Finland since its annexation to Russia after the Russo-Swedish War (the Finnish War). In Snellman's memories, Stockholm always held a special place as the city of his birth. He was moved by recollections of gazing longingly out to sea, hoping to spot the longed-for three-mast ship in order to take home the good news that his father was returning.

In Kokkola, material wealth created by the shipping industry was reflected in the intellectual life of the town. Some of the nation's first libraries were established in Kokkola in 1800, on the heels of those in Vaasa and Turku. The Reading Society's library included over 1,000 volumes, and the ships that sailed to Stockholm to export tar brought new books back. Snellman often used this comprehensive library, first at school and later during his work as a private tutor. He comments that historical writing, which he studied assiduously, equipped him for later life.

Snellman's father had studied at the University of Uppsala and read the classics while at sea. He read aloud to his son, telling stories of foreign lands and, based on his knowledge of languages, translated many stories from the Reading Society's books. Seeing that his son had the desire and talent for learning, he sent Snellman to the Trivial School in Oulu. Fifty years later, Snellman reminisced about his schooldays in Oulu and the fruits it bore for his entire life. He was thankful to the school for strengthening his natural thirst for knowledge, equipping him to seek information and providing the opportunity to develop his character.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

No literary works have survived from Snellman's first twenty years. However, we know that for the rest of his life it was through writing that he would satisfy the yearning for knowledge that resulted from his upbringing and education. After his normal daytime duties, Snellman would write until the early hours of the morning, smoking a cigar and drinking tea. The family's candle bills were high, since there was never sufficient daylight.

The texts that he wrote over the next 55 years vary in style and quality, and include private and public, published and unpublished writings. The material is characterised

by attempts to settle the differences in values between his childhood home and friends, profound philosophical speculations clarifying his purpose in life, and the identification of concrete measures which he presented as practical solutions. The common denominator throughout is his desire to awaken the Finnish nation.

The letters Snellman wrote and received reflect the entire spectrum of his times and people. His correspondence with family members and friends allows us a brief glimpse beyond the curtain of privacy. Snellman's father writes about his sister's death in April 1830: "Marie has now moved beyond the ken of any student of philosophy, but in Härmä, we who philosophise with one hand on the good book know that she has gone to a better place and our rustic beliefs draw tears of joy from us as we caress her cold, earthly remains in the drawing room where she now rests." Snellman's sister, Anna-Christina, wrote in July 1835: "My dear Janne, you seem lonely and abandoned and scarcely have much free time, since you exhaust yourself for my benefit and that of so many others."

Snellman's correspondence with his friends unveils the architecture of nation-building in descriptions of the debates held between the emerging greats of the national movement. In 1840, Snellman wrote to Nervander that since 34 years of his life had already passed, he did not wish to be "reigned in" anymore. "...I can stand a fight and enjoy myself whilst engaged in it; but I need space when my blood boils. If someone is tied to the stake and bated, no good will come of it." Snellman was so sure of his goals that he sought to explain his stubborn and provocative demeanour to his friends. "Even now, based on what I know of my life so far, I feel that I have it in me to accomplish many things. Please do not be offended if I think less of my gifts than yours, which are said to be remarkable. After all, I have forged my own, whose eccentricities might be forgiven since they owe their very existence to stubbornness and perseverance."

In order to clarify his vision for further action, Snellman sought first to discover the logic underlying existence via philosophy. His philosophical manuscripts reveal how turgid his thinking could be, such as the following from one of his sketches: “All spirits desire perfection. ...all desire a space where they can express their abilities as freely as possible, all have the same tendency to expand their influence, draw others to them, gather things to themselves and appropriate all that they consider good, excellent and delightful. Examining Beauty, Truth and Excellence allows us to own these qualities for a fleeting moment.”

Following the University’s move to Helsinki, Snellman focused on his philosophical studies, inspired by his many unsuccessful romances, as he sighs in one of his poems: “No passion of any kind/no frenzy for a truth or a maiden’s kiss/brought peaceful calm to a human mind. Only useful toil generates order.”

The young philosopher’s calling to becoming a national activist grew out of teaching and writing dissertations, philosophical notes, lectures and his first published works. Snellman dedicated his first work, “An Attempt on Logic” with these words: “My dear father, please accept this trivial expression of a son’s respect and love with paternal indulgence. I would rather have presented you, who gave me the gift of life and the best part of my spiritual life, with something more worthy. ... I hope that this work’s seriousness of purpose eases your discomfiture with the thoughtlessness and egoism of our age, although it will hardly shake your view of the world, strengthened as it is by lifelong research and rich experience; let it bear testimony that the example set by your burning fervour for Truth and Justice has not entirely gone to waste.”

Since 1830, the testing ground for budding theories had been the “Lauantaiseura”, the Saturday Society, a regularly convened literary and discussion club. Its goal was to bring the educated classes closer to the masses, fostering joint participation in public

affairs. Snellman also worked as a curator in Pohjalainen osakunta, the University's student association for students from the North of the country, and while in this post, under his leadership, the young people's nationalism was awoken in 1834–36. During this period, Snellman threw himself into the service of Finnish nationalism, as he recalled at the age of 70: "Since my youth, I have maintained a firm belief in the power of nationalism." For Snellman, nationality meant, first and foremost, a distinct national culture, based on traditions forged by past generations. A national language was required to give birth to a national identity and transfer it down the generations.

Snellman first wrote about the impressions that his three year sojourn in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and Austria had made on him in his German travelogue. A book, "Political Science", published in November 1842, encapsulated the conclusions he had arrived at during his travels. Snellman highlighted the role of the national spirit, and the fact that a nation's formal existence as a state was insufficient to guarantee national well-being. Finland's road to nationhood would travel via the spread of civilisation, manners and welfare, the basis for these changes having been formed by Finland's special autonomous status granted by Alexander I at the Porvoo Diet.

His calling clear, Snellman decided to return to his native country in order to implement the nationalist programme he had sketched, according to which, Finland would claim her place amongst the family of nations by developing her native cultural inheritance. This clarion call echoed from here in Kuopio, the pointed articles in his newspaper *Saima*, which he established here, creating a strong social revival.

Saima targeted the educated classes, who Snellman sought to convert to Finnish nationalism: Swedish-speakers were to support nationalism, Finnish-speakers were to be educated. Snellman demanded that the educated classes use Finnish, establish a connection with the masses and work on their behalf. After 1809, he maintained that

the educated classes would have to choose between the culturally dominant force to follow Swedish: between Finnish and Russian. For Snellman, the Finnish language would form the bedrock of national literature: learning one's mother tongue equated to membership of a nation.

According to Snellman's national programme, education and culture would revive the economy and vice versa. The starting point was sensible and expedient legislation, combining social reforms and individual liberty. In his writings, Snellman demanded the abolition of the Guild system and recognition of the right to choose one's trade. He was also fiercely critical of the rudimentary state of farming.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Although his campaigning in *Saima* was followed by five years of silence, Snellman returned to action with the change of ruler in 1855. Snellman's thoughts formed the content of Alexander II's reform policy, and he began to implement his programme, first in his position as a professor and later as a senator.

Snellman's lectures encapsulated his message in a practical form when he instructed young people to work for the nationalist cause: "Gentlemen, our duty, first and foremost, will be to engage in the quiet work of culture. We can offer an emphatic demonstration of our patriotism by giving the culture we have inherited a national form. Speculation over new forms of government is fruitless, if the national spirit cannot wield the moral power to implement them. ... No nation has been left without its own form of nationhood, if it has had the spirit to achieve it."

Although Snellman's lectures were never simple, his main aim was to ensure that his students understood the key issues. It was essential to nurture one's convictions and

understand one's duty to work for the common good, while reserving the right to consider what the common good was.

Snellman's lectures urging the young to engage in nationalist activities complemented his writings in his newspaper, *Litteraturblad*. There he became an opinion former, hoping to encourage the emperor to continue his support for reform. Snellman sought to restrain any reckless, short-sighted fomenting of discontent, believing that, "There is a difference between national self-esteem that believes every nation is capable of forging its own destiny, and insolent lack of gratitude to earthly and divine Providence which has understood the demands for a national consciousness and demonstrated a noble tolerance and benign desire to work in the people's best interests."

Snellman's major writings targeted Finns who, residing in Sweden, wrote offensively about Russia. St Petersburg noted with satisfaction how the nationalist movement, led by Snellman, drew a strict line at Scandinavianism, in order to ensure industrial harmony when implementing the reforms. In 1863–64, Snellman occupied himself with preparations for the Diet of Finland, and his articles turned increasingly towards concrete measures. He touched upon the diet's proposals, such as men and women's inheritance rights, the spirits law, the printing law, the monetary reform, crop failures and railways.

Snellman's role as the guarantor for the nation's loyalty towards the sovereign reached its pinnacle in May 1863, when his article "War or Peace for Finland" was published in *Litteraturblad*. In circumstances defined by the rebellion in Poland, Snellman urged responsibility and realism on his compatriots: "Few European nations have demonstrated this belief more than the Finns, this isolated branch of a great family of nations who, owing to its culture, has saved that family from virtual destruction. On the other hand, no other nation has demonstrated its ability to reap

such a rich harvest based on its faith in the future, nor such an unrelenting sense of self-preservation in prospect of that future, since no other nation has preserved a greater degree of independence whilst subjugated to the rule of war.”

Texts like this were regularly translated for Alexander II in St Petersburg, and maintained a positive atmosphere for the implementation of the reform programme. At the emperor’s personal wish, Snellman was invited to become a senator and the head of the Finance Committee in March 1863. Although from the very beginning Snellman was mired in bureaucracy, managing the myriad affairs of the senate’s economic department, the emperor’s trust secured him the freedom to act behind the scenes.

Snellman’s addresses to the senate and the diet reflected close attention to his work and a firm command of the minutiae of governmental routines. Besides formal minutes, a large number of memos outlined by Snellman prove how profoundly he influenced the emperor on the direction the country should take. Using this channel, Snellman implemented many important reforms, such as the introduction of the Finnish currency, language and railways.

On 7th June 1869, following his career as a senator, Snellman was appointed as the managing director of Suomen Hypoteekkiyhdistys, the Mortgage Society of Finland, the country’s largest such society. He had acquired plenty of experience for this job during his time as the senate’s representative in the board of the Mortgage Society in 1862–1868. Snellman’s challenge was to manage property used as security. Based on long-term liquidation measures over 12 years, Snellman managed to stabilise the mortgage society following the catastrophic famine years.

In March 1870, Snellman was appointed manager of the Finnish Literature Society during the watershed years of the Finnish national movement, Fennomania, amidst a

range of opinions on exactly what should constitute Fennomania. Snellman had remained independent of party politics, putting him in an excellent position to observe the struggle of the Fennomania movement.

Snellman's many speeches to Finnish youth ensured that his legacy was passed onto fresh generations. In his last Vilhelm's day speech in April 1881 he said: "Look around at what is happening in Europe. Each day confirms the significance of work dedicated to inspiring the nation's self-awareness and leading it to a clearer understanding of nationhood and its purpose. ... For this reason, the Finnish movement, which you do not understand, will win: no power on earth can prevent this, and only through that movement can we establish a Finland strong enough to survive into the future." *Morgonbladet* 16th May 1881, Speech for the 75th birthday anniversary.

Until the end of his life, Snellman remained behind the scenes, reminding Finnish civil servants of the realities of being annexed to Russia and their implications in terms of safeguarding the nation's development. The last sentence of his last letter reads: "Integrity and honour are our anchor. But the Russian *tchinovnik*, even if apparently Finnish-born, will understand these concepts differently to us."

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The key lesson from J. V. Snellman's collected works is that the influence of this man, with his erstwhile reputation as a Hegelian obscurantist, was ultimately based on his being a man of action who regarded philosophy as a tool for identifying practical solutions. During his long tour abroad, if not earlier, he learned to shrug off the vile influence of scholasticism, as he put it. In December 1843, Snellman recommended a similar epiphany to his friend, Professor Reiff at the University of Tübingen, as a cure for his solitary meditations and hypochondria. In the end, Snellman stated: "As a

Finnish proverb says, blood is thicker than water, i.e. one's country comes first and philosophy, if it must come at all, comes second."

A prolific writer, Snellman became the scriptwriter for a nation since, albeit his philosophical texts were challenging, in his articles and speeches he popularised his views in unprecedented style, conveying his opinions with verve and panache. Snellman's ability to absorb unusually large amounts of information from several fields and his vigorous participation in public discussion on any topic, have led to him to be compared to Russia's Mikhail Lomonosov, also considered 'a one-man academy.'

Having emphasised his Finnishness while closely observing and critiquing the European lifestyle, Snellman became a champion for Finnish culture and a developer of modern civic structures. Most notably, Snellman's programme aided our country in gaining independence and growing into a European state. During his lifetime, Snellman the European guided his nation, leaving a legacy that remains with us to this day.

In our age, Snellman remains in demand. European integration has made his role as the nation's scriptwriter even more timely, with Finland's internationalisation fuelling the discussion on the Finnish identity. Snellman's collected works build a bridge to an era when Finland was more European than ever before or after.

Throughout, the question has been about the power of culture. In his foreword to Aleksis Kivi's book 'Seven Brothers', Snellman wrote the following in 1873: "He did not allow any of the brothers to be hanged. As a true poet, he was more drawn to allowing them to appreciate the value of culture through their own experiences and meditations, and that they could elevate themselves above their backwoods brutality, assuming a level of cultivation and manners more becoming to a human being."

J. V. Snellman's message for us today is that a nation will never be ready. We all contain a little of the seven brothers' wildness, just as our forefathers did. We can all become national scriptwriters if we remember that we share the duty of adding to our cultural heritage, before passing it on to the next generation. I hope that the programme of our bicentenary celebrations helps each of us to do so, particularly this year. With these words, let me wish you a best ever year of culture! Thank you!