



Unlikely Documents? Exploring Finnish Nineteenth-Century Life Writing *From Below*

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The expression *unlikely documents* in the title of this article is coined by Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perreault. It refers to the appearance of auto/biography in unexpected places, texts that “bespeak either an extended or a limited story about a person’s life.” The article focuses on nineteenth-century Finnish life writing *from below*, texts produced by rural people with no formal education. The cases analysed include a notebook of hymns by a mistress of a farm, a chronicle penned by a modest country tailor, wooden boards inscribed by a saddle maker living on poor relief and textiles produced by a weaver woman. Seen in their contexts, these extraordinary texts prove to be understandable, even plausible: people who were not well-versed in literary genres and styles, had to make their choices from resources that were available there and then. In spite of the limited repertoire of models, the authors were able to express themselves and bring their subjectivity to the fore, in one way or another. Their texts can also be seen as tools of empowerment and vehicles of creativity for people in marginal positions at the time when writing did not belong to the life of the great majority.

ABSTRACT IN FINNISH

Marlene Kadarin ja Jeanne Perrault’n termi “epätodennäköinen dokumentti” viittaa oma/elämäkerrallisiin teksteihin joita voi tavata epätavallisissa paikoissa. Artikkelissa tarkastellaan maaseudulla asuneiden, kouluja käymättömien suomalaisten kansanihmisten omaelämäkerrallisia kirjoituksia ennen

oppivelvollisuuden aikaa. Tapaustutkimukset kohdistuvat noormarkkulaisen talonemännän sepittämiin virsiin, kyläräätälin laatimaan kronikkaan, kunnanhoidokin ”lukulautoihin” ja kutojanaisen tekstiileihin. Huolimatta kirjallisten mallien vähäisyydestä tekijät onnistuvat ilmaisemaan itseään ja tuomaan esille subjektiviteettinsa tavalla tai toisella. Kun kirjoitukset asetetaan kontekstiinsa, ne näyttävät ymmärrettävinä, jopa todennäköisinä. Tekstit voidaan nähdä voimaantumisen välineinä aikana, jolloin kirjoittaminen ei kuulunut suuren enemmistön elämään.

Keywords: life writing *from below*, literacy, materiality of writing, nineteenth-century Finland

LIFE WRITING FROM BELOW

The expression *unlikely documents* in the title of my article originates from the collection of articles entitled *Tracing the Autobiographical*, edited by Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perreault. The term refers to the appearance of auto/biography in unexpected places. According to Kadar and Perrault, depending on the privileges and constraints offered by the context, these texts “bespeak either an extended or a limited story about a person’s life.” “The autobiographical” is a discursive construct that surfaces in all kinds of texts that are usually not assumed to be part of autobiography (1). The coinage “unlikely documents” came to my mind when I came across some instances of grassroots writing from nineteenth century Finland. In one way, there are identifiable autobiographical elements in these texts, but the forms they had taken exceeded my expectations. These cases include a notebook of hymns by a mistress of a farm, a chronicle penned by a modest country tailor, wooden boards inscribed by a horse collar maker living on poor relief and textiles produced by a weaver woman. Jan Blommaert’s concept *grassroots literacy* is also apt here: it signifies a wide variety of non-elite forms of writing by people who are not fully integrated into the elite economies of information, language and literacy (37). It is also important to pay attention to the materiality of writing. In the recent book entitled *Approaches to the History of Written Culture: A World Inscribed* a common thread running through the chapters is the close attention paid to the materiality of writing in the hands of different social actors (Lyons & Marquillas, 2017a).

During the past two decades, there has been more and more interest in texts produced by people who belonged to the lower strata of society (Amelang 1998; Liljewall 2002; Peters 2003; Howard 2012; Lyons 2013a). As T. G. Ashplant has remarked (274), this research has widened previous

notions on autobiographical writing of the past. Over the years, I have gathered a corpus of around one hundred autobiographical writings by more or less self-taught Finns—farmers, crofters, cottagers, rural craftsmen, church wardens, seamen, farm hands and even beggars—who had come of age during the nineteenth century. Most of the texts originate from archival sources, but there are also writings put into print by the authors themselves, their descendants or local history societies. The material is heterogeneous, ranging from fragmentary notes to autobiographical novels (Kuismin 2013). Only eight per cent of the texts were written by women. Writing, associated with power, belonged to men's sphere. Finnish non-elite women took up writing later than men, which undoubtedly reflects the patriarchal ideology of the time.¹ In addition to autobiographical texts, the common people produced poems and stories, religious or philosophical musings, hand-written newspapers and ethnographic data, among other things. For every surviving text, dozens of others must have been lost or destroyed.²

The Finnish Lutheran Church took care of teaching people to read, but the skill of writing was not considered necessary for everyone. During the first decades of the nineteenth century only a small percentage of the population consisted of fully literate people. By 1880, about 13 per cent of Finns over the age of ten possessed the skill of writing (Leino-Kaukiainen, 426). When studying writing *from below*, it is important to keep in mind that the common people who took up the pen were often faced with various kinds of challenges (Mäkinen, 24–40). For example, tuition was sought from peers, local pastors and their sons—or just from the model alphabet. Writing was practised on sand and snow, ink was made of berries or a piece of coal was used to write on shingles and birch bark. Lighting was poor in the wintertime, and there was little time for writing during the busy summer months. In addition, aspiring writers had to confront prejudices of both their superiors and peers who thought that writing did not belong to peasant life. In spite of its somewhat negative connotation, the term *common people* is used here to signify the non-elite people who mainly earned their living by doing physical work and had little or no formal schooling. One could talk of “ordinary people,” but writers were exceptional in their communities. Naturally, there were social differences between those who owned their land and those who did not, but many distinctions separated them from the nobility, the clergy and civil servants. One of these distinctions was connected to the Finnish language that had an under-privileged position in the country, even though it was spoken by the majority.³ Although the situation changed during the last decades of the nineteenth century—by then there was a thriving Finnish-language culture—many rural writers

did not have much reading material at their disposal which naturally limited their repertoire of models.

Many of the autobiographical texts I have unearthed do not fit into the definitions of autobiography and diary: they do not narrate the history of the author's personality or consist of day-to-day accounts of things done and felt. The hybridity of these texts is less apparent when the texts are juxtaposed with the generic sources Finnish common people had at their disposal at the time of writing as well as the models derived from oral tradition. The investigation of Finnish nineteenth-century autobiographical writings *from below* shows that life writing often originates from various kinds of writing practices and oral sources and that social and cultural situations determine what kinds of roads the formation of genres can take. For example, funeral sermons and oral "songs of sorrow" can be seen as models in grassroots life writing (Kuismin 2017).

KAISA JUHANTYTÄR'S BOOK OF HYMNS

One of the earliest incentives for learning to write came from revivalist movements. For example, hymns to be sung at meetings were written down and letters were exchanged among believers. The notebook of Kaisa Juhantytär (Kaisa Juha's Daughter, 1782–1856), mistress of the Kahari farm Noormarkku, south-western Finland, is unique among the texts that have survived. Kaisa's⁴ position was fairly high in her society: she came from land-owning peasantry, and she married into the same class. The family owned a handsome Bible, an expensive book at the time (Mikkola 1996, 25).

Her manuscript was donated to a learned society (Kotikielen Seura) long after the author's death by a student whose connection to the author is not known. The 43-page self-made notebook comprises a preface and twelve hymns (one of them incomplete) as well as some drawings, vignettes and comments. Most of the hymns include a note about a melody, used in the Hymnal of the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church. The inside cover of the notebook contains a short introduction by the author. In this minimal life story, the writer mentions her name and the date of her birth and marriage as well as her husband's death:

I, Kaisa Juha's Daughter, was born at Vanhatalo in the village of Otamo in 1782. Then According to God's will I became united with my husband Abraham Matti's son in 1805. Then he has been taken away by God in 1833.⁵

The notebook opens with a poem in which the speaker declares that she wants to instruct young people in their religious quest. Below the poem,

Kaisa Juhantytär's name appears again, and there is a mention of the time and the place of writing: 1831, Kahari (house), Finby (village) and Noormarkku (parish). The untitled preface that follows after this begins with an apology:

Here I shall embark on at least one childish task which I have started in great simplicity. Perhaps I, like the weaker vessel, acknowledge my weakness and my powerlessness regarding everything that is good and right. And I also acknowledge my unskillfulness, and that is why I suspect that these [texts] will be tiresome in the eyes of many. (ibid.)

Kaisa Juhantytär explains that she has been writing in solitude, while others have been out, seeking the pleasures of the world. She refers to Peter's metaphor of a woman as a weaker vessel (1 Peter 3: 1–7), but the apologetic tone soon changes into a defiant one: the writer declares that she will not care if her texts are looked down upon. There are many souls out there who are willing to hear the Word, Kaisa writes, pointing to the Book of Kings (19:18). Later she quotes Paul's letter to the Galatians: Jews and Christians, slaves and free people, men and women, are united in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). If men and women are equal, women can teach, too, is the implication of the quotation. The preface ends with a prayer and salutation, in the manner of the Epistles. Although the term is anachronistic, the writer's stance can be called a feminist one: a woman takes a role that was reserved for (educated) men. One has to keep mind that early 19th century Finland was patriarchal and hierarchical. Martin Luther's *Die Haustafel*, "Table of Duties," included in the Small Catechism, was one of the mandatory texts to be read by all. It presents a view in which the spiritual estate, the secular authority and the household follow the same pattern of governance: God rules the universe, the king—or, from 1809 onward, the Emperor—governs the country and the pastor his congregation. Accordingly, the master of a household is expected to rule his family and dependents.

The first (untitled) hymn consists of 31 four-line stanzas ending in the following refrain that repeats the message expressed earlier: "I can sing Hallelujah, no matter what the world cries out loud." I regard this an autobiographical statement: Kaisa is expressing her own desire that she has presented in the preface of the notebook. Each stanza includes a reference to the Bible, neatly marked on the left margin. There are texts in the Hymnal narrating Biblical stories, but Kaisa's text includes a considerably greater number of Biblical characters, and there definitely is no other hymn in Finnish flaunting women the way her hymn does. In the first stanza the speaker names Miriam as an example she wants to follow. Prophetess Miriam appears in the Old Testament at the point when the

people of Israel had been rescued from the hands of Egyptians. Miriam took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her with their instruments and dancing (Exodus 15:20–21). There are other references to women whose voice or instrument is heard in public. Referring to the female figures in her text, Kaisa justifies her writing by comparing herself to the Biblical women who have praised the Lord (Kuismin 2015, 223–238). The first person is also used in the last stanza: “Like the holy woman/I want to praise the Lord.”

Some of the hymns are followed by remarks: “This has been written in sad times, when thinking about mortality”; “This I have written while missing my friends.” These comments reveal the autobiographical desire behind the notebook which can also be seen in the first hymn, a kind of a womanist manifesto on the right of women to preach. The “I” of the hymn belongs to Kaisa Juhantytär, a woman about to turn fifty, a mother and grandmother who in two years would become a widow.

These hymns did not come about in isolation: it is apparent that revivalism, which shook the roles of the clergy and laymen and called for personal, everyday faith and striving for salvation, informs Kaisa’s texts. Reading and writing were part of and contributed to the individual religiosity aroused by revivalism. Kaisa had probably known Anna Lagerblad (1747–1811), Juliana Söderborg (1745–1799) and Anna Rogell (1745–1799) who were well-known revivalist women in western Finland. Söderborg is said to have preached at illegal prayer meetings like a minister at the church. Following her model, at least ten women and two men in the town of Pori were known to have preached, in spite of the Conventicle Ban.⁶ In 1774 Söderborg was taken to court alongside four maid-servants. When questioned about her permission to preach, she answered that God had given her this gift, and no one could deny her the right to teach her fellow Christians (Sulkunen, 71). This is also the message behind Kaisa’s notebook.

One cannot know if the Finnish mistress of a farm wrote to be published, for a selected audience or for her own pleasure, but it is apparent that her need for self-assertion and the defence of women in general can be seen in the context of revivalism. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the revivalist movements had made it possible for women to engage themselves in new ways in many countries. Particularly radical Pietist and Herrnhutian women started to act and speak in public (Öhrberg 2003, 126; Lindgärde 1993, 180–183). The focus on the inner world, conversion and the practice of prayer meetings channelled literate expression towards diary, autobiography and hymn. Margaret Ezell, among others, has paid attention to the seventeenth-century Quaker

women who produced a variety of texts to be shared by others—letters, prefaces to their friends’ texts, prophetic warnings, responses to their critics and testimonies (141).

EFRAIM LINDGREN’S CHRONICLE AND LIFE STORY

Efraim Lindgren (1834–1909), a modest country tailor from south-western Finland, provides the second case of unlikely documents. According to Akseli Kajantola, an amateur historian, Lindgren mostly sewed work clothes and fur-lined coverlets; on his small patch of land he grew flowers and turnips, whose seeds he later sold. Kajantola’s short narrative, based on oral lore, paints a picture of an eccentric individual who built himself a tiny church and decorated its walls with his paintings. In the summertime his church attracted a lively crowd of young and old, to whom the tailor preached and sold his flowers. Rewarded with coins and material goods, he was willing to repeat his sermon if given a drink (Kajantola, 472–473). This story is silent about Lindgren’s scribal activities. There are religious texts Lindgren had copied and some of his own writings, such as diaries dealing with weather, work, prices and purchases kept from 1888 to 1903, in the archive of the Finnish Society for Church History.⁷ How Lindgren had learned to write is not known. All of Lindgren’s manuscripts are written in the style of printed text. Perhaps he did not even know how to write longhand.

A chronicle dating from around 1880 and Lindgren’s short autobiography are of interest here. It is entitled ‘Memorial Book of the Most Remarkable Events’ (‘Muisto-Kirja merkillisimmistä tapauksista’) and is a self-stitched booklet, written with print-style letters. The text is set in two columns, and there are some watercolour illustrations. Lindgren’s orthography is typical of unschooled writers: the punctuation is idiosyncratic and there are traces of the local dialect in the text. The hybridity of Lindgren’s chronicle is even more prominent because of the texts surrounding it. The compilation consists of two issues of *Kristillisiä Sanomia* (‘Christian News’) from 1862 and 1863, leaflets on bears, whales and the telegraph, a map of ancient Israel drawn by Lindgren and embellished with references to the Bible, as well as an eleven-page manuscript in Lindgren’s hand, entitled ‘On the First Sunday of Advent.’ Obviously, Lindgren wanted to save these texts, but why were they bound together, remains a mystery.

Lindgren’s Memorial Book starts as a more or less faithful copy of a printed popular chronicle called *Ajantieto* (‘Knowledge of Time’), which

was first included in the Hymnal in 1701 and updated in various editions. The annals reported wars, comets, pestilences and discoveries, among other things. Interestingly, Lindgren discards his model in the middle of the text and shifts his focus from general history to events in his parish and finally touches upon his own life in retrospective diary-like entries. The annal of 1791 records the birth of Erik Mikkelinpoika, Lindgren's father, and the one for 1799 starts with the birth of Liisa Matintytär, Lindgren's mother. The chronicler records Erik's and Liisa's marriage in 1823 and lists their children, including Efraim:

Boy Kustaf. Born in March 1824. Boy Samuel born in August 1825. Boy Juhannes born in February 1827. Boy Adam born in December 1831. *Boy Efraim born on the 1st of May between 3 and 4 p.m. 1834.* Boy Matias born in July 1838. Boy Abraham born in June 1841⁸ (Emphasis added).

The annal of 1864 mentions the following: 'This was the year during which the building of the rooms of Ruodsila was started,' which refers to the cottage in which Efraim and his brother Samuel lived. There was not much snow in the winter of 1870; the summer came early and the lake was free of ice on the 21st of April, writes the chronicler. The first person is used again: 'I sowed fir tree seeds for the first time.' Lindgren also writes that he had planted the fir saplings around the garden.

The passages in which the chronicler reveals something of his life are not numerous, but they do bring the author's subjectivity to the fore. The emergence of the 'I' is visible in Lindgren's chronicle, even though the instances do not reveal much of his thoughts or feelings. The year 1870 saw the death of the chronicler's father. The entry includes an excerpt from a hymn of repentance that expresses the son's feelings in thinking about death:

O! Jesus come to my rescue
 So that I would repent
 And turn to you
 Before the Gate of Grace is closed
 So that you would find me prepared
 To take me with you when you'll return (Kuismin 2015).

Another text manifesting Lindgren's autobiographical impulse appears in an undated manuscript *Saarna Kirja koti hartauden tarpeeksi. Mukaillut. Efraim Lindgren* (A Sermon for Home Use. Modified by Efraim Lindgren). However, the sermons are missing; there is only a text entitled "Biography" (*Elämänkerta*), written in the third person and positioned as a preface. It

starts with the author's birth date and the names of his parents. The rest of the text reads like this:

As a little boy, Efraim was herding his parents' lambs. Up to the age of 12. And then other animals. In 1849 he was confirmed. Because his weak and sickly body did not withstand hard work, he became a tailor in 1854 and lived with his parents up to the year 1864. Then with his brothers Samu and Juha he built a croft on the land of Tuuna-Väiskä and cultivated a bit of land and called that place Ruodsila. And he established a garden in which he planted apple trees, which he had grown from seeds. He sowed fir tree seeds in 1870, and then he planted saplings around his garden. He also grew oak trees and bird cherry trees by planting saplings.⁹

Even though the life story is placed in a religious context, it tells nothing about Lindgren's faith. Needless to say, a preface of this kind in a collection of sermons was extraordinary indeed. One thing is certain, though: Lindgren must have enjoyed the act of writing and producing book-like texts, for his own pleasure and perhaps for the enjoyment of his visitors (Kuismin 2015).

VILPPU JEREMIAANPOIKA'S READING BOARDS

The word *graffiti* refers to writings or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place; the practice dates back to Ancient Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire. In Finland, walls and doors of barns, storehouses, mills, granaries and fishing huts sometimes provided a surface for texts (Aaltonen, 140). They were produced with a knife, the tool every man carried as a matter of course in the Finnish countryside. In Hinnerjoki, western Finland, the master of the Vaino-Sunila farm used his knife to inscribe diary-like entries on the walls of his mill. For example, he recorded the weather, sowing dates, the celebration of Luther in 1817 and the visit of Emperor Alexander the first in 1819 to Finland. Some of the entries concerned prices: "In 1820 the price of rye was 20 Riksdaler a barrel, but in 1821 the price went down to ten and I saw a man from Huittinen to sell his oats at the price of one Riksdaler for a barrel" (Papunen, 343).

The texts on the wooden boards of Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika ('Philip Jeremiah's son') from southern Finland are also inscribed with a knife, but they are far from occasional scribblings that were done to pass the time. Five boards (150×10×2 centimetres) have survived out of the original nine or ten pieces. Found in the attic of a municipal building of Joutsa,

they are preserved at the Itä-Häme Museum, the Joutsa Museum and the municipality of Joutsa. There is a hole in each piece; perhaps they were meant to be hung on the wall (Sihvo, 845–846). The texts are skillfully carved in the Gothic style that was widely used in Finnish newspapers and religious books. Both sides of the boards are filled with writing that is often hard to decipher—there are no commas or full stops, the division of words is arbitrary, and the orthography and the grammar are often idiosyncratic.

Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika was born as a son of a crofter in 1858. There was no elementary school in Joutsa in Vilppu's childhood; where he learned to write is not known. He must have acquired his literacy and counting skills before starting to work as a local merchant's assistant in 1878. In 1881 Vilppu moved to an area near St Petersburg and the Karelian Isthmus and lived in various places before returning to Joutsa. In 1879 he had been listed as a crofter in the parish records, but this new position was short lived: in 1881 he is recorded in the parish records as a cottager, which indicates a fall in status. The same year he was given a marriage licence, but there is no record of the marriage having taken place. In 1890, Vilppu was placed in a municipal home (*kunnalliskoti*). Municipalities paid farmers for the board and lodgings of paupers and people with disabilities, but those who could not be housed this way lived in the communal home. Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika was characterised as a lunatic (*mielipuoli*). According to Pirkko Sihvo, this might not necessarily point to a mental illness: the word was also used of eccentric people. Vilppu died in 1898, not having reached the age of forty¹⁰ (846).

The boards date from the time Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika spent in the municipal home. The inmates were expected to take part in the farming work, but Vilppu probably made some furniture, too: his first board includes images of chairs and a chest of drawers. He called his creations *lukulauta*, a reading board or an ABC board. Wooden boards were used in reading instruction at home: they included the alphabet and some religious phrases.¹¹ How common these objects were, it is difficult to know; apart from the former reference, I have not found other information on the matter. When quoting passages from the boards, it is not possible to follow the division of lines: due to the narrowness of the boards, the number of letters in a line is small. The aim of my renditions is to make the texts understandable. The first board begins with a list of numbers:

1234567890

October begins

now begins [this] reading [board]

this reading board was the first one 1

ten one hundred thousand
in Finnish announced
[reading board] names printed letters words names
one ten [figures]
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0
twenty numbers
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1
1121314151617181920
[write] in Finnish with [printed] letters with a word
now begins this reading to read the year
123456789011121314151617181920
1894 1895 1896 1897 (Sihvo, 848)

“[T]his reading board was the first one”—later “this board is the first [of] ten,” Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika had inscribed in his first board. Perhaps he had already carved ten boards but started to redo them in 1897. The instructional function is apparent: Vilppu lists the letters in the Finnish alphabet, and presents a table with three styles of writing—Gothic, Latin (*Antikva*) and longhand—as well as upper and lower cases of letters. In addition, the natural world is introduced, with a religious tone:

Man has his God
the sun, the moon, the stars in the sky
the clouds move in the air
the rain comes down from the clouds
the wind comes [from] the air
they are God’s property
on land on seas lakes ponds
on land [there are] many sorts of
many different kinds of
with various names of stones [and] lands
on earth [there are] many sorts of
many different kinds of
trees with various names
[they] grow in the woods
on one’s own land
many sorts of hay grow on land
there are many sorts of animals on land (Sihvo, 849)

The second board has not survived, but there is a summary in the third one: the topics were money and greetings (“day talk,” “afternoon talk”). According to the fifth board, the fourth board included information on measurements, weights and money. Vilppu clearly wanted to offer information about the things he knew. There are autobiographical passages in

the first board. Interestingly, the author moves from the third to the first person when introducing himself:

In 1897 in the district of Mikkeli
 in the municipality of Joutsa
 in the church village of Joutsa
 in the house of Ala-Koiravuori
 Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika has made this board of birch trees from the woods
 this board is the first of ten
 on this same board Vilppu wrote
 his own name in printed letters
 his own word his own writing his own letter
 so that one knows how one is
 what is one's work
 what I have done (Sihvo, 849).

“How one is” makes one think about a diary, whereas “what I have done” points to a memoir. Vilppu writes that he has “done many sorts of work with different names felled trees at home, in the village, in the forest.” There are some traces of an account book, too: Vilppu mentions the objects he had made and the prices he had received. The passage quoted above shows that the author wanted to be remembered, and the mention of printed letters in connection with his name seems to act as an extra emphasis on the wish for permanence. The first board includes a depiction of the death of Vilppu's parents:

In the district of Mikkeli
 in the municipality of Joutsa
 in the village of Angesselkä
 in Metsäaho
 died mother Liisa father Jere[mias]
 [were] taken to the graveyard of Joutsa. (ibid.)

In the ninth board, Vilppu returns to the death of his parents and describes his life after an auction had taken place: he travelled to St Petersburg and the Karelian Isthmus, moved from place to place, earning his living by making wooden horse collars:

when the men of Metsä-aho heard what things were left behind
 they sold things [changed into] money
 merchant [Schrowe] from Putkijärvi gave the money to Vilppu
 Jeremiaanpoika
 with the money Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika bought two cows from Tammimäki [...]
 he bought another cow from Haapamäki [...]

he sold the cows in Hololahti [marketplace]
 with the money he bought a [brown] horse and carts
 he sold them in St Petersburg
 he moved to Revonnenä
 he made horse collars [and] sold them
 got the money from Kuisma Karassi
 he made horse collars [and] sold them
 got the money from [...]

he moved to the municipality of Kivennapa
 village of Kuokkala at the Koukku farm
 Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika made a saddle
 got the money for it
 in the municipality of Uusikirkko [and]
 in the town of Viipuri
 he made wooden horse collars (Sihvo, 853)

The motive of producing the carved wooden objects is repeated in the ninth board: Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika wanted to leave something behind, leave his mark on the world (Sihvo, 854). The boards are his legacy, they carry his name and preserve information on the details of life. Before ending up in a communal home, he had travelled, bought and sold, made saddles and horse collars.

The boards are also products of an aesthetic impulse, manifestations of Vilppu's skills.

TEXTILES OF SIINA SAVIJOKI

The case of weaver Siina Savijoki (Josefiina Eufrosyyne Rinne, 1859–1940) has some resemblances to that of Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika: she practised handicrafts and had an interest in writing. Savijoki—who was known as “Momman Siina” (“Siina from Momma”) lived in Huittinen, southwestern Finland. Born as a daughter of a crofter, she started weaving around 1879, moving from farm to farm. She was skilled in her art; besides weaving, she did knitting and crocheting. Some forty textiles of hers have been preserved in museums. It is not known where she learned to write. She lived with her sister, apart from the periods when she was moving from farm to farm weaving all kinds of textiles needed in households. Over the years, she crocheted a skirt, using also the hair she had shed. It includes the following sentence: “Kings and beggars are equal at death. Power does not go underground even though the powerful do so.” There is also a crocheted rug with her name in which there are images of exotic animals—hippos, elephants, camels and crocodiles, as well as plant motifs. She is known to have written poems and performed them

in parties accompanied by the Finnish string instrument, *kantele*, but according to the local lore, she burned her texts when suffering from depression.¹² An autobiographical fragment has survived: “Born is a girl, daughter of parents rich with work; close to the big church, with four brothers yelling” (the rhyme is not rendered in the translation).

There are counterparts for Savijoki in Italy and England. Clelia Marchi was a peasant woman from a village near Mantua, born in 1912. When her husband died in a road accident in 1972, Clelia experienced a personal crisis. Emotionally bereft, suffering from loneliness and insomnia, she took stock of her past life. She wrote her autobiography on what came to hand, namely a large bed-sheet. Clelia called it her *Libro-Lenzuolo*, her sheet-book. It is preserved today in the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale in Pieve Santo Stefano (Lyons 2013b, 18–19). Another writer to use a cloth to write on is Lorina Bulwer who made a sampler (12 feet by 1 foot) around 1900, whilst resident in the female lunatic ward of Great Yarmouth Workhouse. According to Megan Dennis, curator of the Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse, the text takes the form of one long, often confusing, rant:

With no punctuation, and entirely in upper case, each word has been carefully hand-stitched onto a patchwork of fabrics by the maker. In the sampler, Lorina tells the reader stories about her life and her family, including how she feels about being in the workhouse. She is furious at finding herself in there, with few rights and labelled a lunatic. Some suggest that the sampler is the product of an early form of art therapy, although this is unlikely. It is more probable that Lorina was permitted to continue her stitching to keep her occupied. Whilst the true extent of Lorina’s mental illness is unknown, the sampler does tell the reader something about living with the stigma of this disability.¹³

CONCLUSION

Let us return to the beginning of my article and the term introduced by Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perrault. Are the texts discussed above *unlikely documents*? Yes and no. They were produced by extraordinary individuals at the time when writing did not belong to the life of the great majority, and their texts have few counterparts among the texts that have survived in Finland. But when they are seen in the contexts in which they were produced, they look more and more understandable, even plausible. People who lived in a semi-literate environment and were not well-versed in literary genres and styles, had to make their choices from resources that were available there and then (Kuismin 2017).

Hymn was the natural genre for Kaisa Juhantytär. However, taking up the pen to express herself provoked conflicting emotions in a context

where the field of writing—like that of speaking in public—belonged to the male sphere. The apologetic preface and the defiant first hymn as well as the autobiographical comments attached to some of the hymns make it possible to call her notebook life writing. For Lindgren, copying the annals of a popular chronicle incited the discovery that local events he knew of were also part of history, like that of his own life. Vilppu’s wooden boards and Savijoki’s textiles include autobiographical passages. On the whole, the objects in which they included texts can be seen as tools of empowerment and vehicles of creativity: in producing writing on wood and in textiles they made a name for themselves, left something behind. In addition to their scriptural or inscriptional qualities, Vilppu’s wooden boards and Siina Savijoki’s skirts are objects now belonging to the collections of museums.

It is significant that two of the four people I have presented used other surfaces than paper in expressing themselves. Vilppu had made wooden horse collars and furniture, while Siina Savijoki had earned her living by weaving and knitting. In Finnish, the etymology of the word for writing (*kirjoitus*) points to “sign,” “mark,” “scratch,” “a decorative pattern” (Häkkinen 2004, 434–436). In modern Finnish, *kirjailu* means embroidery. In Vilppu’s and Savijoki’s cases, the materiality of writing could not be more apparent. It is important to keep in mind that “literary works do not exist independently of their material embodiments, and the physical form of the text is an integral part of its meaning” (Driscoll, 90). Moreover, as Kadar and Perreault write in their introduction to *Tracing the Autobiographical*, unlikely documents can reveal “inexhaustible variety of human identity and experience, and the irrepressible impulse to explore, express and understand it” (2).

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NOTES

- 1 Because of the scarcity of reliable sources, it is difficult to know how many non-elite women were able to write during the first decades of the 19th century. When C. Ch. Böcker sent inquiries concerning literacy, among other things, to Finnish parishes in mid-1830s, he did not even ask how many fully literate women there were in the parish (Leino-Kaukiainen, 426).
- 2 Finnish self-educated writers' motives for writing fall into six categories: (1) economic and occupational; (2) religious; (3) the desire to influence community or society; (4) the need to communicate through letter writing; (5) the desire for self-expression or to leave behind written traces of oneself and (6) writing upon request to newspapers and various memory organisations (Kauranen, 40–50, see also Stark).
- 3 For centuries, Finland had been part of the Swedish Kingdom. After a war between Sweden and Russia, Finland became a Grand Duchy under the Russian Empire in 1809. Up to the 1860s Swedish was the language of education, administration and jurisdiction in Finland, while the majority of the population spoke Finnish as their mother tongue. As Ilkka Mäkinen has observed: "When there were no real opportunities for using Finnish, the objective

- need to learn to write was debatable, but, on the other hand, there was no markedly greater eagerness to learn to write or to establish elementary schools among the Swedish speaking rural population either. The heart of the matter was, then, the class distinction between the educated and the uneducated classes, not languages as such” (26–7).
- 4 I am calling the writer by her first name, because Kaisa did not have an official surname. Juhantytär is a patronym.
 - 5 The notebook of Kaisa Juhantytär, the Literary Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (Kotikielen Seuran arkisto, kotelo 13). There are no page numbers in the text. Translations by Anna Kuismin. See also Kuismin 2015.
 - 6 The Conventicle Ban issued by the Lutheran Church in 1726 did not allow the organising of religious mass meetings; only those held within a family were allowed.
 - 7 National Archives of Finland: Archive of the Finnish Society of Church History, A 118. Rukoilevaisten papereita. (Papers of the Prayerists, collected by Sakari Loimaranta in 1908.) Prayerism is a Pietist revival movement that had its origins in the 1750s in south-western Finland. The ecstatic form gradually gave way to quiet types of worship. Religious texts were read and home prayer meetings were organised, but the Prayerists usually attended regular Lutheran masses as well.
 - 8 Translations by Anna Kuismin. For the original text, see Kuismin 2015, 176–193.
 - 9 See note 8.
 - 10 I am indebted to Pirkko Sihvo who has gathered information on Vilppu Jeremiaanpoika from the parish records and deciphered the inscriptions.
 - 11 <http://www.tunturisusi.com/aapinen/>.
 - 12 http://www.huittinen.fi/palvelut/kulttuuri_ja_vapaa-aika/huittisten_museo/siina_rinne.
 - 13 I should like to thank Megan Dennis (Norfolk Museum Services) for this information. <https://frayedtextilesonthedge.wordpress.com/tag/embroidered-letter/>.