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Feminist History Writing as an Intellectual and Emotional Activity in Northern Europe from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1930s

Aim of the discussion and theoretical frame

Women's history gained ground at the grassroots level in feminist circles and as an academic discipline in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not only the history of feminism as a social and political movement that was examined: attention was also accorded to the significant intellectual work that feminists of the so-called first wave (the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War) accomplished to bolster their political struggle. Writing history – women's history in particular – was an integral part of this knowledge production. History was written, for instance, to correct male biases in the narrative of human achievements, to provide arguments for gender equality and to empower women in their identity formation.[1] In their introduction to one of the pioneering works, *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (1979), editors Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck characterized the long history of women's history writing as follows: "Although recent trends have precipitated the study of women's history, the field has historical precedent. For several centuries, recurring waves of feminist activism have generated inquiries into women's history."[2] Further research shows that feminist history production was not limited to Anglo-American milieus but was rather a widely flourishing field with a transnational flow of inspiration and narrative patterns.[3]

History writing for feminist purposes and within feminist contexts provides an example of a phenomenon called *use of history*. The use of history has a temporal dimension, through its connection of past, present and future. In their analysis

1 See e.g. Hüchtker 2019: 284–311.

2 Cott & Pleck 1979: 11.

3 See e.g. Katainen & Kinnunen & Packalen & Tuomaala (eds.) 2005; Schaser & Schraut & Steymans-Kurz (eds.) 2019.

of the use of history in public discourse, Pertti Grönholm and Heimo Nyyssönen suggest that the following four aspects direct the use of history: *existential, moral, ideological* and *political*. The existential aspect is associated with people's identity work and various image construction processes, and the moral aspect with the use of history as a tool to justify ethical and societal decisions from the viewpoint of right and wrong. The moral aspect connects to the idea of learning from history. The ideological and political aspects are closely connected. Through the political use of history, political decisions are made understandable and legitimate. Moreover, the political instrumentalization of history helps underscore societal and political problems and needs, whereas its ideological use is associated with reinforcing and/or challenging focal doctrines and teachings within various ideologies.[4]

The focus of my article is on feminist history writing in Northern Europe, specifically Finland and Sweden, from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. Based on a selection of representative examples, I examine how feminist writers used history – and in so doing, fostered women's history – to promote their goals of improving women's status in society and families and empowering women as individuals. When reading my sources, the typology by Grönholm and Nyyssönen is used as a heuristic tool to find the relevant features of feminist history writing. Inevitably, and as my discussion in the present article shows, the dimensions overlap, interconnect and complement each other.

I am interested in parallels and connections between the two national contexts, Finland and Sweden. As to the history of feminism, these two countries had much in common. In both countries, which have a long-shared history as Finland was a part of the Kingdom of Sweden from the Middle Ages to 1809, the establishment of women's associations from the 1880s onward was preceded by the writing of fiction that addressed the subjugation of women. The late nineteenth century was a period in both countries when women's rights progressively expanded. An area where Finnish women were ahead of their Swedish counterparts was suffrage. In Finland, a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917, women gained passive and active voting rights in 1906, whereas Swedish women had to wait until 1921.

In addition to empirical studies on the history of feminist history writing through the centuries, some theoretical contributions have widened our understanding of the use of history as a feminist tool. Memory as a concept refers to the multiple ways history is narrated. Drawing on Jan Assman's scholarship about memory, Maria Grever has divided feminist memory production into three, often overlapping, categories: *Ritualized memory* includes various observances tied to women's history, whereas *frozen memory* is manifested in various symbols and

[4] Grönholm & Nyyssönen 2019: 17– 22.

the materiality of memory. *Continued memory* consists of canonized texts and history writing – the latter being my focus of interest.[5]

The point of departure in this article is that writing feminist history was both intellectual and emotional activity, these two aspects being closely interconnected. My understanding of history writing as an intellectual activity is inspired by the concept of a *thought collective*, coined by the Polish-Jewish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck in the 1930s. According to Fleck, a thought collective exists (in science) "when a group of people speak about something important, (...) there arises a thought style characteristic for that group. There also rises a certain collective mood which straightens up ties among the group members and inclines them to act in a certain way."[6] The respective feminist thought collectives in the period under review were not exclusively academic. Many women historians were instead amateurs, however often professionals as writers and journalists.

Collective action inevitably produces emotions but is also triggered by emotional experiences. In women's history writing during the second wave (from the 1960s onward), emotions have been addressed from the beginning. For instance, Carroll Smith Rosenberg's article "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975) gave inspiration to wide circles of women historians. In the twenty-first century, there has been an upsurge in the history of emotions and today it is an established field of its own. Within this field, the concept of an emotional community, coined by Barbara Rosenwein, is widely used. This concept underlines how feelings are communicated in culturally coded ways.[7] Based on insights from historical research on emotions, I see history writing not only as an intellectual, but also emotional activity within women's thought collectives. This article asks what kinds of emotions feminist history writing has fostered and how the writers and readers were expected to feel about the past, present and future.

Implementation

I began the research for this article by identifying a sampling of books in Finland and Sweden written by feminist authors with a focus on women's history, in particular biographies. Previous studies show how biographies became a particularly popular genre within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history culture, feminist circles included.[8] I additionally examined feminist periodicals,

5 Grever 1997: 364–375.

6 Ludwig Fleck. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: 4. (https://plato.standord.edu/entries/fleck/)

7 See e.g. Rosenwein 2006, passim.

8 See e.g. Possing 2015: 29–34; Leskelä-Kärki 2017: 32–154.

because texts with historical content were an established category of their coverage. Feminist media historians have focused increasing attention to the important role feminist magazines (and also radio in the interwar period) played in producing and circulating knowledge and creating feminist consciousness.[9] The feminist authors who wrote the texts analyzed in this article are both university-educated historians and amateurs. Some women with history degrees had an interest in women's history even if the field was not accepted as a truly scholarly one.[10]

Women's associations and the editorial teams of feminist periodicals formed thought collectives, communities "of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction," as Ludwig Fleck puts it.[11] The magazines that were examined for this include the Swedish *Dagny*/*Hertha* and the Finnish *Koti ja yhteiskunta, Naisten Ääni* and *Nutid*. *Dagny/Hertha* was the mouthpiece of the Fredrika Bremer Association (Fredrika-Bremer-Förbundet), established in 1884.[12] The Fredrika Bremer Association represented the entire spectrum of Swedish middle-class feminism, whereas in Finland the field was divided, due to both personal and ideological divisions and conflicts. The numerous publications reflect these divisions.[13]

The first four sub-chapters of this article address various practices and genres typical of feminist history writing in Finland and Sweden in the period under consideration. Each sub-chapter introduces one or several examples as empirical evidence for my argument. The fifth sub-chapter contains a more detailed discussion of my interpretation of history writing as an emotional activity and seeks to answer the question of what kind of emotions were mobilized through historical narratives.

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9 See e.g. Delap & DiCenzo 2008: 48–65.

10 Katainen & Kinnunen & Packalén & Tuomaala 2005, passim.

11 Ludwig Fleck. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: 4. (https://plato.standord.edu/entries/fleck/)

12 *Dagny* was launched in 1886. *Hertha* refers to Fredrika Bremer's eponymous feminist novel (1856) and was adopted as a title of a magazine in 1914 when *Dagny* was replaced by the new one. The association gave it this name to honour the author Fredrika Bremer – foremother of Swedish feminism – and her legacy. Hertha and Dagny are both women's names.

13 *Koti ja yhteiskunta* [Home and Society] was established in 1889 by the Finnish Women's Association (Suomen Naisyhdistys, established in 1884), but its leading light Alexandra Gripenberg undertook personal liability for the magazine in 1894. It was closed in 1911. *Nutid, tidskrift för samhällsfrågor och hemmets intressen* [New Era, a magazine for social issues and household interests] established in 1894, represented the interests of Finland's Swedish-speaking feminists. These women, together with the Finnish-speaking critics of the Finnish Women's Association established *Nutid* and were organized in the Women's Association Unioni (Naisasialiitto Unioni). *Nutid* closed in 1917. *Naisten Ääni* [Women's Voice] was the mouthpiece of Finnish Women's Alliance (Suomalainen Naisliitto), established in 1907.

A forgotten source comes to light

The "history work" conducted by feminist writers was highly diverse, reflecting the practices of history writing of the time. It included, for instance, compiling statistics, collecting and publishing documents, and writing non-fiction and fiction (novels, plays and poems). An impressive discovery was made in Sweden after the outbreak of the Great War. In 1915, *Hertha* published an article written by Ellen Kleman. The article dealt with an appeal written by the writer Fredrika Bremer and sent to *The Times* in Great Britain during the Crimean War in August 1854, under the title "Appeal to the Women of the World to Form a Peace Alliance." It was published on 28 August.

In her emotional appeal, Bremer turned to women in the hope that "through woman a peaceful alliance might be concluded, embracing the whole earth—an alliance opposing the direful effects of war, and contributing by united and well-directed efforts, under the blessing of God, to the development of a state of peace, love, and well-being, to come forth when once the terrors of war shall be over, and the time of devastation has passed away."[14]

In 1915, the appeal was reprinted in English from the original print and issued by the National Council of Swedish Women. In the pages of *Hertha*, readers were provided with a Swedish translation. Furthermore, Ellen Kleman described the historical background of the appeal and its reception.[15] Kleman herself was a women's rights activist and the long-time editor of *Dagny/Hertha*.[16]

For Swedish feminists, the life and achievements of Fredrika Bremer were a recurring theme in their production and circulation of knowledge about women's history. However, this document connected to the Crimean War was something the activists knew nothing about until it was discovered by Klara Johanson. She was a feminist activist and literary scholar, and together with Ellen Kleman, her life companion, a great admirer of Bremer.[17]

The reprint in March 1915 was extremely timely. In April 1915, women from neutral and belligerent countries gathered at the Hague. At this conference, an International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace was to be established.[18] The foreword of the reprint in English framed Bremer as a genuine, albeit forgotten, pioneer in women's internationalism: In 1888, the International Council of Women was established in Washington DC at the first International Congress of Women. At the congress, its president, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who by 1915 had

14 Bremer 1854/1915: 5.

15 Kleman 2/1915, 3/1915.

16 Nordenstam 2017.

17 Burman 2018.

18 See e.g. Paull 2018: 249–266.

become an iconic figure in international feminism, praised Bremer as a champion for women's freedom. The writer of the foreword to the reprint remarked: "By uttering these words, Mrs Stanton probably as little as any of the other members of the Congress, knew that Fredrika Bremer more than three decades earlier had presented a plan for the establishment of a union between all women of the world for the promotion of peace, prosperity and happiness and for the sake of fighting against ignorance and iniquity."[19]

In Finland, the magazine *Nutid* wrote about the discovery of Bremer's appeal and quoted both Kleman's article and Bremer's original appeal at length. *Nutid* also underlined the role of Bremer as a pioneer in women's transnational cooperation.[20] *Naisten Ääni*, in contrast, did not pay any attention to *Hertha*'s coverage of Bremer's appeal. In general, Finnish feminists had close connections to Sweden irrespective of their mother tongue and were familiar with Swedish publications.

In terms of the knowledge production of women's history, the case of Bremer's appeal includes the discovery of a new/forgotten source, a contextualization of the source by Kleman in *Hertha*, and the circulation of knowledge across borders. National pride was also attached to the document. Feminism was international by nature, but Mineke Bosch, for instance, has focused on nation-based hierarchies within international feminism. As an example of this nation-based categorization, she offers the volume *The Woman Question in Europe*, with articles on the development of women's activism in various countries, published in 1884 and edited by Theodore Stanton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's son. In other words, feminist history writing itself shared responsibility for creating these hierarchies.[21]

Creation of the Great Woman through biographical activism: Fredrika Bremer as a transnational object of admiration

Prior to 1915, Bremer was already the subject of feminist history writing, both in Finland and Sweden. Finnish women, interestingly, associated her with Finland. The connection was weak—she had moved from Finland to Sweden as a child—but was used to "nationalize" her to some degree. The first book-length biography of her—*Fredrika Bremer: kuvaus vuosisatamme alkupuolelta* [F.B.: a portrayal from the beginning of our century]—appeared in Finland and in Finnish in 1886. It was written by Lucina Hagman. Hagman was an early activist advocating for issues associated with girls' education, strongly supporting co-education as Finnish women generally did. She was active in several women's associations and in 1907 was elected to parliament among the first MPs. She herself became

19 The National Council of Women in Sweden 1915:3.

20 Nutid 1915: 93–101.

21 Bosch 2009: 5– 6. See also Kinnunen 2016: 661.

an object of admiration and the related history writing in her later life, but before that she wrote biographies of several women.[22]

Hagman's book contained a detailed description of Bremer's life work, characterized by admiration, gratitude, and respect. It was not Bremer's material success as an author that made her admirable, but rather the ideals and values that she presented and her way of life, which was dedicated to pursuing the happiness and well-being of humanity as a whole. Hagman made extensive citations from Bremer's novels to demonstrate her way of thinking, at the heart of which were *Bildung*, truth and freedom. In the United States, where Bremer had travelled for two years, she experienced how the ideal of freedom was extended to women much more strongly than in Europe.[23] Hagman herself underscored the interconnections between rights and duties for both genders, and asserted that this was the legacy of Bremer's thinking to be preserved for future generations.

In Sweden, Ellen Fries, a feminist activist with a Ph.D. in history, wrote a biographical essay about Bremer in her collection on *Märkvärdiga Qvinnor* [Notable Women].[24] The first extensive biography of Bremer in Swedish, *Fredrika Bremer. Biografisk Studie* [F. B.: A Biographical Study], was published in two volumes in 1896. The authors, Sophie Adlersparre and Sigrid Leijonhufvud, were leading figures in the Fredrika Bremer Association. The biography received positive reviews by Finnish feminists as an important contribution. Bremer's life work was seen as exemplary and was commemorated as a pledge for future generations.[25]

The aforementioned Ellen Kleman was a feminist activist who increasingly dedicated herself to Fredrika Bremer's memory. She published a collection of Bremer's essays (1925), and in 1915–1920, together with Klara Johanson, she published Bremer's letters in four volumes, an extensive collection of over 2,000 pages.[26] In Finland, the publication of Bremer's letters was duly noted and in 1926 feminist circles accorded considerable attention to her life. The 125th anniversary of Bremer's birth came in 1926. In addition to her life, historical knowledge was conveyed in the feminist media accompanying the various events connected to this anniversary. These events are examples of *ritualized memory*, according to Grever's categorization. A plaque – an example of *frozen memory* – was unveiled in Turku with a related lecture by Kleman. In Helsinki, the Swedish historian and suffragist Lydia Wahlstöm, Ph.D., delivered a lecture on Bremer's life "in the light of recent research,"[27] meaning what had been done in Sweden, thus circulating knowledge across borders.

22 Hagner 2005: 105–107.

23 Hagman 1886: 145–147.

24 Ohlander 2018.

25 Gripenberg 1896: 79; Westermarck 1897: 15–21.

26 Nordenstam 2017.

27 L–o. 1926: 57.

Creation of the Great Finnish Woman: biographical activism around Minna Canth

In Finland, a comparable figure to Fredrika Bremer can be recognized in terms of recurrent knowledge production and a dedicated memory collective. This person was writer Minna Canth (1844–1897). Canth was a social activist and among Finland's first notable woman writers. She wrote short stories, novellas and plays. She disseminated radical new ideas about equality between the genders and social classes. As a widow and mother of seven children, she managed her household and ran a business.[28] The history writing associated with her life's work began soon after her sudden death. The first volume of the two-part *Minna Canthin elämäkerta* [Minna Canth's Biography] was published in 1906, and the second volume followed in 1911. The author was the same activist who wrote the first biography of Fredrika Bremer, i.e., Lucina Hagman. Hagman began her work soon after Canth's death, but the completion of the book was delayed due to Hagman's heavy workload as an educator, feminist activist and politician. They were not yet archived, and she accomplished the valuable work of collecting letters to and from Canth, her manuscripts and published texts. She also conducted oral history interviews with people who had known Canth.[29]

Hagman depicted Canth as the pioneer of social progress and as "a skilled soldier" who pointed "her weapon toward the weakest point of the adversary's front lines."[30] Instead of the artistic aspects of Canth's fiction, Hagman preferred to discuss the content of her work that concerned the rights of the oppressed, in particular women. She emphasized Canth's fearless mindset and resilience in protecting women's rights: "One cannot be so easily scared off. Nor is a strong woman a delicate flower to be easily crushed."[31] Canth's mental exhaustion was suppressed, and attention was focused on strength instead, on Canth's alleged heroic ability to cope and overcome her difficulties as a widowed mother of seven children. Hagman also used Canth's life story as evidence of women's capabilities in various professions. Canth was not only a writer but also a successful shopkeeper.

Hagman's biography gave contemporary feminists a model for describing Canth's life as a feminist pioneer,[32] but her picture was also modified by other members of the thought collective that continued Hagman's work. Suomalainen

28 Krogerus 2014.

29 Kinnunen 2021: 75–77.

30 Hagman 1911: 6.

31 Hagman 1911: 81.

32 Kinnunen 2021: 77–78.

Naisliitto (Finnish Women's Alliance) was a key player in this regard. The alliance was established (in 1907) to bolster women's understanding of their newly won citizenship, with the concrete aim of pushing them to vote for women candidates in elections.

After Hagman, the task of writing about Canth's life—and thus of creating a lasting memory of this *notable woman*—was taken on by a younger generation within the Finnish Women's Alliance. Hilja Vilkemaa and Helle Kannila stood out as particularly dedicated in this respect. Based on her studies and work as a history teacher, Vilkemaa understood the significance of history in the construction of identities, whether national or feminist. Among other projects, Vilkemaa and Kannila wrote the book *Minna Canthin muisto* 1844–1914 [Minna Canth's Memory], published in 1914. The sales proceeds went to the memorial fund, as the idea of commemorating her with a memorial had begun to emerge: "The life's work of our greatest woman author must finally be awarded the recognition it deserves."[33]

In 1925, a Minna Canth study group, an example of a thought collective, was established in Helsinki thanks to Kannila's activities. In March 1928, an event was organized to commemorate Canth's birthday. It was broadcasted, and Vilkemaa instructed local divisions of the Finnish Women's Alliance to acquire radio receivers and loudspeakers for their conference rooms. The celebration – establishing *ritualized memory* – was launched with Kannila's lecture about Canth "as a pioneer and visionary poet."[34]

As to the modifications to Canth's life narrative after Hagman's contribution, the married life of Minna and Ferdinand Canth was soon re-evaluated. Hagman described Ferdinand as a tyrant, whereas, for instance, in Vilkemaa's book *Minna Canth. Elämäkerrallisia piirteitä* [Minna Canth: Biographical Features, 1931], the marriage was clarified as more of a partnership.

In 1937, the raising of a statue to commemorate Canth's authority— a piece of *frozen memory*—was completed in Kuopio with the accompanying media coverage of Canth's life and work, celebrations connected to the memorial's unveiling (which was broadcasted) and the statue project as a women's common effort. The statue was a milestone in Finnish history culture, as it was the first statue dedicated to a woman. Several speeches delivered at the unveiling ceremony and the media coverage emphasized Canth's lifetime efforts as a champion for women's rights and the statue as a symbol of women's admiration, gratitude and respect for Canth and her "maternal energy." Her pioneering role was underlined by the attendance of many women MPs at the ceremony.[35]

[33] Kinnunen 2021: 79–80.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Kinnunen 2021: 81–84.

History writing as a tool for correcting male-focused narratives and recording the history of feminist movements

Feminist history writing by trained scholars was intellectual work motivated by genuine interest in the production of reliable knowledge. Moreover, women's history was seen as a much-needed correction of the biased knowledge produced by male writers. Lucina Hagman, in her biography of Minna Canth, explicitly underscored this bias. The conscious production of counter-narratives is evident, for instance, in the attention accorded to Fredrika Runeberg in 1904. She was a pioneer in Finnish historical fiction, writing several stories that illustrated women's historical agency. Her husband Johan Ludwig became canonized as a national poet during the nineteenth century. In 1904, the centenary of his life was celebrated widely in Finland. As a counter-act, Finnish feminists wrote about his wife and her work, without silencing the hardships she experienced when serving her husband's needs.[36]

The four-volume work by Finnish activist Aleksandra Gripenberg under the title *Naisasian kehitys eri maissa* [Reform Work for the Improvement of Women's Status in Various Countries, 1905-1909] is an example of the commitment of feminist activists to tell narratives of their own movement and thus pass on the memory of hardships, campaigns, and victories to the next generations. In Sweden, the aforementioned Lydia Wahlström wrote the book *Den svenska kvinnorörelsen. Historisk översikt* [The Swedish Women's Movement. A Historical Overview, 1933] about the development of women's status in Sweden. Reflecting her own activism for women's suffrage, this topic was given detailed treatment. In Finland, the memories of the first female MPs, about the first elections and their campaigns, were collected and made public in the magazine *Naisten Ääni* in 1937 when the 30th anniversary of women's suffrage was celebrated.

Influenced by Theodor Stanton's *The Woman Question in Europe* (1884) and supported by her own profile in the international feminist movement, Gripenberg had a more comprehensive approach than Wahlström. In addition to her native country, she included other "civilized" nations in her narrative: European and North American ones, including Russia, Australia and New Zealand. This work, originally published in Swedish in three volumes (1893–1903), was based on Gripenberg's extensive research. She did not have an academic degree, but she was conversant with the basic methods of writing history. She travelled abroad, collecting sources in archives and libraries, and conducted oral history interviews. She was an international feminist activist and could use her contacts in this field to gather information. Furthermore, contact with the above-mentioned Ellen Fries, a like-minded feminist, and a historian with academic training, provided Gripenberg with intellectual support.[37]

[36] E.g. Hagner 2005: 107–108.

[37] Kinnunen 2013: 189–227.

Gripenberg's work describes the development of women's status from the distant past to the present in the selected nations, the focus being on the nineteenth century and women's gradual emancipation in different societal fields. She provided valuable information for her contemporaries and contributed to the formation of women's history as an intellectual field, but she also instrumentalized history for various purposes. Writing women's history from her standpoint was inevitably ideological and political. She also used history for her personal aims, as a tool to marginalize her own opponents within the Finnish women's movement.[38]

Another bias in Gripenberg's work, self-evident to us now, was the categorization of nations into "developed" and "less developed" in terms of women's emancipation. On the top was the Anglo-American sphere with their iconic feminist figures, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Next to Anglo-American were the Scandinavian countries. What these had in common was the Protestant foundation of their societies. For Gripenberg, Christianity, in particular Protestantism, was a prerequisite for "true emancipation." This type of nation-based hierarchization reflects the attitudes among Western feminists, as already pointed out in the preceding section.[39]

Gripenberg wrote in Swedish, her mother tongue. Her original work (with three volumes) thus easily reached the Scandinavian feminist community. Tilma Hainari and Ilmi Hallstén, her colleagues in the Finnish Women's Association, were charged with the Finnish translation. When we analyze the production and circulation of knowledge, it is important to pay attention to the often-invisible work of translators. For instance, Ellen Fries wrote a book series about female celebrities, notable women. The books were translated into Finnish and positively reviewed but without the name of the translator/s.

The role of history writing in the mobilization of emotions

Women's history – later women's and gender history– has extensively examined the role of emotions in various types of human relations, with a particular focus on relations between women. In addition to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's seminal article, Lilian Faderman's research,[40] for instance, inspired many women historians who discovered close emotional and intimate ties between women activists in the feminist and related social movements. In the Swedish context, feminist couples are examined in an inspiring collection of essays, *Den kvinnliga tvåsamhetens frirum. Kvinnopar i kvinnorörelsen 1890–1960*, published in 2018. A key issue for many scholars has been the question as to how to interpret intimacy between

38 Kinnunen 2013: 213.

39 Kinnunen 2016: 661–662.

40 E.g. Faderman 1985.

women when lesbianism as an identity category was not yet articulated. When conducting my own research in the 1990s on the reception of the Swedish author Ellen Key in the German feminist movement prior to 1914,[41] I endeavoured to find tools for understanding and categorizing what I had uncovered in letters written by German women to Ellen Key. The letters were often highly emotional. I first approached them within the framework that contemporary women's history offered, namely close, loving and even intimate bonds between women activists. Romantic friendship was an often-used definition.

Upon reflection, however, I realized that the most relevant elements in the emotions directed at Key were admiration and gratitude.[42] In some cases, close friendships, even intimate relationships, evolved, but the starting point was admiration. Key was admired because her readers had the feeling that she had provided them with a model for new womanhood and moreover showed them a way to realize their own potential. Admiration and gratitude were expressed through emotional and sometimes also religious language. 'Way', 'sun', and 'mother' were among the frequently used characterizations: Key paved a way to the new womanhood, her texts were experienced as a source of light and she as a person was seen as comparable to a wise mother. The religious vocabulary included, for instance, 'Christ' and her books were identified as 'sacred'.[43]

In biographies of women figures, written for feminist purposes, this same type of emotional mixture of admiration and gratitude, and also respect, becomes evident. The use of life narratives of women was politically, but also existentially and morally – to use the concepts by Grönholm and Nyyssönen – motivated. In opposition to the culture of admiration of Great Men, typical for the time, it was crucial for feminists to construct the lives of Great, Exemplary Women. On the one hand, these life stories were used to justify claims for extended rights and, on the other, create elevating role models for women who needed support and inspiration in their search for new ways of being women. Biographical descriptions – books and media coverage – conveyed the idea of learning from history, historical lives in particular.[44]

In the process of producing exemplary life-narratives, the key word was selection. In line with the didactic tradition of biography, feminist *herstory* of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely silent about the contradictions and ambiguities in the lives of those women who were selected as exemplary and worthy of narration. The writers duly collected sources, but instead of narrating

41 Kinnunen 2000.

42 Concerning the challenges in interpretation, see also Wikander 2018: 115–136.

43 See also Kinnunen 2020: 75–76.

44 Kinnunen 2019: 321–328; on the function of admiration of Great Women in the international women's movement, see Kinnunen 2022: 120–123.

the lives as complex ones, the emphasis was placed on traits that served feminist goals. Women were presented as intellectually capable, not inferior to men, and strong characters, even stronger than men. Among the key attributes were endurance, courage, moral strength and humility. It was also crucial to underline the sacrifices made by exemplary women to improve women's status in the future.[45]

Some examples to clarify my interpretation: in her biography on Fredrika Bremer, Lucina Hagman praised her modest lifestyle and her boundless will to sacrifice herself and help those in need. This narration pattern underlined the idea of *samhällsmoderlighet* (social motherliness) as Bremer's key legacy for later generations of women to follow.[46] In a biographical sketch, Alexandra Gripenberg in turn described Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony – the pioneers of the feminist movement in the United States – as a harmonious team who shared ideas and were close friends, working together tirelessly for human progress and women's liberty.[47]

In addition to knowledge production, biographical descriptions spurred emotions: gratitude, admiration, and respect. The mobilization of emotions reinforced the message to female readers to follow the example of the Great Women. The message had a temporary aspect, as well: readers should pass on the legacy of exemplary women's endurance, courage, moral strength and humility to the following generations. This legacy also had to be lived by new generations.

This aspect of memory as compelling was self-evident for contemporaries, but sometimes it was explicated in the texts I have analyzed. For instance, as mentioned above, in Turku, Finland, in 1926 a plaque was unveiled to commemorate the life's work of Fredrika Bremer, who had lived in Turku as a small child before migrating to Sweden with her family. At the unveiling event a woman named Selma Tilvis praised Bremer as a champion for women's rights and thus for the progress of humanity in general. Her memory was dear to Finnish women. She concluded: "Bremer's memory is compelling. We have to maintain her legacy and even more, to develop her ideas further."[48]

Conclusion

The modernization of European societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed social, economic and political structures and accordingly affected how human relations were understood and lived. Gender roles

[45] Kinnunen 2019: 325. As an example, see *Uranuurtajanaisia* [Women Pioneers, 1924]. In this Finnish collection of short biographies of feminist pioneers, their exemplarity is the common descriptive thread.

[46] Hagman 1886, passim.

[47] Gripenberg 1892: 101–106.

[48] Tilvis 1926, 68.

were inevitably included in this transformation, and gender equality was put on the agenda of various women's circles and organizations, also supported by progressive men. Women's movements and individual feminists propagated women's rights as human beings, albeit not in every respect identical to men. Emancipation was seen as a tool for social progress both in society at large and within the family.

Women's movements were political, ideological, intellectual, and emotional communities, nationally based and simultaneously international and transnational. History writing provided an important tool for feminists in their search for gender equality. My discussion in this article, with its focus on Finland and Sweden, proves that writing women's history within feminist circles was collective intellectual work, producing novel knowledge of the women's past. The work of individual writers was nurtured by an exchange of knowledge and ideas, also across borders. The term "thought collective" reflects the activity of those circles in charge of production, but also the reception of women's history. Study circles exemplify the latter aspect of intellectual activity. Despite lack of academic training or degrees, the writers were in many cases conversant with the methods and guidelines for how history should be written: most importantly, by collecting and using primary sources. We can also see that women's history writing introduced new tools, for instance oral history interviews.

In line with academic historians, mostly male, who actively supported political agenda, namely nationalism in their respective countries, feminist history writing included ideological and political aims. History – or *herstory* – was used to provide arguments for women's emancipation and against women's exclusion and antifeminism. It also supported national thinking – despite feminism's discourse about international sisterhood – using the nation as a historical category, and the related hierarchization between nations.

Women's history writing provided narratives of strength, on the one hand, and of suppression, on the other, to argue for a social change toward gender equality. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck define this strategy as follows: "The use of history by women trying to advance their sex has ranged (…) from 'boosting' to 'knocking'. That is, some have emphasized women's strengths and accomplishments in the past; at the opposite end, others have prompted social change by stressing (…) the disabilities and constraints suffered by women."[49]

This article also proves that writing women's history in feminist circles was an emotional activity and associated with the existential and moral aspects of the use of history. Feminist politics created a women's space for new ways of expressing their gender identity. In this situation, an emotional need emerged to have role models and to learn from history. History writing was also useful for this purpose.

[49] Cott & Pleck 1979, 11.

History, memory, and emotions were closely intertwined. History writing – biographies, and other genres of memory production – provided feminist communities with tools and patterns to mobilize and express emotions, particularly gratitude, admiration, and respect for past women's achievements and personalities. In this process of narration, admirable Great Women entered the spotlight.

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