

DEFIANT SISTERS: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF FINNISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN CANADA

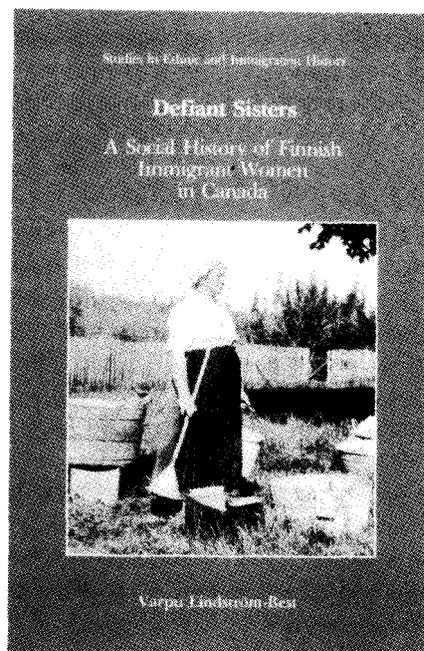
Varpu Lindström-Best. Toronto:
Multicultural History Society of
Ontario, 1988.

Linda Kealey

The title of this study captures the respectful and at times celebratory approach of Varpu Lindström-Best to the Finnish immigrant women who came to Canada between 1890 and 1930. Her work represents the fruition of years of research in one of the first monographs on immigrant women's history in this country. Like many of the current researchers in the "new" social history of immigration, Lindström-Best's own cultural background, language skills and historical training uniquely qualify her for the task of writing about Finnish women immigrants. Many of us have eagerly awaited the publication of this book based on her revised Ph.D. dissertation. Seven chapters and an introduction outline the immigrant women's milieu in Finland, geographical distribution in Canada, health and welfare, marriage, birth and work experiences, and religious and political associations. As is the case with many immigrant groups, the experiences of both conservative and radical Finns varied widely and the author has been careful to explore both. This important theme of political allegiance pervades the general treatment of Finnish women in Canada, as well as providing the focus for the last two chapters of the book.

Lindström-Best's avowed purpose is to examine adult immigrant women's experiences, particularly within the social and cultural framework: while their problems and experiences were often the same as other immigrant women, their responses were not. Culture influenced the responses of Finnish women in such a way as to distinguish them from their sister immigrants. Demographic factors were also key because of the highly imbalanced sex ratios (more men emigrated than women) and the lack of established family support structures.

The overwhelmingly rural, migrant and



working class backgrounds of immigrant Finnish women also meant that there were few middle or upper-class women in Canada who might have provided alternative perspectives. Most Finnish women immigrants were single and came to Canada seeking work, particularly domestic service. Consequently, their background, culture and Canadian experiences drew them toward radical socialist politics and defiant sisterhood, more often than toward the conservatism of religion. Lindström-Best's portrait of Finnish women in Canada stresses struggle, survival and "iron will" in the face of difficult circumstances.

While focusing on women's experiences, the book also provides much information on the contrasting experiences of Finnish men. While the men came in larger numbers and found work primarily in the mining and logging camps, the women gravitated toward economic opportunities in the urban areas, usually in Ontario where the bulk of Finns settled, or less frequently in British Columbia and the Prairies. The shortage of Finnish women gave first-generation immigrant women the advantage in choosing marriage partners and, by the 1920s and 1930s, a pattern of late marriage was common, except in rural farming communities. Second generation women did not follow the late marriage pattern of their mothers. Family size tended to be small, not only because of late marriage, but also by choice. Finnish marriages were also dis-

tinguished by the widespread choice of common-law unions, especially among those who rejected the church. Finnish women faced the rigours of childbirth, and diseases such as TB took their toll; for adult Finnish men, mortality rates are explained by alcohol and accidents. Young Finnish children were also at risk but their mortality rates fell below national averages even in areas remote from medical help.

Late marriage and small families were choices for Finnish women who valued their independence and faced the necessity of wage labour. Most women came to Canada in search of work and most commonly they worked, if single, as domestics. Married women took in boarders, ran restaurants and provided other services for the large groups of single men. Few Finnish women chose factory work, preferring to work in more familiar surroundings where they took pride in their domestic skills. The large number of Finnish domestics led to the creation of organizations for maids which offered recreation, job exchanges, education and social welfare in times of need; occasionally such maids' groups also facilitated agitation for better wages and conditions as well as political consciousness. The chapter on work also provides a fascinating portrait of the illegal activities of enterprising Finnish women who bootlegged liquor and provided prostitutes to the single Finnish men in their communities.

The attraction of the Lutheran or other Protestant churches in Canada proved small in the period before the 1930s. Patriarchal church structures and little financial support from the church in Finland help to explain the weak influence of that institution on Finnish women. Far more important to immigrant women were the socialist organizations based in their local communities which provided education, employment information, drama groups, counselling and many other services. Women-only organizations flourished, providing the infrastructure for Finnish women's socialism. Despite the vibrancy of women's groups, men assumed the leadership positions in the socialist movement and sexual divisions were only partly challenged. Women organizers like Sanna Kannasto, the itinerant socialist speaker, were rare and most Finnish women played a more restricted

and less dramatic role than the legendary Kannasto. In comparison with women socialists in other ethnic groups or in the English-speaking movement, Finnish women were numerically very significant, forming one-third to one-half of the socialist membership. The decade of the 1920s represented the high point for Finnish women's organizations as they joined the new communist movement using their press, the "sewing circles," and the women's labour leagues to educate and organize their Finnish sisters. Language

and cultural barriers, however, proved difficult to surmount and the gap between the Finnish women and other groups remained large.

Lindström-Best's book makes fascinating reading and it reminds us that women's, labour and ethnic history cannot ignore the experiences of women immigrants because their views and experiences were often different from those of their male compatriots. While this book leaves out much material on Finnish women by choice — their involvement in

cooperatives, other political groups, and their rich cultural activities in the arts, literature, music, theatre and sports — it nevertheless conveys a sense of what these women's lives were like and how they created a place of their own in Canada under circumstances not of their making. Readers will regret the lack of a concluding chapter to summarize the author's findings. This book, however, clearly deserves a wide audience among those interested in social history, women's studies and the Finnish experience in Canada.

EGALIA'S DAUGHTERS

Gerd Brantenberg. Translated by Louis Mackay. Washington: The Seal Press, 1985

K. Börje Vähämäki

In 1977, this novel was much more revolutionary than it is in the late 1980s. Yet, it seems to provoke a lot of discussion, and is certainly a great instrument in the important sensitizing process that our society needs, particularly in the area of linguistic sexism.

Meaning is a matter of opposition. Contrasts are necessary to bring out, as conspicuously as possible, the distinctness of definitions. Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters* gives an account of a society in which the gender roles are reversed.

This novel, the subtitle of which is "A Satire of the Sexes," presents the country of Egalia where matriarchy reigns, where values and attitudes that even remotely pertain to sex roles are reversed. The treatment involves a great variety of issues and topics, and provides some thought provoking insights into the nature and foundations of gender roles in society.

The idea that language reflects social and political attitudes even in its alleged arbitrary linguistic conventions is by no means new. The Saussurean notion that the linguistic sign is arbitrary rather than bound in any way to its contents was revolutionary in the early decades of this century among linguists; its power lay primarily in the break with earlier views of meaning.

Brantenberg's novel, although not among the first, clearly one of the more

consistent and thorough works employing lexical gender reversal, powerfully discloses the role of convention in the "allegedly" arbitrary linguistic sign. Many linguists, myself included, who were taught the random relationship that holds between sign and object, have had to acknowledge the tremendous power of convention and the attitudes underlying convention. *Egalia's Daughters* shows major strength in its consistent attention to sexist language. Thus the generic pronouns are *she, her, herself*. Ordinary words such as man, woman and male, female have been manipulated in a thoughtful translation process into *manwom, wom, and fele, mafele* respectively, incisively using derivation for "male" words in contrast to conventional English use of "female" derivatives. In markedness terms, the female is the unmarked, "normal" representation of generic sex. Another good example is *huwom* for *human*. What is supposedly gender neutral, is female.

Linguistically this principle has some humorous consequences: *heir* vs *heirass*, *lion* vs *lionass* (*heirass* and *lioness* both being marked masculine). Most typically the countersexist terms serve to sensitize the reader to the sexism implicit in a variety of seemingly innocent words. The patriarchy hidden in the patronymic tradition in English as well as in the Scandinavian languages becomes pressingly apparent when the *housebound* (husband) of one of the main characters carries the name *Christopher Lizdaughter*.

Gender role attitudes are results of thought patterns typically taught and learned by indoctrination and confirmed by ritual, ceremony and male centered historical writing. The novel confirms

this position both in its choice of characters and its manner of argumentation. The main characters are children or youths going through puberty. They are people who are in the process of formulating their worldview, their sexual identity, and their political position. Many of the scenes involve family discussions, peer discussions or classroom situations.

While some of these situations are stereotypical and somewhat artificial, once again the novel, by virtue of its relentless pursuit of aspects of gender dictated behaviours where traditionally none have been recognized, is quite remarkable. The very notion of sexual behaviour, of intercourse, and various attitudes toward love making are followed through repeatedly and with some new perspective appearing each time. In this reversed culture, *menwim* rarely experience any sexual pleasure because for them sex and conception cannot be separated, because they are taking contraceptive pills with a multitude of side effects, while *wim* are often polygamous, and only interested in physical pleasure. Petronius, the main *mafele* character, experiences rape, but is too ashamed to report it; he would be blamed as having brought it on himself. There are *maidman's balls* where the boy's *maidmanhood* (virginity) is taken. Even if the idea is to reveal the prevalent patterns of male dominated and male conceived sexual behaviour, the ultimate result in the novel is an indictment of the deplorable, outright tragic state of attitudes toward sexuality in contemporary society.

The account of Petronius' anxieties about his physical development during puberty was moving and thought provoking. It is, of course, customary to