

Manly Nations through Nature

Hunting and Wilderness in the Creation of National Identities



Jean-Francois de Troy (1679-1752), "Le Repas de Chasse" (1737), oil on canvas, Louvre.



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), "Daniel Boone Sitting at the Door of His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake, Kentucky" (n.d.), oil on canvas, private collection.

The Nordic experience with commoners' hunting proved to be quite different from the rest of the continent. During the seventeenth century, the Swedish nobility temporarily succeeded in introducing European-style hunting regulations to the densely populated core regions of the kingdom, but in the northern peripheries the folk hunting tradition was not seriously challenged and continued practically unabated until the commoners' hunting rights were completely restored under the law with the famous Union and Security Act of 1792. Thus, it is no wonder that the eighteenth-century Finnish bear hunter and widely publicized folk hero Martti Kitunen has much more in common with the fictional and real-life hunter heroes of North America, such as Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, than with his European counterparts.



Martti Kitunen (1747-1833) shooting bear in Zacharias Topelius, *Maamme Kirja* [The Book of Our Land]. First edition was published in 1875, and the book remained in wide use in Finnish elementary education until the 1940s.



Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919, 26th President of the United States, 1901-1909) as a Dakota Badlands hunter in 1885. ©Library of Congress



Pekka Halonen (1865-1933), "Tracking Lynx" (1903), oil on canvas, K. H. Renlund Museum, Kokkola.

At the turn of the twentieth century, two "young" nations, the United States and Finland, placed special emphasis on pristine landscapes and the image of the wilderness hunter when developing ideas about the national character. These in turn were deeply related to ideals of manliness.

Juxtaposing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North American and Nordic ideas about nature, landscape, and masculinity can therefore shed new light on the notions of nationalism and manliness—some shared, some distinct—between the two regions. While the importance of landscape painting for the evolving national identities in both North America and the Nordic countries has been extensively studied and generally accepted, the role of recreational hunting and fishing in the creation of "national" cultures remains largely neglected.

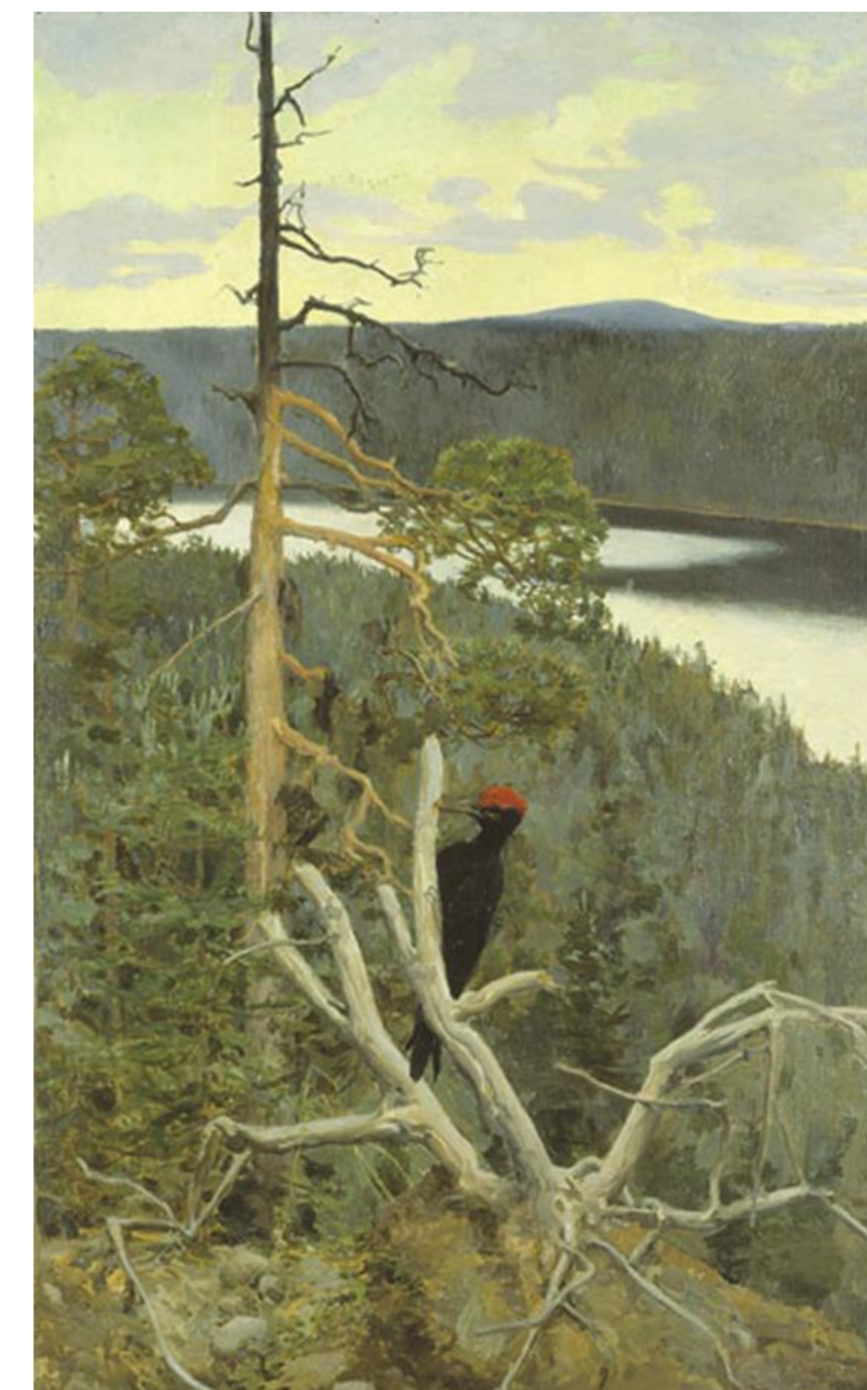
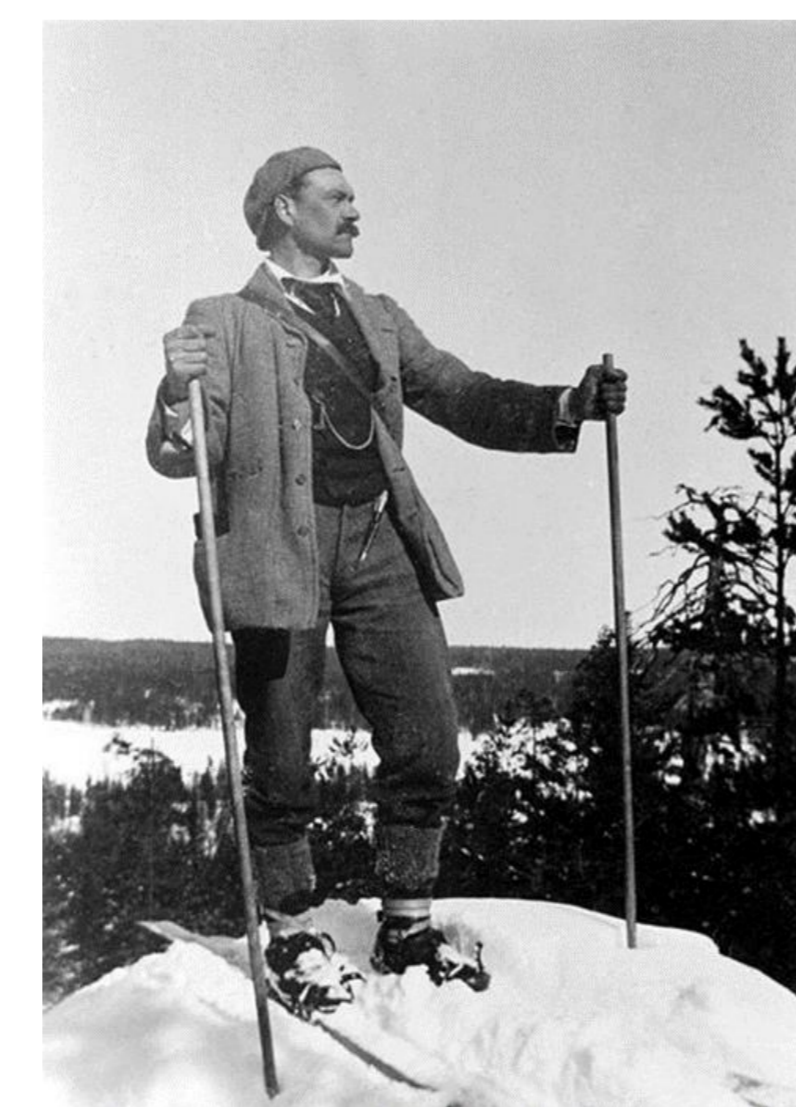
The very distinctive Finnish and American experiences are especially illustrative in this context. There are clearly obvious differences, but a closer examination shows that the two cultures share many previously unrecognized similarities with broad repercussions. While nineteenth-century Finns and Americans generally saw themselves as industrious farmers, landscapes untouched by humans and the images of wilderness hunters greatly contributed to the construction of a national identity and ideals of manliness in both young nations.

It could be further argued that the North American experience with its imagined unrestricted access to the wilderness is not as exceptional as scholarly and popular literature would have it. From the seventeenth up to the twentieth century, the Nordic peripheries shared certain natural, cultural, and even legal features with the famous North American frontier.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Swedish King Gustav Vasa declared all areas of the eastern (i.e., Finnish) wilderness commons (the so-called *erämaa*) to be the crown's property and strongly encouraged their permanent settlement. During the next three centuries, much of the wilderness was settled, and the Lapp (Sámi) people either assimilated or were pushed northward in a process that in some ways resembled the North American frontier experience. However, vast areas remained uninhabited, especially in the north of Finland, and their traditional use as hunting and fishing grounds continued.

During the nineteenth century, *erämaa* became a powerful symbol for rising Finnish nationalism. In the spirit of National Romanticism, painters, authors, and even composers such as Jean Sibelius championed wilderness as a cornerstone for Finnish identity, or more precisely, Finnish male identity. A not-so-distant cousin of the North American "mountain man," *eränkävijä* ("wilderness hunter/fisher") became an epitome of idealized Finnish masculinity and, to a certain degree, has remained so to this day.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931), "The Great Black Woodpecker" (1892-1894), oil on canvas, private collection.



Numerous scholars have demonstrated that upper- and middle-class American men at the turn of the twentieth century were fearful of losing their physical vigor and, consequently, intrigued by ideas about manhood. Emphasizing the historic wilderness experience, President Theodore Roosevelt and his followers created a new, "de-evolutionary" masculinity, balancing "civilized" urban life with atavistic outdoors physicality. Seasonal immersion in the wilderness with primitive camping and big game hunting was to provide the ideal outlet for this purpose.

The writings of many contemporary Nordic authors echo Roosevelt in their archetypal representations of a national masculinity, combined with the idea of strenuous life as a safeguard for the survival of a potent "race." While Roosevelt himself described this new manhood as inherently American and rising from a unique frontier experience, the Finnish discourse at the time often utilized exactly the same arguments, emphasizing the importance of the domestic "frontier" and "wilderness" for the national character and lamenting the urbanites' loss of woodcraft and survival skills.

The history of hunting provides an important, but in many ways neglected viewpoint to the core of national cultures and history of class relations, especially in comparative and transnational contexts. In the feudal societies of Western and Central Europe, hunting rights were gradually severed from land ownership. Typically, only the royalty and nobility were allowed to hunt big game, and smaller landowners and peasants were forced to become assistants in the hunt, which turned into an elaborate display of aristocratic power and a potent symbol of social inequality.

Beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner, American scholars have convincingly argued that the more "democratic" access to nature's bounty—such as hunting for big (and smaller) game—in part made the mythic "America" so appealing to European immigrants. To be sure, there were certain exceptions. The history of hunting in the American South, for instance, resembles in certain ways the continental narrative, with black slaves and sharecroppers substituting for European peasants.

The history of hunting in Finland and in northern parts of Sweden in many important ways resembles the iconic North American narrative. The great national importance attributed to wild landscapes, hunters, and pioneer settlers in both North America and the Nordic countries seems to share common roots, especially when contrasted with the general European experience. Not surprisingly, this mythical idea of a democratic wilderness past—an idea celebrated by the national elites—was eventually reproduced by the dominant classes in a new, novel form.

Many nations in the temperate zones of the globe with a history of recent colonization by Europeans and/or their culture show striking similarities in their utilization of wild lands. Originally peripheral in the greater European economy, these nations typically displayed lower population densities, less governmental control, and more egalitarian systems of land use (at least for a significant portion of the common people) than the core regions of Europe. Today these nations often possess vast swaths of public land and protected wilderness areas (often reflecting the movement of the "frontier" in question), with great cultural significance—and aboriginal land ownership questions—attached to them. It seems that nations with a history of more equal access to nature and its bounty tend to support its protection also on other than purely economic terms.

For references and additional information, please consult Mikko Saikku, "Hunting and Wilderness in the Creation of National Identities," in Mark D. Hersey and Ted Steinberg (eds.), *A Field on Fire: The Future of Environmental History* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2019), 116-125. The author is open to comparative and collaborative projects on the wider topic. Please contact him at mikko.saikku@helsinki.fi



U.S. National Parks and National Forests

Finnish "Natura 2000" Areas

