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## The Exemplary Minna Canth as “the Brave Defender of All Those Who Had Been Oppressed and Hurt”<sup>1</sup> – Practices and Politics of Feminist Commemoration in Finland, 1900 to 1944

### Introduction

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the complex relationship between the past, present and future has drawn increasing attention within a research field that connects historical scholarship with memory studies. In this scholarship, with its focus on history / memory cultures, scholars pose questions that problematize representations of the past in the public sphere, and examine, for instance, power structures that inform these representations. Instead of principally asking what *really* happened in the past, scholars are looking at the *meanings* given to the past and related memory production – the “afterlives” of events and people<sup>2</sup>. These meanings and memories are typically contested ones, as ideologies and politics play into how the past is interpreted and narrated. This interest in history / memory cultures<sup>3</sup> and connected politics typically focuses on present-day representations. In Finland, for instance, public and private memories of the wars that affected the nation in

<sup>1</sup> Reportteri, “Patsaan paljastus”. *Naisten Ääni* 10–11/1937, 145. Trans. Michelle Mamane. The characterization of Minna Canth was included in Hilja Vilkemmaa’s speech that she gave at the unveiling of the Minna Canth statue in Kuopio on May 12, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the concept of “afterlife” as a tool of mnemohistory, see *Afterlife of Events. Perspectives on Mnemohistory*. Edited by Marek Tamm. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015. Afterlife is a reintroduction of the concept of “Nachleben”, first employed by Aby Warburg in the 1910s, understood as “a continued life”. See Marek Tamm, “Introduction: Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory”. *Afterlife of Events. Perspectives on Mnemohistory*. Edited by Marek Tamm. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2015, 9. Instead of implementing the concept of afterlife in mnemohistory of events, I use it in order to see how individuals have been remembered and commemorated.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, history / memory culture is used interchangeably and conveys the idea of mnemohistory, developed by Jan Assman. According to him, “[u]nlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered.” Tamm 2015, 3.

the twentieth century have been topical and accordingly, scholars focus on these memories and their many layers visible in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

This article addresses the topic of history culture from a slightly different angle, with emphasis on the *history* of history cultures instead of a present perspective. My approach suggests that this temporal angle contributes to our understanding of history cultures as phenomena with multilayered histories that can be examined in past contexts and circumstances, in addition to a present-day perspective. The aim is to examine the feminist history culture that emerged and was maintained around the Finnish author, playwright, journalist and social reformist Minna Canth (1844–1897) from the early twentieth-century Finland until the end of the Second World War. My interest in this past history culture is influenced by the present-day commemoration of Canth in Finland. In 2019, the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth was celebrated with a variety of events and publications. Among others, a children’s book was published on the “superwoman” Minna with the aim of girl empowerment.<sup>5</sup> This article, which examines the first fifty decades of the history culture around Canth, deepens our understanding about the long tradition of her commemoration in Finland. Furthermore, the article contributes to research about feminist memory cultures over time. Previous research shows the rich body of memory constructions in national and international contexts and furthermore, how the politics and mechanisms of memory travelled across borders. Admiration of Great Women was a focal element in creating feminist knowledge and identities.<sup>6</sup>

Addressing the afterlife of Minna Canth puts the focus on mnemonic activities around a woman who made her lifework within a cultural sphere and whose writings had great impact on Finnish feminism. She is an exceptional figure in Finnish historical canon, as she is one of the few women whose memory has never faded in contrast to many others whose lives and achievements in the past centuries have been recovered as a result of women’s and gender history of the past few decades. From early on, despite being too radical for some commentators, Canth belonged to the canon of Finnish literary history, a position that few female writers were awarded in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In 1944, a stamp was published to commemorate the centenary

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Second World War, the memory constructions of the Finnish Civil War have been topical in recent years, see e.g. *Rikki revitty maa. Suomen sisällissodan kokemukset ja perintö*. Edited by Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius. Gaudeamus, Helsinki 2018; Seppo Hentilä, *Sisällissodan pitkät varjot*. Siltala, Helsinki 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Leena Virtanen and Sanna Pellicioni, *Minna! Minna Canthin uskomaton elämä ja vaikuttavat teot*. Teos, Helsinki 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Tiina Kinnunen, “Feminist Biography in Finland and Sweden around 1900: Creation of Bonds of Admiration and Gratitude”. *Erinnern, vergessen, umdeuten? Europäische Frauenbewegungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Angelika Schaser, Sylvia Schraut and Petra Steymans-Kurz. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York 2019, 312–337.

<sup>7</sup> Kati Launis, “Minna Ulrika Wilhelmina Canth, Finnish Author, 1844–1897”. [http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Minna\\_Canth](http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Minna_Canth). Retrieved 10 June, 2021.

of her birth, reflecting her acceptance as a Finnish cultural figure. In 1946, a literary society was established to honor her lifework as an author and to promote the ideas and values that directed her writing, namely surrounding human rights, equality, and societal progress. The society defines itself as a community that has been led by “strong women”.<sup>8</sup> Canth also received a flag day of her own in 2007. This day, March 19 (her birthday), relates to equality, too.

Minna Canth’s life has been an object of much academic research, biographical writing, and other popular representations since her death.<sup>9</sup> The approach in this article explores a new angle, as her afterlife has not been examined as an object of its own. In order for it to stay alive from one generation to another, a continued life of a person or an event needs a community that is actively circulating and reproducing the related memory. Minna Canth was not excluded from the national canon by its male establishment, but it was particularly a female community that established and maintained the memory culture around her over time. She has been highly appreciated across the field of women’s activism from organized political work for emancipation to a wide range of societal and cultural interests. In the interconnected field of Finnish women’s associations, it was *Suomalainen Naisliitto* (Finnish Women’s League, henceforth the League, established in 1907) in particular, that put emphasis on her achievements as an exemplary woman and her importance as a role model for new generations.<sup>10</sup> When Minna Canth died in 1897, women’s rights activists who some years later established the League started a conscious construction of her afterlife. The League saw itself as a heritage-bearer of Canth. In March 1944, these mnemonic activities reached a peak as the centenary of her birthday was commemorated with various festivities. Even today, the journal of the League is entitled *Minna*, thus connecting to the tradition from the early twentieth century and positioning itself within this tradition.

The memory activism of the League is at the center of this article. The theoretical frame, drawing on reflections from previous research, deals with the mechanisms and politics of feminist history cultures as they emerged across borders in the period of the so-called first wave, from the nineteenth century to the interwar period.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://minnacanthinseurassa.org/minna-canthin-seura/>. Retrieved 20 June, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Among the books published in the 21st century, see e.g. Kirsti Mäkinen and Tuula Uusi-Halila, *Minna Canth: taiteilija ja taistelija*. Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, Helsinki 2003; Ilkka Nummela, *Toiselta kantilta: Minna Canth liikenaisena*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2004; Minna Majjala, *Herkkä, hellä, hehkuvainen: Minna Canth*. Otava, Helsinki 2016; Suvi Ahola, *Mitä Minna Canth todella sanoi?*. Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, Helsinki 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Tiina Kinnunen, “Minna Canth Suomalaisen Naisliiton muistokulttuurissa 1900-luvun alusta vuoteen 1944”. *Toinen jalka haudassa. Juhlakirja Juhani Kostetille*. Toimittaneet Sanna Lipkin et al. Oulun yliopisto 2019, 143–149.

<sup>11</sup> Concerning the (contested) concept of first wave, see e.g. *No Permanent Waves. Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. Edited by Nancy A. Hewitt. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2010.

Informed by this frame, discussed in the first section, the article asks the following questions: Which forms did the memory activism of the League take, given its aim to keep the memory of Minna Canth alive and pass it down to next generations? How was her exemplarity narrated? Were there changes in her image over time? How did the activists articulate the importance of constructing an afterlife of a Great Woman, in this case Minna Canth? To answer these questions, I will take a chronological approach and first look at Lucina Hagman's biography of Minna Canth as the initiator of a commemorative tradition and the model for narration of her life. This is followed by a look at some representative examples of the League's activities since the 1910s and a discussion of the memorial project, completed in 1937. Finally, I will examine how the centenary of Canth was commemorated in 1944.

The primary source material consists of a selected sample of texts – contemporary books and articles in print media – that, on the one hand, were published in order to commemorate Minna Canth and that, on the other hand, depicted various festivities associated with her commemoration. Among the researched magazines, *Naisten Ääni* is at the center of attention. This was a periodical of the League, and its leading figures acted in the editorial team.

Finnish feminism, with its aim of equality in the family and society, was a result of co-operation across a field with several associations and devoted work by many individuals. The period examined from the early twentieth century to the end of the Second World War is often divided into two phases. The years from around 1900 until the early 1930s are typically seen as a period of gradual steps towards gender equality – the marriage law from 1929 being one of the last achievements in this process. In the 1930s, in turn, women's rights activists increasingly addressed household issues, which has been seen as an expression of conservatism, and contradictory to the struggle for equality. This turn was, however, more complex than typically seen and was associated with reform claims, too. The war years then imposed a heavy burden of practical work on women but did not silence feminist voices who demanded access for educated women to positions of power and openly criticized women's exclusion.<sup>12</sup>

Given the great respect Canth enjoyed among wide circles of Finnish women, a selected sample of media texts constructing her afterlife in other women's magazines is examined as a complementary source material. The aim is not to conduct systematic comparison, but instead to give a relevant context for the coverage of *Naisten Ääni*. These magazines include *Toveritar/Tulevaisuus*, the periodical of the Social Democratic women's union, *Astra*, the periodical of the women's organization of the Swedish People's Party, *Kotiliesi*, the mouthpiece of Finnish household ideology and the most popular women's magazine in the interwar period, and *Hopeapeili*, a

<sup>12</sup> Tiina Kinnunen, "Naisetko vain aputyöläisiä? – Naisliikkeen lehdistön välittämä kuva vuosien 1939–1944 tasa-arvopyrkimyksistä". *Naistutkimus*, 3, 2018, 5–18.

commercial women’s magazine directed at urban emancipated women.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the media coverage of the unveiling of Minna Canth memorial in Kuopio is examined in the newspaper *Savon Sanomat*.

### The mechanisms and politics of feminist history cultures

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, feminism grew into a powerful transnational and international movement with the aim of profound change in power relations between men and women. This change was seen by its proponents not exclusively as a gender issue, but as a key to human progress in general. The feminist effort did not only address the political sphere with its claims of women’s right to equal citizenship, including educational, vocational, social, legal, and political rights. In addition, feminist activists created local, national, transnational, and international women-centered communities that were characterized by shared cultural and emotional values and norms. Within these communities, collective patterns and practices of remembrance and commemoration emerged, as for instance Maria Grever has pointed out. According to her, *historical culture* – in the present article the concepts of *history / memory culture* is used as a synonym for historical culture – refers to how the relationship to the past is articulated and organized in institutions, various media, ideologies, and attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on Jan Assman’s writings on cultural memory, Grever divided this memory / history production into three categories. First, *ritualized memory* included various festivities linked to history. Second, *frozen memory* was manifested in various symbols and materiality of memory. Third, *continued memory* consisted of canonized texts and history writing.<sup>15</sup>

An elementary aspect of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history cultures, whether feminist or not, was that they connected the past, present and future to serve various ideological, political, and cultural aims. In this period, biography constituted a popular form within history cultures, feminist ones included. Kathryn Sklar writes about “the missionary zeal” inherent in this genre. “They write for today, but they

<sup>13</sup> An analysis of the history of women’s magazines in Finland is provided by Arja Turunen, “Naistenlehdet Suomessa 1880-luvulta 1930-luvulle”. *Media & Viestintä*, 2, 2014, 38–56. <https://journal.fi/mediaviestinta/article/view/62866>. Retrieved 15 May, 2021. *Toveritar* changed its name into *Tulevaisuus* in 1944. *Naisten Ääni* was established in 1905, *Astra* in 1919, *Toveritar* in 1922, *Kotiliesi* in 1922 and *Hopeapeili* in 1936.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Grever, “Fear of Plurality: Historical Culture and Historiographical Canonization in Western Europe”. *Gendering Historiography. Beyond National Canons*. Edited by Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York Campus 2009, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Grever, “The Pantheon of Feminist Culture. Women’s Movements and the Organization of Memory”. *Gender and History*, 2, 1997, 364–374. On feminist history writing of the first wave, see also e.g., Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women’s History Since the Renaissance*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2002, 130–142.

also write for the eternities. A group without history is a group without an identity. By creating a history of women [...] they transform the possibilities in women's present and future."<sup>16</sup> Based on my own comparative reading of biographical descriptions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland and Sweden, I adhere to Sklar's interpretation. Biography offered women activists an important tool, namely the figure of a *Great Woman*. Representations of *Great, Exemplary Women* were needed in feminist work. Suitable women's contributions in intellectual, moral, and other relevant respects and in different fields of human life were instrumentalized. On the one hand, descriptions of women's capacities provided the feminist campaigns with justification for equal rights. On the other hand, within women's own communities, the representations were additionally used to strengthen a shared identity of "us". The history culture with its narratives of exemplary figures contributed to an emotional regime based on admiration, gratitude and respect and charged women with a related responsibility to remember the idealized figures and their sacrifices for their own gender. Furthermore, women were charged with the responsibility to carry on the legacy of the role models in the future.<sup>17</sup>

This interconnectedness between narrated sacrifices of exemplary figures and gratitude expected from the following generations was a common pattern that connected history cultures with various ideological backgrounds. In a nationalist use of history, for instance, gaining strength in the nineteenth century, a strict responsibility was imposed on present and future generations to remember the sacrifices, utmost the loss of lives, that past generations had made for the prosperity of their respective nations.<sup>18</sup> Not only did this connection of sacrifice and remembrance connect and constitute nationalism and feminism, but they also implemented traveling ideas that crossed borders. Feminist media, for instance, was actively circulating patterns of history writing across borders and various works of women's history were consumed in their original form and as translations in different countries.

<sup>16</sup> Paula R. Backscheider quotes Sklar in *Reflections on Biography*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, 159. Originally in Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Coming to terms with Florence Kelley". *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*. Edited by Sara Alpern et al. University of Illinois Press, Champaign 1992, 17–33.

<sup>17</sup> Kinnunen 2019, 312–337. See also Tiina Kinnunen, "Progress, nation and Great Women in constructing the idea of feminist internationalism". *Debating Internationalisms. A European History of Concepts Beyond Nation States*. Edited by Pasi Ihalainen and Antero Holmila. Berghahn Books, Oxford/New York, forthcoming 2022.

<sup>18</sup> On the mechanisms of memory and the interconnectedness of nationalist and feminist uses of the past, see Dietlind Hüchtker, "Vergangenheit, Gefühl und Wahrheit. Strategien der Geschichtsschreibung über Frauenpolitik und Frauenbewegungen in Galizien an der Wende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert". *Erinnern, vergessen, umdeuten? Europäische Frauenbewegungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Angelika Schaser et al. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York 2019, 284–311.

Continued memory, as defined by Grever, with canonized texts and history writing, did not only respond to the call for admiration and gratitude, and the responsibility to remember the sacrifices of previous generations of exemplary women. On the contrary, ritualized and frozen forms of memory – festivities and monuments, for instance – can also be seen from this perspective. For instance, monuments were erected to honor the struggle of the pioneering generations. In the United States, for instance, the first statue was unveiled in 1921 to commemorate the pioneering lives of Lucretia Mott, Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the founding mothers of US-American feminism.<sup>19</sup> Feminist memory production is not an outdated phenomenon, but instead, a very prolific and visible one in the twenty-first century. For instance, the centenaries of women’s rights to vote in different parts of the world have resulted in extensive commemorations in recent years, including the erection of monuments.<sup>20</sup>

### **Lucina Hagman’s biography of Minna Canth as the initiator of a commemorative tradition and the model for narration of her life**

Tending to Minna Canth’s memory started soon after her sudden death in 1897. The first part of the two-part *Minna Canthin elämäkerta* (Minna Canth’s biography) was published in 1906, and the second part in 1911. The author of the biography, teacher and MP Lucina Hagman (1853–1946), was one of the driving forces of Finnish Women’s League and Feminist Association Unioni (established in 1892). Like Canth, Hagman studied at the Jyväskylän teachers’ seminar, and the women knew one another. This seminar was among the first educational institutions in Finland to provide women with a path to an independent life. Hagman had begun her biographical work soon after Canth’s death, but the completion of the book was delayed due to the author’s many engagements – it was a period of Russification, on the one hand, and the battle for suffrage and the beginning of her parliamentary work, on the other hand. Hagman was also the head of a mixed secondary school in Helsinki. For the biography itself,

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/portrait-monument-lucretia-mott-elizabeth-cady-stanton-and-susan-b>. Retrieved June 10, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., Krista Cowman, “‘There is so much, and it will all be history’: Feminist Activists as Historians, the Case of British Suffrage Historiography, 1908-2007”. *Gendering Historiography*. Edited by Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York Campus 2009, 141–162; Susanne Kinnebrock, “Warum Frauenbewegungen erinnert werden oder auch nicht. Zum Zusammenspiel von Gedächtnisformen und Medienlogiken”. *Erinnern, vergessen, umdeuten? Europäische Frauenbewegungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Angelika Schaser et al. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York 2019, 376–402; Valentina di Liscia, “Monument to Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth Unveiled in Central Park”. <https://hyperallergic.com/584676/monument-to-susan-b-anthony-elizabeth-cady-stanton-and-sojourner-truth-unveiled-in-central-park>. Retrieved 10 August, 2021.



time was spent on compiling the various source material that was not yet archived. Hagman identified valuable letters to and by Canth, her manuscripts and published texts and made oral history interviews with people who had known Canth.<sup>21</sup>

Minna Canth (née Johansson) came from a middle-class family, based in Kuopio. In 1865, she married Johan Ferdinand Canth, who worked as an educator at the teachers' seminar. The marriage put an end to her education and changed the course of her life. She gave birth to six children but managed to continue intellectual activities together with her husband. She assisted him in editing a newspaper in their hometown Jyväskylä. In this paper she addressed, among other issues, the social problems due to the sale of alcohol. Her husband died suddenly in 1879 when she was pregnant with their seventh child. She moved back to Kuopio, where she took over her father's business.<sup>22</sup>

Alongside running the draper's shop, Canth raised her children and became famous as an author, particularly as a playwright. In her lifetime, she was a controversial figure, due to her social activity among the poor and her radical opinions of women's and working-class rights. These opinions were addressed in her literary production, too. Her literary salon attracted authors and other influential persons from all over Finland to discuss new literary, social, and scientific issues. Canth herself was an important mediator of these currents as she followed international debates very closely in her hometown, which she only left occasionally. Some of her works were translated into foreign languages and she attained an established place among the Nordic realist writers, alongside Henrik Ibsen, and others.<sup>23</sup>

Universal suffrage was granted in 1906, during the time that Hagman was working on the book, providing Finnish women a completely new opportunity to pursue a policy of equality and simultaneously defend Minna Canth's visions and demands that strongly emphasized women as the key force in reforming society. The women representing different parties in parliament focused specifically on issues related to the status of women and children.<sup>24</sup> In the spirit of this politics, Hagman depicted Canth as the pioneer of societal progress and described her as a "skilled soldier" who pointed "her weapon towards the weakest point of the front lines of the opponents".<sup>25</sup> From Hagman's point of view, it was not essential to focus on the

<sup>21</sup> Lucina Hagman, *Minna Canthin elämäkerta. Ensimmäinen osa*. Osakeyhtiö Kuopion Uusi Kirjapaino, Kuopio 1906, III–IV; Lucina Hagman, *Minna Canthin elämäkerta. Toinen osa*. Otava, Helsinki 1911, esipuhe. On Hagman, Anne Ollila, "Lucina Hagman". <https://kansallisbiografia-fi.pc124152.oulu.fi/kansallisbiografia/henkilo/2705>. Retrieved 15 April, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning the biographical facts of Minna Canth presented in this article, see Maijala 2016 and Launis, [http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Minna\\_Canth](http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Minna_Canth). Retrieved 10 June, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Maria Lähteenmäki, "Naiset tasa-arvoisemman yhteiskunnan puolesta 1907–2003". Irma Sulkunen, Maria Lähteenmäki and Aura Korppi-Tommola, *Naiset eduskunnassa. Suomen eduskunta 100 vuotta 4*. Edita, Helsinki 2006, 88–110.

<sup>25</sup> Hagman 1911, 6. Trans. Michelle Mamane.



artistic aspect of Canth’s written work, but on the contents that concerned the rights of the oppressed, women in particular. She emphasized Canth’s resilience as a pioneer of women’s rights. Despite the criticism she received, Canth was not to be defeated: “One cannot be so easily scared off. Nor is a strong woman a delicate flower to be easily crushed.”<sup>26</sup> Hagman did bring up Canth’s mental exhaustion, which Canth herself discussed in her letters, but Hagman’s emphasis was on her heroic ability to cope and overcome her difficulties. Canth’s successful career as a shopkeeper was an additional building block in the heroic story Hagman created: Women can succeed in different professions.<sup>27</sup>

Lucina Hagman did not begin her work as a biographer from scratch but was continuing the career she started in the nineteenth century. As a part of their campaigns, from the very beginning, women’s organizations cultivated feminist memory culture and highlighted “exemplary” women whose lifeworks were used, on one hand, to convince the parties outside the women’s movements of women’s capabilities to take part in societal work, and on the other hand, to create role models for women in order to build a new women’s identity and to realize women’s citizenship. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, activists celebrated the memory of author Fredrika Runeberg. In doing so, they challenged the culture centered around genius men, such as Frederika’s spouse, poet J. L. Runeberg.<sup>28</sup>

Although in many senses, Hagman created a model for describing Canth’s life, her depiction of Canth’s marriage was re-evaluated quite soon. Hagman described Ferdinand Canth as a tyrant who was able to exhaust Minna into accepting his hand in marriage and to whose will the young wife had to submit, even sexually.<sup>29</sup> As early as 1931, when her book was published, Hilja Vilkkema clarified the couple’s marriage to be more a partnership.<sup>30</sup> Even Hagman acknowledged that the husband slowly began to appreciate the mental abilities of his sharp wife and that the wife began to respect her husband, although that she did not feel any “dizzying bouts of desire”.<sup>31</sup>

Hagman’s portrayal of the Canths’ marriage can be seen to be equally as political as her portrayal of Minna as a female hero. It is my interpretation that this was her contribution to the debate that the women’s movement was having on sexual morality and an ethical, equal marriage. One must emphasize the problem – inequality in

<sup>26</sup> Hagman 1911, 81. Quote from Canth’s letter to Hagman in 1886. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>27</sup> Hagman 1906; 1911, passim.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Minna Hagner, “Naisasian tarkoitus on ihmiskunnan sopusointuinen kehitys.” Porvarillisen naisliikkeen tuottamat kertomukset naisten historiasta”. *Oma pöytä. Naiset historiankirjoittajina Suomessa*. Edited by Elina Katainen et al. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2005, 100–118. On Fredrika Runeberg, e.g. Helena Westermarck, *Fredrika Runeberg. En litterär studie*. Söderström & c:o förlagsaktiebolag, Helsingfors 1904.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Hagman 1906, 35. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>30</sup> Hilja Vilkkema, *Minna Canth. Elämäkerrallisia piirteitä*. Otava, Helsinki 1931, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Hagman 1906, 47. Trans. Mamane.

marriage – and present a solution – law reform (a new law was made in 1929) and the ensuing equalizing practices.<sup>32</sup> Minna Canth also took part in this conversation with her many descriptions, and if one were to interpret her fiction as autobiographical, one could conclude that it was a matter of personal experience.

With her biography, Hagman created an influential model as to how to narrate Canth's life from the viewpoint of the fight for gender equality and societal progress, and based on this lifework, as a Great Woman to be admired. This way of narrating Canth's life was also adopted within working class women's circles, however with a special emphasis on her as a champion for the working class and its women in particular. For instance, in 1922, twenty-five years after Canth's death, when her legacy was reflected upon in *Toveritar*, Lydia Saarikivi retold the stages of Canth's life in accordance with Hagman's description, including Canth's suffering in the early phase of her marriage. Saarikivi emphasized how working-class women respected Canth for her courage and commitment to address their oppression and to fight for decent living conditions for all.<sup>33</sup> Canth's way of addressing alcohol as a societal poison was a topic that was discussed repeatedly in the life descriptions of Canth that I examined, and her standpoint about temperance as women-friendly was unanimously shared in the feminist field.<sup>34</sup> Due to the legacy of hers, Canth was a socialist, Saarikivi declared.<sup>35</sup> Canth herself also declared herself to be a socialist in the 1880s. In the 1920s' Finland, however, socialism was an organized political movement and quite different from what it was when Canth enthused over it in the 1880s after reading international literature. This anachronism did not prevent Saarikivi from depicting Canth as one of "us". Hagman's and Saarikivi's depictions show that creating an afterlife of a person for social and political purposes was open to suitable interpretations.

<sup>32</sup> On the sexuality debate in the Finnish women's movement, see e.g. Maija Rajainen, *Naisliike ja sukupuoliromantiikka*. Suomen kirkkohistoriallinen seura, Helsinki 1973; Anna Elomäki, "Politiikan siveellisyys ja siveellisyden politiikka suomalaisten naisasianaisten teksteissä". *Siveellisyydestä seksuaalisuuteen. Poliittisen käsitteen historia*. Edited by Tuija Pulkkinen and Antu Sorainen. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2011, 131–152.

<sup>33</sup> Lydia S-vi, "Minna Canthin muistolle". *Toveritar* 5/1922, 78–79.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Lucina Hagman, "Piirteitä siitä, miten Minna Canthista tuli kirjailija". *Minna Canthin muisto. Myydään Minna Canthin muistomerkkirahaston hyväksi*. Otava, Helsinki 1914, 51; Aino Lehtokoski, "Perinnön antama velvoitus". *Toveritar* 23–24/1931, 332–333, 348; Anni Rautiainen, "'He ovat kantaneet päivän kuorman ja helteen.'" *Naisten Ääni* 22/1936, 316–318. Concerning the interconnectedness between women's suffragists/MPs and temperance, see e.g. Lähtenmäki 2006, 105–110; Irma Sulkunen, "Suffrage, gender and citizenship in Finland. A comparative perspective". *Nordeuropa Forum* 1/2007, 27–44.

<sup>35</sup> Saarikivi 5/1922, 79.

### “A commanding memory” – Finnish Women’s League as the champion of the Minna Canth history culture since the 1910s

The League was founded in 1907 in order to advance gender equality and the civic education of women.<sup>36</sup> Because of her early death, Minna Canth was not able to see its founding, but would have undoubtedly supported its objectives of social reform, but also preserving bilingual culture in Finland. Canth was among the first authors to write in Finnish, but she never adhered to the Fennoman claim of a monolingual Finland. Instead, she was open to a bilingual culture with both Finnish and Swedish as tools of communication.<sup>37</sup> She had originally participated in the Kuopio division of Finnish Women’s Association, founded in 1884, but became distanced from it.<sup>38</sup> This distancing meant that Canth did not have a specific place in the memory culture of the Association.<sup>39</sup> The League emerged after the 1906 parliamentary reform. With universal suffrage and the right to stand for election, women’s efforts could be channeled into the parties’ women’s organizations. Unaffiliated women’s organizations, such as the League, did, however, continue their work and formed a network of players with the political women’s organizations. Social reform of society, temperance included, was a shared goal. Women’s emancipation was seen as a result of and a tool in the reform work, in line with Canth’s visions.

After Canth’s death, within the League arose the thought about a memorial as “the lifework of our greatest woman author must finally be awarded the recognition it deserved” – as it was expressed in the book *Minna Canthin muisto 1844–1914* (Minna Canth’s memory), published in 1914, when the memory of her seventieth birthday was topical. The proceeds of the book went to the Canth memorial fund, founded in the League’s summer meeting of 1909. Two years later, a special committee was established for the realization of the memorial.<sup>40</sup> However, implementing the plan took time until 1937. The book was a compilation of writings by various authors and self-evidently included a description by Hagman in which she praised Canth’s

<sup>36</sup> An introduction into the history of Finnish Women’s League, “*Valkoisia variksia ja helmikanoja*”. *Suomalaisen Naisliiton 110-vuotisjuhlakirja*. Edited by Maija Kauppinen. Suomalainen Naisliitto, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> The Finnish-speaking women’s rights movement was part of a nationalist, so called Fennoman movement that promoted the standing of Finnish and the Finnish-speaking population in the Grand Duchy with the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority. This campaign led to the language conflict that divided particularly educated Finns between pro-Finnish and pro-Swedish. The third group consisted of those in favor of a bilingual Finland. On the language politics in Finland, see Pasi Saukkonen, “The Finnish Paradox: Language and Politics in Finland”. <https://www.recode.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Saukkonen-Pasi-2012-RECODE.pdf>. Retrieved 12 May, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Aleksandra Gripenberg, *Naisasian kehitys eri maissa IV. Suomi*. Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, Porvoo/Helsinki 1909, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Hilja Vilkmán, “Minna Canthin muistomerkkihanke”. *Minna Canthin muisto*, 1914, 9–15.

lifework as a form of service for her nation.<sup>41</sup> The poems that were included in the publication were written in the same idealizing spirit. This idealization included, among other things, the idea that Canth – the heroine – was born to accomplish heroic deeds. Hilja Vilkmaa, for instance, wrote in her poem “Minna Canth”: “She was born to be a heroine. [...] She was majestic, with a fiery temper, exchanging blows, never imitating others, fearlessly flying her banner in the race.”<sup>42</sup>

Hilja Vilkmaa participated in the memorial project from the very beginning.<sup>43</sup> Vilkmaa (Vilkman) (1887–1976), who considered herself to be a kindred spirit of Minna Canth,<sup>44</sup> began to profile herself as a Canth activist as a young student, at the same time as she became active in women’s rights in the League. She was invited to be the secretary of the organization in 1910. Having studied and later taught history, Vilkmaa understood the significance of history in the foundation of both national and women’s identities particularly well. Alongside Vilkmaa, Helle Kannila (Cannelin) (1896–1972) was another fundamental Canth-activist working within the League. Kannila herself was a pioneer in advancing the Finnish library as an institution ever since the 1920s. In Canth, she found a person who held in high regard the values that were fundamental to her own worldview: culture, progress, and equality.<sup>45</sup> In 1925, a Minna Canth study group was founded in the Helsinki division of the League as a result of Kannila’s activity, among others, which organized a memorial event on Canth’s birthday in 1928. The event was broadcasted, and Vilkmaa instructed other local divisions of the League to acquire radio receivers and loudspeakers for their conference rooms. The celebration took off with Kannila’s presentation of Canth as “a pioneer and poet visionary”.<sup>46</sup> We do not know the number of listeners, but the effort to use the radio as a medium for feminist news, history included, is significant. The use of the radio had the potential to make the information more widely available to the public, and to strengthen community spirit among women activists.<sup>47</sup>

For the Minna Canth study groups, in Helsinki and in other parts of Finland, Vilkmaa created the book *Minna Canth. Elämäkerrallisia piirteitä* (Biographical features) (1931), which in addition to her own text included recommendations of

<sup>41</sup> Hagman 1914, 57.

<sup>42</sup> H.E.V (Hilja Elina Vilkman), “Minna Canth”. *Minna Canthin muisto*, 1914, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Hilja Vilkman, “Aleksis Kiven ja Minna Canthin muistopatsaat Kansallisteatterin edustalle!”. *Minna Canthin muisto*, 1914, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Karmela Belinki, “Hilja Vilkmaa – ihanteellinen tukipilari”. <http://www.naistenaani.fi/hilja-vilkmaa-ihanteellinen-tukipilari>. Retrieved 16 May, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Jukka Muiluvuori, “Helle Kannila 1896–1972”. <https://kansallisbiografia-i.pc124152.oulu.fi:9443/kansallisbiografia/henkilo/7565>. Retrieved 10 May, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> H. E. V., “Juhlapäivä ja sen ilta”. *Naisten Ääni* 4–5/1928, 83. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>47</sup> On the use of radio in circulation of knowledge and entertainment for women, see *Women’s History Review* vol. 29, no. 2, March 2020 with its Forum articles “Women and Radio: Sounding Out New Paths in Women’s History”. E.g. Kate Murphy, “Brightening their leisure hours’. The experiment of BBC Women’s Hour, 1923–1925”, 183–196.

further reading. The book was dominated by – in a Hagmanian spirit – a narrative of a women’s rights pioneer: “It [work for women’s emancipation] leaps, in many nuances, out of her fictional works, she cobbles together from it the most empathetic and poignant writings throughout her life, it receives due attention in her private correspondence.”<sup>48</sup> Vilkemmaa highlighted those parts of Canth’s life that characterized her own work as well: In addition to women’s rights, these were temperance and a moderate Fennophilia that respected the Swedish language.<sup>49</sup>

Women’s study groups were established among working-class women, too. According to media coverage in *Toveritar*, Canth’s writings were frequently discussed and her plays performed, which reflects the fundamental importance of her thoughts to women of lower classes.<sup>50</sup> Media coverage does not give evidence whether Vilkemmaa’s book was used as a study material within the working-class milieu, but it was advertised in *Toveritar*.<sup>51</sup> A reference to Canth’s “fiery temper” in Lydia Saarikivi’s article in 1922 lets us assume that she knew Vilkemmaa’s poem published in the book *Minna Canthin muisto 1844–1914*.<sup>52</sup>

### **A message cast in bronze – the completion of the Minna Canth statue project in 1937**

The Minna Canth memorial expressing her authority as an established author, designed by sculptor Eemil Halonen and unveiled in May 1937 in Kuopio, can be considered a milestone in Finnish history culture, as it was the first statue dedicated to a woman.<sup>53</sup> Initially, the idea was to erect the statue in Helsinki. The project progressed crucially when the Kuopio division of the Finnish Women’s League took the project into their own hands and founded a statue committee in 1932, which several other women’s associations in the city joined. The fund’s nest egg was donated by the Minna Canth club of Kuopio’s local branch of the League. Female MPs, who were sympathetic to the cause across party lines, were also asked for social support of the project.<sup>54</sup>

The unveiling took place on the day Canth died, May 12<sup>th</sup>, which was also the Finnish Identity Day (Suomalaisuuden päivä). It was a coincidence but underlined

<sup>48</sup> Vilkemmaa 1931, 112–113. Trans. Mamane. See also H. E. V., “Kansakuntamme suuren tyttären päivänä”. *Naisten Ääni* 6/1934, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Vilkemmaa 1931, 44–45; Belinki, “Hilja Vilkemmaa.”

<sup>50</sup> E.g. *Toveritar* 22/1927, 279; *Toveritar* 20/1937, 343–344.

<sup>51</sup> *Toveritar* 18/1931, 251.

<sup>52</sup> Saarikivi 5/1922, 79.

<sup>53</sup> Statues to commemorate Minna Canth are located in other cities in Finland with connection to Canth’s life, too: Tampere, where she was born (unveiled in 1951), and Jyväskylä, where she studied and lived with her family until her husband died (unveiled in 1962).

<sup>54</sup> Laimi Korhonen, “Kuopion Minna Canthin muistomerkin pystyttämävaiheet”. *Naisten Ääni* 9/1937, 126–129.

the respect Canth broadly received as a national and local treasure. This national day of celebration was dedicated to the memory of J. V. Snellman (1806–1861), leader of the Fennoman movement, who was branded as the national philosopher. The leading local newspaper, *Savon Sanomat*, summarized the core idea of national history culture aptly: “Remembering and honoring the past sets the stage for present and future action.”<sup>55</sup> The unveiling of the memorial was broadcasted,<sup>56</sup> which reinforced it as a national event. From a more local point of view, it was important to highlight Kuopio’s significance in the evolution of Finnish nationalist culture. This significance was personified in the “intellectual geniuses”,<sup>57</sup> J. V. Snellman and Minna Canth, who both lived in Kuopio, Snellman from 1845 to 1849, Canth from 1880 until her death.

An article in the *Kotiliesi* periodical reminded its readers that at her time, Canth was decidedly not respected by all, but rather, she was considered by some to be an “oddly savage, tactless widow”.<sup>58</sup> The focus of the article was on how time-specific history culture is: Primarily, statues tell us about the views and minds of the time when they were erected. The author interpreted, or at least hoped, the statue – the first dedicated to a woman – would reflect the advancement of gender equality in Finland. The progress was not linear, she reminded her readers, elsewhere women were removed from office and publicity, undoubtedly indicative of how women were treated in fascist nations.<sup>59</sup>

In the interwar period, the newly independent nation’s nationalism was accentuated in the myth of very specific Finnish culture<sup>60</sup>, also impacting the women’s movement. However, it is noteworthy that when women’s rights activists wrote about Canth’s statue, they focused on gender issues, rather than the statue’s notion of Canth as a national treasure. The media coverage highlighted how significant it was that women were the implementors of the statue project – it was “an achievement of women’s work”.<sup>61</sup> This fact was of great importance, because it told that women understood how much they owed to Canth’s lifework as a champion for women’s rights. This was emphasized in several speeches given on May 12<sup>th</sup>. Women also had a key role in the unveiling of the statue, and the prestige of the event was underlined by the

<sup>55</sup> “Minna Canthin patsaan paljastusjuhla”. *Savon Sanomat*, May 11, 1937. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>56</sup> “Suomen Yleisradio”. *Savon Sanomat*, May 11, 1937.

<sup>57</sup> “Maajussin mietteitä”. *Savon Sanomat*, May 15, 1937. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>58</sup> K. O., “MINNA CANTH omansa ja muiden patsaiden tulkitsemana; omansa ja meidän aikamme tulkkina”. *Kotiliesi*, 9/1937. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. See also Sylvi-Kyllikki Kilpi, “Pohjolan naisten yhteenkuuluvaisuus. Solidariteten bland Nordens kvinnor”. *Toveritar* 13–14/1938, 201–202.

<sup>60</sup> See e.g. *Kansallisten instituutioiden muotoutuminen. Suomalainen historiakuva Oma maa -kirjasarjassa 1900-1960*. Edited by Petri Karonen and Antti Rähä. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Aino Lehtokoski, “MINNA CANTH yhteiskunnallisena ja raittiustaistelijana”. *Toveritar* 11/1937, 184.





*A child's view on Minna Canth (Photo: Fredrik Georg Runeberg (1950–1959), Source: Finnish Heritage Agency).*

attendance of many female MPs.<sup>62</sup> In their speeches Hilja Vilkema, Miina Sillanpää and Tilda Löthman-Koponen, among others, characterized the statue to be a symbol of women's admiration, gratitude and respect for Canth.<sup>63</sup> Sillanpää was one of the leading Social Democratic MPs, whereas Löthman-Koponen represented the Agrarian Union.

In line with the speeches given in Kuopio, the editorial of *Naisten Ääni*, “Pronssi puhuu.” (Bronze speaks) highlighted that the statue was “extrinsic proof of the life force that respect and gratitude command”.<sup>64</sup> Respect and gratitude, meanwhile, were forged from Canth's work in improving the situation of women and the working class.<sup>65</sup> According to the description in *Hopeapeili*, the statue communicated Minna Canth's maternal energy, which did not only want to “protect its own, but all those

<sup>62</sup> “Minna Canthin muistopatsas paljastettiin eilen Kuopiossa”. *Savon Sanomat*, May 13, 1937.

<sup>63</sup> Reporteri, *Naisten Ääni* 10–11/1937, 143–150. See also Kinnunen 2019, 321–328.

<sup>64</sup> H. E. V., “Pronssi puhuu”. *Naisten Ääni* 9/1937, 116. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. Hanna Asp, “Kuinka nainen ennen vanhaan tuli ylioppilaaksi”. *Hopeapeili* 5/1937, 10–11.



who are vulnerable and discriminated against”.<sup>66</sup> The description conveyed a message that Canth was deserving of the gratitude of *every* Finnish woman. This “maternal energy” associated with Canth also in media coverage of the other examined magazines referred to the common theme of both the Finnish and international women’s rights movements that the motherhood that women innately represented should be channeled into societal and political work.<sup>67</sup> In some descriptions, Canth’s role as an enlightened mother for her own seven children was addressed. In this respect, too, her life was narrated as an exemplary one.<sup>68</sup>

The statue project itself became a part of the history culture of the woman’s movement. Narratives of its history communicated the activists’ commitment to pass down the legacy of Minna Canth. By recounting the history of the project, women activists also reinforced the idea of women’s ability to take care of common causes. This view corresponded with reality in the sense that the project had been initiated within the women’s movement. As far as funding went, it was not a question of only the efforts of women, as even the Ministry of Education, for example, supported the project.<sup>69</sup>

Several associations participated in the unveiling in order to pay homage to Canth’s lifework. Social Democratic women’s union also laid their own wreath down, reflecting the respect Canth received within the labor movement. In her review of Canth’s lifework published in *Toveritar*, MP Aino Lehtokoski considered Canth’s temperance work to be among her key merits.<sup>70</sup> Temperance work, as well as Canth’s role as the champion of the ideas that female MPs a few decades later crafted into laws pertaining to maternity benefits and national pension, for example, was discussed in the annual women’s meeting (called women’s days) hosted by the League. In 1937 this meeting was held in Kuopio in conjunction with the unveiling and female MPs from various political parties volunteered to carry on Canth’s legacy.<sup>71</sup>

### **Minna Canth’s centennial celebration in 1944 as a channel for feminist criticism**

It was a coincidence, of course, that the centennial anniversary of Minna Canth’s birth, March 19, 1944, happened to coincide with a time when Finns were struggling

<sup>66</sup> H. A., “Ensimmäiselle suomalaiselle naiselle pystytetyn patsaan äärellä 12.5.1937”. *Hopeapeili* 6/1937, 9. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950. A Political History*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000, 227–242.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. Hagman 1911, 5–6; Hanna Asp, “MINNA CANTH perheenäitinä”. *Hopeapeili* 3/1944, 9–12.

<sup>69</sup> Korhonen, *Naisten ääni* 9/1937, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Lehtokoski, *Toveritar* 11/1937, 185.

<sup>71</sup> “Onnistuneet naisten päivät”. *Savon Sanomat*, May 13, 1937.

for their national existence against the heavy attacks of the Soviet Union. Finnish Women’s League, in particular, had been meticulously preparing for the anniversary. Finns were encouraged to study Minna Canth, and Helle Kannila had designed a detailed program to implement for the studies. With the program, “we can organize the Minna Canth celebration even in the most remote areas of our country while respecting the memory of this great inspiring pioneer.”<sup>72</sup> A special booklet entitled *Minna Canth 1844 – 19.III. – 1944* (1944) was published with poems, plays, and stories to help local groups to organize festivities for adults and children. The booklet was created by a committee established by Finnish Women’s League.

The characteristic feature of history cultures, adapting to the spirit of each time period, is reflected in the medley of Canth quotes published in *Naisten Ääni* in early 1944. In the interwar period Finnish feminists subscribed to pacifism and Canth’s contribution as a champion for peace was accordingly acknowledged.<sup>73</sup> In 1944, pacifism could not any longer be on the agenda and the following thought reflecting the sentiments felt during the Russification that started at the end of the nineteenth century was chosen to characterize Canth’s view of Russia: “Dear God, what is to be the future of this nation? Does the foul weather not blow from the East, that which hinders all progress and sweeps us into ethical ruin? Is there safety to be found in Western Europe? Will that powerful Slavic race defeat all former civilized nations?”<sup>74</sup> Despite this dark view of hers, Canth’s vision of women as “mothers and educators of humankind” inspired women and gave a promise of a better future. In her chapter in *Minna Canth 1844 – 19.III. – 1944* Greta von Frenckell-Thesleff addressed the potential women had in terms of improving living conditions and human relations.<sup>75</sup>

Wartime Canth descriptions also emphasized Canth’s vision of Finland as a bilingual nation part of the Nordic community with long traditions of democracy; a vision that liberal-minded Finns endorsed.<sup>76</sup> Canth was highly regarded as a prominent figure among Swedish-speaking women in Finland, but she was not visible in the media coverage of *Astra* until the wartime. One particular reason for the shift was that the first biography of her in Swedish was published in 1942, namely *Minna Canth och “det Unga Finland”* by the above-mentioned Greta von Frenckell-Thesleff. The book was translated into Finnish in 1944 by Tyyni Tuulio, a prolific biographer of

<sup>72</sup> Helle Kannila, “Nyt on ryhdyttävä Minna Canth-opiskeluun”. *Naisten Ääni* 1/1944, 6. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>73</sup> E.g. Toini Iversen, “Äänioikeus velvoittaa”. *Toveritar* 7/1937, 115.

<sup>74</sup> “Minna Canthin ajatuksia”. *Naisten Ääni* 2–3/1944, 32. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>75</sup> Greta von Frenckell-Thesleff, “Minna Canth kansankasvattajana”. *Minna Canth 1844 – 19.III. – 1944*. Helsingin Uusi Kirjapaino Oy, Helsinki 1944, 60. A summary of the chapter in Swedish: “Minna Canth som folkkuppfostrare. Till hundraårsdagen av hennes födelse”. *Astra* 3/1944, 50–51.

<sup>76</sup> E.g. Greta von Frenckell-Thesleff, *Minna Canth och “det Unga Finland”*. Holger Schildts förlag, Helsingfors 1942, passim. Also Kilpi, *Toveritar* 13–14/1938, 201–202.

women pioneers.<sup>77</sup> Her own writings about Canth were published in *Kotiliesi*, for instance. In 1940, she reminded that intellectual nourishment – referring to Canth’s writings – was available, in contrast to a shortage of several material things, due to wartime circumstances.<sup>78</sup> Tuulio also contributed to the centennial booklet with a sketch of Canth as a lively person who was open to new thoughts throughout her whole life. So being, she was a model for everybody.<sup>79</sup>

Having emphasized national unity across language barriers, it was also appropriate to highlight crossing class boundaries during the wartime. For example, in a program broadcasted March 16, 1944, and organized by Hilja Vilkmaa, Martta Salmela-Järvinen, Social Democratic MP and active member of the working-class women’s movement’s, among others, discussed Canth’s legacy. She emphasized that the working class recognized Canth – “a pioneer and proclaimer of liberty” – as their own.<sup>80</sup> This was in line with several writings published in *Toveritar* already in the 1920s, in which Canth’s contributions for the working class and its women in particular were highly regarded. Salmela-Järvinen also was invited to contribute to the centennial booklet. She wrote a play depicting a women’s group at wartime. After discussing Canth’s thoughts they subscribed to carry on her legacy – until “the final victory of gender equality”.<sup>81</sup>

During the Second World War, Finnish women’s organizations focused on supporting the nation’s war efforts. The organizations worked together and with female MPs extensively in order to make women’s work effective and to develop maternity care and childcare, among other things.<sup>82</sup> The population issue rose to an increasingly prominent role in social debate, creating pressure to emphasize motherhood as a women’s calling.<sup>83</sup> This calling was never denied in the women’s movement, but they did not want motherhood to restrict women from being active members of society or their right to an education or paid work.<sup>84</sup> These rights were sought to be kept in the public eye even during the war years, but in accordance with the prevailing manner of speaking, by emphasizing the overall interest of the nation.

The centennial anniversary of Minna Canth’s birth provided the perfect opportunity for a reminder of more equality that was expected as a compensation for the efforts

<sup>77</sup> Riitta Oittinen, “Historiaa jokanaiselle. Tyyni Tuulio”. *Oma pöytä* 2005, 161–202.

<sup>78</sup> Tuulia (Tyyni Tuulio), “Hengen ravinto ei ole kortilla”. *Kotiliesi* 12/1949, 309.

<sup>79</sup> Tuulia, “Minna Canth koulutiellä”. *Minna Canth 1844 – 19.III. – 1944*, 33. See also Tuulia, “Naisellisia kirjoituspöytiä”. *Kotiliesi* 3/1935, 92.

<sup>80</sup> “Keskustelu Minna Canth ja me”. *Naisten Ääni* 5/1944, 73. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>81</sup> Martta Salmela-Järvinen, “Kuuden kerho”. *Minna Canth 1844 – 19.III. – 1944*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> See e.g. Mervi Kaarninen and Tiina Kinnunen, “Naisvaikuttajien sota”. *Sodassa koettua. Yhdessä eteenpäin*. Edited by Martti Turtola et al. Weilin+Göös, Helsinki 2009, 8–22.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. Seija Aunila, *Kuinka naistenlehdessä tuli osa sotapropagandaa. Naisihanteen muodostuminen ja muokkautuminen Kotiliesi-lehdessä toisen maailmansodan aikana*. JYU Dissertations 269. Jyväskylän yliopisto 2020, passim.

<sup>84</sup> E.g. Helle Kannila, “Olisiko syytä lakata puhumasta naisasiasta?”. *Naisten Ääni* 6/1935, 83–84.

women made for the nation. Helle Kannila, who gave a speech during the main event, described Canth’s women’s rights agenda as “religiously, philosophically, pedagogically, nationally, and economically” thought out: “It was founded on the belief that by training women to be capable of leading society, we are fostering a victory of truth, liberty, love, and peace in the world.”<sup>85</sup> I would interpret the referral to leading positions to point to women’s organizations’ and female politicians’ criticism of how women were “consciously and deliberately”<sup>86</sup> overlooked in both restoration work during the interim peace (1940–1941), as well as decision-making during the wars (Winter War 1939–1940 and Continuation War 1941–1944). Female MPs across parties, for example, campaigned the country’s leaders for a female minister – unsuccessfully. The criticism of overlooking women also included worry for the development of equality and democracy after the wars. This criticism was very openly voiced in *Naisten Ääni*, for example, but also, I suggest, indirectly, by highlighting Minna Canth’s lifework.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

The history culture built around Minna Canth, examined in this article from the early twentieth century until 1944 covered a period that began soon after her death and ended in the centennial anniversary of her birth. This period was part of a national project with which the national identity was reinforced and the way for the future paved. Because of her gender, Canth was an exception in a national canon of male heroes. At the same time, nurturing Canth’s memory was part of an international feminist history culture that was building a catalogue of history’s Great Women. This endeavor needed active participants, memory communities, in order to continue and hand down the tradition. In my article, I illuminate Finnish Women’s League’s role as such a community, and within it especially Hilja Vilkkemaa’s and Helle Kannila’s significance as activists dedicated to Canth’s memory. They built upon the foundation that Lucina Hagman created. I also highlight how the feminist history culture built around Canth held within it elements of the different forms of remembering, conceptualized by Maria Grever. Biographical descriptions were written of Canth, her memory was cherished at different events, especially on her birthday, and with the statue, the respect for her was cast in bronze. These different forms supported one another. For example, the meanings associated with the statue had to be explained, and therefore the writings surrounding the statue were an essential part of the statue

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<sup>85</sup> Helle Kannila, “Naisliikkeen tervehdys”. *Naisten Ääni*, April 1944, 51–52. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>86</sup> Hedvig Gebhard, “Älä taivu! Nouse! Pyri eteenpäin!”. *Naisten Ääni*, June 1940, 50. Trans. Mamane.

<sup>87</sup> Kinnunen 2018.

project. The radio programs broadcasted on Canth's memorial days were planned to spread the message of her exemplarity effectively.

At the heart of the history culture was the portrayal of Canth as a force for advancement and equality who fought for the rights of not only her own gender, but of others who had been overlooked as well. The force associated with her was not, however, portrayed as manly, but rather motherly, and Canth, alongside her followers, was therefore associated with the transnational discourse cherished by the women's movement of the contribution that specifically women had in developing society. Canth's greatness was not only associated with her abilities, but also with her ethical backbone, her readiness to make sacrifices for the good of others. By focusing on these aspects and by repeating them in writing and on the radio, a narrative was built of Canth's greatness. The statue with its materiality also built on this interpretation on its part.

Given that the meanings given to the past are typically contested ones, it is noteworthy that the values and meanings linked to Canth that were conveyed through history culture did not change during the period under examination. In addition, the meanings did not vary significantly because the agenda of Canth's followers – several women's organizations and individuals – was a shared one. At the foundation is Lucina Hagman's interpretation of Minna Canth as a tireless defender of women's rights and a society based on high morals. This interpretation was not untrue, but it was selective. Until 1944, women were demonstrably disadvantaged in a way that could be rectified with the use of Minna Canth's life. The wartime (1939–1944) brought on different emphases, but the gist was the same. For example, the mental exhaustion that Canth suffered from and that interests our time did not fit the story of her as an “exemplary soldier”. Neither did women activists address her as a sexual being, as do present day descriptions.<sup>88</sup>

Memory is compelling – the history culture built around Minna Canth was based on this fundamental principle. My examination portrays the significance that emotions have for constructing and maintaining a history culture – in this case, a feminist history culture. As an identity community that created a shared female “us”, the Canth community – Finnish Women's League at its center – was based on not only information, but on admiration, gratitude, and respect for the work and the sacrifices that were associated with Canth. The memory community also included an intergenerational element, as the memory also compelled the retelling of Canth's life work to future generations in the spirit of admiration, gratitude, and respect. The obligation has endured in the 2020s, however with some shifts. When cracks – signs of human imperfection – are introduced to the story of the great woman, the story is even more compelling.

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<sup>88</sup> E.g. Minna Rytisalo, *Rouva C. Gummerus*, Helsinki 2018.