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Heritage as a Cornerstone in Aristocratic Lifestyles

Landowning, Family Manors and Artefacts as Means of Maintaining Noble Credibility in Finland

When considering the emphasis on heritage by noble families in Finland, a remark about the Nobility order, landowning and the merging of rural nobles and urban nobles must be made. The Nobility in Finland has had its own institutions to turn to since the founding of a House of Nobility of its own in 1818, under the new Russian order, and its manifestation in a building erected between 1857 and 1862 in neo gothic style. In this House of Nobility the Noble stand of the Finnish “Lantdag”, a Reichstag for the Finnish Grand Duchy, met from 1863 to 1907 when there was a change to a single chamber Parliament. Since 1858 also a Calendar of the Nobility has been yearly published, where all the different families of the Nobility, the “Ritterschaft und Adel”, are presented. All in all 357 families have belonged to The House of Nobility but today there are only 148 still continuing in the male line. The modern House of Nobility was founded in 1918 in a “Ritterschaftsordnung”, that was sanctioned by the head of the state in this troublesome year in the then independent Finland.

This nobility that was the cornerstone of the of the civil and military administration in Finland after 1809 had a gripe over the administration and later also of the industrial world due to its contacts, education and language skills. But all through the 19th Century landowning, as a traditional form of caring for the ancestral home, was also a way of maintaining power at the local level. The manorial districts in Finland are situated in the south and southwest, where as in the inner part of Finland that had small manors in the 19th Century, the nobles lost them to rising bourgeois families and farmers of peasant origin already in the middle of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. In the period from the independence of Finland to the late 1940s two landowning reforms struck the manors and diminished them. In 1918 the crofters or tenant small holders liberation made the crofters legitimate owners of their small plots. Over 46.500 crofters used their right to buy their plots. A similar land assignment was the result of the legislation after World War II. Then a population of 200 000 evacuated Karelians that had lost their land to the Soviet Union were assigned land, a great proportion of which was legally taken from great

landowners. As all these reforms were the results of parliamentary decisions the transfer did not give rise to any resistance. Some strategies by the landlords kept the manors more intact than it otherwise could have happened. Adoptions and wills meant new noble owners to possessions that included several manors, and land bought in northern Finland and distributed to Karelians meant that southern manors could stay intact. Nevertheless the land transfers of 1918 and 1947 induced heavy losses on many manors. Still, the manorial system in Finland stayed relatively stable and only selling out in the 1970s made noble landowning increasingly scarce. Today most of noble landowning consist of a local way of life with its own distinguishing traits of culture. Some nobles are still commuters, with a career in urban centres and landowners with the manor as a second home. Most of the manors in Finland have over time found new owners and many now function as congress seats, museums, guesthouses and official buildings.

Now a manor with its original family still living on the site, is a cause for wonder and also of considerable interest to the outside world.. This puts the owners in a position between the private and public, where everyone owning a manor is also looked upon as a representative of this, by Finnish standards, very remote and even mysterious, but ever so fascinating group. With less than 150 families the nobility as a group has no real power but that which comes through networks and a distinctive culture and it can be said that nobility has turned into a lifestyle and different “family cultures” that are reproduced in many different ways (Lönnqvist 2007, 295). My searchlight will be on the latest thirty years, the beginning of which saw some important historical and ethnological works published in which manors and nobility are in focus. Since then many more popular books on estates and for instance a book called Food on manors have been published. In antiquity and lifestyle magazines manors and their owners are regularly presented in a romantic slight in the same ways as many Finnish films have done (Åström 1989, 185-194). Manors and the manorial lifestyle is as such part of the national memory although they are in possession of only a happy few.

For them the manors and their possessions engage the question of collective memory. I will in my paper address this question out of the premises that the past can not be preserved as such but a group can preserve and revive collective memories especially when there are buildings and

objects that evoke them (Lönnqvist 2007, 15, Radley 1991, 52)

Manors are condensed places for commemorating the life of their families through the buildings themselves and through all the material artefacts that they contain. For the owners they are part of the collective memory of their own group, containing and expressing very special meanings that may not be discernable from outside. Here many objects are arranged in order that they may help to remember the past that go beyond the immediate memory of the persons then surrounded by these objects. The artefacts help to make sense of a very long continuity. As markers of temporal change they may go beyond centuries, which is not that common in the world outside, museums apart.

But in the homes of nobles the artifacts are not only artefacts of a distant past but as Alan Radley has emphasised even more arranged to *embody categories and thereby mark out the object's significance* (Radley 1991, 47). Old pieces of furniture and a special arrangement of them may point out specialities that may even differ from that of the high bourgeois (Åström 2007). Radley also points to the status of objects as vehicles for remembering, as a matter of social definitions, and the framing of some artefacts as mementos, some of historic interest and others which remain only functional (Radley 1991, 56). It is the relation or constellation of all these dimensions that differ in manors and differ in families with the collection of things on manors compared to owners of artefacts in other social categories

As memorabilia artefacts may evoke very different senses of time and place, which for the owners are part of their everyday life, but which for visitors from the outside world must be translated into a narrative that makes sense and exhibits some of the meanings of the objects. In the manors there are many cases of special artefacts - 'object to be remembered by' - by which the past can be read and understood, but they will mean that the objects also for the owners have had to be explained so that they can be explained further. This is so because objects do not give themselves to a given interpretation or to the same interpretation of all of us. Many of the objects in a manor may be of a kind that visitors have never seen. But in the collective group of the landowning nobility most objects have their counterparts in many other noble homes and thus a

special of collective memory has been developed and consciously elaborated and this can serve as a foundation also for a collective identity. The memory of this noble group may be different from the memory of other social groups, since they might mean a special way of looking and talking about the past. Remembering in this class is thus through the artefacts formed “naturally” to encompass long historical periods. The artefacts also form a basis for what is memorable or worthy of collection or recollection (Radley 1991,47).

Two more remarks on the speciality of manors as ‘receptoirs’ of memory must be mentioned. Firstly: the manors are in themselves arranged for the purpose of bringing out the history of the owners. In this way the family is put in a distinct position in society that tells about wealth, power and a glorious or at least comfortable past. The narratives that are presented are also arranged, not only for the sake of the story itself but also, as if a pact had been signed that the owner of today shall display the history of the family in a certain way. This past seems to oblige them to do so and they are thus part of a special myth and ideology in which the buildings and objects are significant images (Radley 1991, 47-52).

My paper will now concern itself with immediate meetings, when the history of the manors and their owners are on display, that is to say how manor owners, persons of noble families handle a mediating position when meeting the public and displaying their manors or their possessions that have a commemoration system of their own. For an ethnologist the sources are found in the field. My main sources stem from taking part in several visits to manors in southern Finland (Laboratorium för folk och kultur 3/2005) , but also to some remaining manors in eastern Finland, in assisting in the publications about the history of some of these same manors and in interviewing landowners in the 1980s (Sirén 1980 and Sirén 1985) . Concerning the other part of my paper my sources stem from catalogues and visits to the exhibitions planned and erected in the House of Nobility by a group of noble women since the 1990. I have also been able to discuss with some of them.

The most important sign of nobility is the noble name and its history. Managing a family estate seems to be an obligation and a source of pride for many nobles. In the manor lies the history of

the family in a much more obvious way than for instance in the graveyards. When manor owners show their manors they have thus a setup than can and is put to use in their narratives. It is the manor that will be shown, but when the guide is the owner of the house it has its private touch, that translates the narratives also to a self-presentation. I will concentrate on *what* is shown, *how* family history is presented and *in what context* the narration is put. My examples are taken from the district of Nyland and manors are: Fagervik owned by the von Frenckell family, Sarvlax, once a domain of the von Born family, Tervik, the owners of which are the Ehrnrooth family and Svartå, a large estate, that was owned by the Linders, lost by the family but bought back and restored in the 1985. Additionally I have information from the Grotenfelt family complexes, through relatives of mine. Their manors are in the Savo district of Eastern Finland - the district which was in the centre of my dissertation some years ago.

In narrative analyses personal narratives are said to bring out some points in the life history of the person while simultaneously strengthening his or hers identity. Narratives have their way of starting and ending and consist of many high points and sequences along the act of narrating. I choose to discuss a variant in which the life history of the manor is in focus and the identity question is somewhat problematic.

Usually the guiding of groups starts with an introduction in front of the main building. Thus the owner, usually the heir, gives an overview of the history of the manor through its owners. The proprietor knows the whole list of owners by heart and is able to put the owners, their contribution to Finnish history and to local history in their proper context. The history of Sweden of which Finland was a part until 1808 and the Russian era passes by as he recapitulates. Some famous or notorious owner is usually brought into light, perhaps the one that built the house or some whose national reputation is great. These owners are attached to and form the mementos of the family. They can be highlighted also by some artefact. The building as an artefact itself also functions as the 'receptoir' of the family at least from the time the building was built. Usually also former main buildings are mentioned that give the history even longer roots.

As in the case of Sarvlax, where the coat of arms of the Creutz family figures in the front, such

emblems are always referred to. In this case the last owner of the von Born family divided and bequeathed all his land to twelve different heirs and the main building to the Swedish literary society in Finland but ordered that some member that would represent the family should always live on the estate. While living there, the manor would be alive in the same ways as if the owners continued to own it. Here the formula is thus the same as in some other manors. Inside the building three stories of large rooms display the reception facilities in different historical styles and in one room portraits representing all the relevant owners are being exposed. The mistress of the house knows all of them and from her instructive narrative one gets the impression that they are also fond relatives of hers, that also can be looked upon with humour. Thus the personal and the official merges.

Another noble owner displays the fact that with ownership he gets a still stronger hold on history when he can relate to the position of heir. A second example takes us to Fagervik where the young owner thus, himself farming his land, has a much more relaxed view of the history of his house built in the middle of the eighteenth century. He also puts the history of his manor Fagervik in its economic and historical context (built around an ironwork), tells about the famous kings that had visited the estate, and of the deeds of other ancestors. But he is also able to inform on the land seizures and the cultivation of land today. Here the tour started in the village church where he told that the people of the manor and the neighbourhood still meet at Christmas, but, as it is impossible to get a priest there, he himself performs the sermon. When passing through the fine salons and chambers he instructs the visitors to view certain historically and culturally relevant objects and with great pride takes us to the library where old books, maps and charts are on display. Only a glimpse is allowed of the more private quarters.

Our third example takes us to Tervik, owned by a branch of the Ehrnrooth family, one of the noble families in Finland that still also possesses economic power. This family must rely on the produce of the manor. It is an exceptional manor in that it houses so many antiquities. From the outside it is certainly interpreted as a museum. Here the historical weight of every object is evident, but as there are artefacts in such an abundance, even the guide heiresses cannot on a short visit, although performing very instructively, do justice to the treasures. Here the noble history is quite

astonishing and from a certain point of view it can be felt as a burden. Apart from the portraits and pieces of furniture small vitrines have been installed where some objects of special worth are exhibited. They have been removed from their natural surroundings but form a memento of a lifestyle perished long ago. One can find a similar kind of exposition in the public hanging of samplers - 'imparaticci'. These small pieces of cloth with monograms and cross-stich symbols that were formerly kept in the drawers of noble women are today decorative pictures on the walls.

My last example is the large estate of a former mill owned by the Linder family. The estate was lost to the family for sixty years but was re-bought in 1985, when all buildings and the park were restored with reverence although changed into a hotel and restaurant. The main building was however preserved as a museum. Here the whole complex is shown as a heritage site especially elevating the beauty of the place but also the lifestyle of noble owners. An antiquity fair that is yearly held here underscores the weight of antique artifacts.

On many manors there are also small museums of artefacts with a more mundane character such as kitchen utensils. If there is enough time the visitors can have a look at these, or some garden pavilions or even a play house with instructive toys. When the visitor-guests are offered coffee or some other refreshments it is done in a very elegant way and in elegant settings.

With these examples - my account is based on seven more and a comparison from a similar tour in Sweden when twelve manors were visited last autumn - my aim has been to show that the exteriors and interiors of the houses form a background from which noble distinction points to the past, the history of each family, a lifestyle gone and a distinct but for visitors hidden everyday life of today. The members of the noble families are in their presence part of the manor, exponent of their families and guides to their distant pasts. The personal relation to this background differs according to person, but the active formula that is being used in the narratives underscore historical facts and wide views concerning the position of the manors. The narratives always have a positive touch according to the pact I mentioned. The buildings and artefacts function as a proof that the narrations are true at the same time as the narrations install the artefacts with

meaning. Through anecdotes of some relatives a distance to the noble life is established and a more personal attachment at the same time expressed. A strange social and cultural universe is exhibited with the aim of presenting a part of the cultural history of this social group but also of the region. The identity question concerning these noble guides is as I said problematic. The guide takes the role of a guide at the same time as being an exponent of the story that is told.

When moving to the next part of my paper we are still focussing on objects, but now on objects temporarily displaced and taken out of context. Since 1990 a committee of mostly noble women have planned and organised some fifteen exhibitions in the House of Nobility. These exhibitions in Helsinki are very popular and for some weeks gather a large public. The exhibitions are founded on objects borrowed from noble and bourgeois families with the aim of exposing goods that relate to the cultural history of these social segments but also the material culture from by gone days. The exhibitions have been ordered by different principles; according to kind of material, such as copper, brass, glass and wooden chairs, or to different themes such as historical epochs of furnishing, artefacts exemplifying “beauty, style and vanity” or the high points in life cycles, such as christenings and weddings. A common theme has also been different modes of laying the table with porcelain from different epochs and of different kind such as coffee and tea utensils.

What is characteristic of all these exhibitions is that they define the traditional spheres of women of noble stand, large households, large families, large repertoires of things and a variety of themes whereby women have been in a position to organise family life.

The important thing here is that these selections, arrangements according to different principles and labelling practices, bring about the way members of the nobility want to expose their culture. Firstly the exhibitions rely totally on artefacts that formerly have been private and hidden. When made public in this way it seems to me that the aim is to show the history of the nobility in another way than the public guiding tours do. The exhibitions bring out the everyday life and the festive life of former times. When the artefacts are labelled very precisely, so that one gets to know from which family they stem, the age and history of the artefacts, the aim is also to present

the material life of the nobility and gentry in a very concrete way. The exhibitions do- as do the guiding tours - point to the high awareness of the cultural and historical values that are inherent in all these object. But it is the arrangement that gives the artefacts their meaning in this new context. We can secondly stress the surrounding, in the House of Nobility they are still under the noble patronage. The partakers have not given up their belongings to a second or official part. Thus the context is in a way preserved. The artefacts do in a way form new 'alliances', instead of being on display in the homes of each different family.

According to Georg Simmel the nobility is at the same time *a sociological form of community* of individuals that in themselves and as members constitute this enclosing circle and a *very concrete conglomerate of persons*, the noble name and descent being the decisive criteria (Simmel 1958, 545). He has further stated that nobility also means "to have it better" (besser haben), as if the nobility, stemming in the past can cast a good shadow on the descendants that thus also can have it better. And furthermore the noble person also gets influenced by what has been the best and the most precious and he or she is even bestowed by this which has been good and prestigious in the nobles that lived before him, but also in those who live beside him and even after him! Nobility would thus be something that is shared in this circle.

It seems to me that the practise of these exhibitions are in some curious way a kind of manifestation of this principle of Simmel. Artefacts and the fabricated or arranged environment are always there also as a tangible expression of the basis from which one remembers, the material aspect of the setting which justifies the memories constructed (Radley 1991,49). It is thus not only the objects that are put on display but also their bases or the special categories that inform when and how to use the objects. It is as if the objects form what the Hungarian ethnologists Edith Fél and Tamás Hofer has named a population of objects. A population of objects encircles the lifestyle in which they are or have been used. The patina they have give them something extra (McCracken 1988, 23). But it is also as if the exhibited things in one exhibition - but also in the exhibitions together - are keys to the forms of order to which they have been subject in marking them out as significant (Radley 1991, 52), worthy of preserving and thus now leading to functioning as reservoirs to use. This form of order refers to the ways in

which the world of things is or has been arranged. The very concrete artefacts function as keys to this sociological form of noble lifestyle. The significance of the past can thus be used for significant exhibitions today and in the future.

The exhibitions are arranged by a small group of noble women with their different networks. By using all of the networks together a vast 'receptoire' of potential goods that can be future loans to the exhibition has opened up. In the exhibitions the possessions exhibited are enriched. Every loan influences the other and so the artefacts bestow one another with their different and particular glory. The result is also cumulative. The exhibitions show that this group is able to renew itself and also that there is a plentitude of objects still to be shown. In the same way as the manors these possessions also take us to the different genealogies, the networks of the nobility and to the special social and cultural order that make up their lifestyle. The manors and the artefacts together shape images out of significant features of experiences in this noble group. The images have been shaped within the group and in my two examples of presenting the noble material heritage is still transmitted by the group itself. In this every manor and every object is a key to different noble family histories but also to a joint noble lifestyle

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