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# Changing Uses of Genealogical Research in Finland

Yrjö Blomstedt\*

(The following article by the eminent Finnish genealogical scholar, Dr. Yrjö Blomstedt, was published in the December 1991 issue of *Siirtolaisuus - Migration*, the journal of The Institute of Migration in Turku, Finland. While the article is beamed primarily to those interested in Finnish genealogy, Dr. Blomstedt's thesis should be of general interest to anyone working in Scandinavian genealogy. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author and the editors of the journal- Ed.).

The first written and extant authentic documents concerning Finnish history are quite young in comparison with other countries. They are from the beginning of the 14th century. Because of the scarcity of documentation we only have a few fragments of the genealogies of the medieval Finns. Some of the more imaginative historians have, of course, attempted to trace the origins of our ancient nobility back to the pagan chieftains of the Finnish tribes or to the Swedish crusades of Saint Erik and Saint Henry in the 12th century, I would say without any scientific reliability. There do not exist any genuine family genealogies from that time. Naturally, most people knew about their ancestors and relatives through several generations, but all this knowledge was not reduced to writing. It was stored as family tales and legends in the minds of older people. From this material, kept in the original or in copies, younger generations thus traced their genealogical pedigrees back to the old noble families.

The use of genealogy in the olden times was mainly concerned with legal matters. This was necessary in an age when one had to deal with forbidden alliances, barriers to certain marriages. The laws governing inheritance had its special provisions, which made it necessary to employ genealogical knowledge. In the beginning, the right to inheritance, was virtually unlimited. Thus when a family estate was sold, or for some other reason left the family, there existed the right of redemption for the nearest kinsman. In difficult disputes concerning inheritance, old men and women were considered the best witnesses before the court because their memories stretched far back in time, although very often they recounted old tales.

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When the continental notions and rules of the hereditary nobility penetrated the simply structured society in the far north, they contrasted sharply with an earlier freedom from duties, for those who fulfilled equestrian service. The privileges of the nobility were so advantageous, as for instance the exemption from paying land taxes, that a vast horde of men and widows attempted to enjoy this privilege without having to pay tax or performing service. When the male line became extinct, the maternal descendants of lower birth, claimed the rights of nobility, so as to be able to inherit the noble's estate. The continental manner of granting patents of nobility to distinguished persons and giving them letters of patent and a coat of arms was breaking the older system of service and counter-service. In 1569 King John III established the rules for the nobility, tightening the system and setting up certain limits. The institution of nobility became a registered corporation of ennobled and naturalized noble families. This notion of nobility required reliable genealogical pedigrees. This system had already made its appearance in the Reformation era and had been used there primarily for legal purposes.

When Gustavus Vasa assumed power there arose a practical reason for reliable genealogies. As a part of the Reformation, the king confiscated many of the old church estates and brought them under the Crown. The nobles wanted to share the loot. They claimed proprietary rights to such estates which had been donated to the Church as bequests and for certain expressed purposes. In Finland, the case that comes to mind was the bequest to the Church for a family member and her livelihood, as she entered the cloister of the Order of the Birgittines at Nådendal (Naantali). The sister in question had passed away decades before, but the cloister still kept the estate as a *proventa* for her. The claimants of such estates documented their rights with genealogical tables and pedigrees. On the other side, royal secretaries like the famous Rasmus Ludvigsson in the chancellery in **Stockholm**, collected genealogical evidence for the defense of the Crown. They worked very seriously on the medieval documents in order to get reliable knowledge of the family relations within the nobility. Most of these genealogies deal of course with Swedish families in Sweden, but in this material there is also a Finnish Family Book, *Finska Släktboken*, now in the genealogical collection of the Swedish National Archives. Genealogy as a research tool thus had a very practical use and its aims and purposes were to assist the judges and the courts in arriving at just and fair judicial decisions.

Genealogical research, however, has never been only and purely a practical one. To know the details, the background, to pursue knowledge to its highest fulfillment has always been a true pleasure in this field as well as in other areas. To nourish the endless human curiosity is also a great pleasure.

When the House of Nobles (*Riddarhuset*) was founded in Stockholm in the early part of the 17th century and its collections of genealogical pedigrees were being built up, use was often made of private amateur sources. The famous Finnish warlord, Colonel Axel Kurck, became known in his time as one of the best authorities on Finnish noble families and his intimate knowledge was of great help when the directors of the House of Nobles worked out the genealogies for the Finnish families. During the succeeding centuries genealogical research in Finland has progressed further so that today there are but a few gaps. As of the 1820s we

have our own House of Nobles, established when Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia, and one of the tasks of this institution was to carry on genealogical research, which it has done with much success. The great names in this field are Oscar Wasastjerna, Tor Carpelan and Jully Ramsay.

Now let us move from the nobility to the clergy. In 1660, the newly appointed bishop at Turku, the Swedish-born Johannes Elai Terserus, was on his first routine inspection journey through the northern parts of his diocese. Moving slowly from one manse to the other, he had time enough to notice how a major part of the clergy was related to each other, through strong and multiple ties of kinship. He discovered that a peasant living at the time of Gustavus Vasa, called Erik Ångerman Sursill, and residing in the village of Västerteg in Umeå Parish in northern Sweden, was the common ancestor of a vast offspring on the Finnish side of the Gulf of Bothnia, among them, nearly the entire clergy of Ostrobothnia. Terserus tried to write down all of the information he received. He was not only interested in genealogical matters. He had in mind the idea of writing an historical and topographical description of Ostrobothnia, with geographical and historical details, with lists of the clergy since the Reformation and short biographies of them. He wished to list the extraordinary events as well as the presence of antiquities in each parish. He wanted to write about the population and the geographical boundaries of each parish, its lakes and rivers, its roads and its significant events. This work was continued by others, but it remained unfinished, however, and without a final editing.

There was also a genealogical part in this manuscript, nowadays commonly known as *Genealogia Sursilliana*, but earlier as The Family Register of the Seven Sursill Sisters. During the following nearly 200 years it was subject to continuous emendation and up-dating. It is of course obvious that very soon there circulated different versions of the genealogical part of the manuscript among the Ostrobothnian clergy. Thus vicar Martinus Peitzius at Brahestad (Raahe) had the manuscript in his possession and after his death in 1727, his son, Gabriel Peitzius, curate at Kempele, who died already in 1752. He continued his father's work by means of a large correspondence with his colleagues. The scope of the manuscript was tripled in size through the work of the younger Peitzius. The next clergyman to add new generations and to revise the manuscript was the vicar at Pyhäjoki, Petter Niklas Mathesius, who died in 1772.

Already in 1766 there were plans afoot to publish the manuscript, but the printing plan was not fulfilled. Henrik Gabriel Porthan, professor of eloquence at the University of Turku and known as the “Father of Finnish History”, attempted in the beginning of the 1780s to have the manuscript prepared and ready for printing, but Johan Westzynthius, vicar at Pyhäjoki, successor and son-in-law of Mathesius, was not capable to bring the work to a proper end. Then at the end of the 1820s a young chaplain in Kalsjoki, Elias Robert Alcenius (he died as vicar at Lappfjärd in 1875) became acquainted with the Peitzius manuscript with the Sursill descendancy from 1747. The young man was suddenly bitten by the genealogical bug and then used almost twenty years to accomplish the task and prepare the manuscript. *Genealogia Sursilliana* was published in 1850. It had about 300 subscribers and for the publisher it was not an economical disaster. Elias Robert Alcenius became “The Father of Finnish Genealogy”. Our great national philosopher, J.V.Snellman, wrote a highly critical and biting review in his newspaper. There was thunder and lightning - ironic as usual - when he told his countrymen that “there was no use for genealogy at all. It is simple and pure vanity”.

A hundred years before, Gabriel Peitzius, for his part, had already written that genealogical registers and tables are necessary instruments for historians, just as necessary as the chronology or the topographical knowledge of parishes and towns. History gets a great deal of light from the genealogies, and all other disciplines, useful and necessary for the common human society, are also illuminated by genealogy.. Porthan, the great historian, stressed the same things when describing the whole field of history and the task of his contemporary Finnish historians at the end of the 18th century. “We have to collect and bring together all noteworthy material into the store house at the present time, so that future historians will be able to write a Finnish national history”.

Snellman’s criticism of *Genealogia Sursilliana* produced no effect at all. He could not prevent the disease from spreading. In the 1870s genealogy was fully presentable as a science, when - the initiative was taken by the historian and archeologist Johan Reinhold Aspelin - the Finnish Antiquarian Society began to collect family registers from the so called learned public. The noble families were registered in the House of Nobles, but other members of the upper strata were so to say unregistered. In good Porthan tradition the Society collected about 500 pedigrees or genealogical surveys. From the 1890s onward the Society then published an alphabetical collection of more than 250 family histories from Aejmelaeus to Östuring. The editor was Axel Bergholm, a country town schoolmaster, who skilfully completed the collected genealogies. After Bergholm’s *Sukukirja Suomen aatelittomia sukuja* (Collected genealogies of Finnish Commoner Families) Atle Wilskman prepared a similar, and even more scientific collection called *Släktbok*, printed in Swedish. Such collections are being published even today.

The genealogical publications with their often fully descriptive biographies soon showed their usefulness as source material for history, particularly social history. The main stream of Finnish historical research tradition was until very recently directed toward social mobility, the structure of the four estates, that of nobility, clergy, burghers and farmers, as well as immigration and emigration. The historians have either used the same sources as the genealogists or they have found enough material for their conclusions in genealogical works. Despite Snellman's damnation of genealogy, the discipline has gained and preserved a position as one of the most important auxiliaries of history. We are even giving lectures in genealogy at our universities. The purpose of genealogy has primarily been to supply the historian with facts and thus to facilitate the understanding of our nation's past.

Of course, for many genealogy already at the beginning of the century was a considered also a hobby. a hobby. but a very respectable such. In 1917, when the Genealogical Society of Finland was founded, its rank and file was composed mostly of professors of history and other scientists. but in addition also a wide range of amateurs. The Society and especially its enthusiastic spokesman, Otto Durchman (who died in the 1950s) gained good results in trying to improve the possibilities for all people to practice this hobby. All of the parish registers of Finland (those containing births, marriages and deaths), from the earliest extant (i.e .from 1648) to ca. 1850, have been copied by hand. This unique collection of ca. 800 volumes are now kept at our National Archives. The Society has published sources of biographical character and has made it possible for its members to publish genealogical surveys and notices of interest. Apart from our Genealogical Society, for instance, the large General Register of Land Settlement in Finland has been published with State support, a useful combination of all taxation sources from the days of Swedish rule and an important source for all genealogists.

This was the status of Finnish genealogy up to the 1940s and 1950s. Two different factors changed the picture. The first thing was the enormous technical progress, for example, the microfilms, the microfiche and other modern technical equipment which has made it possible for the genealogical enthusiast to do his research at home and to get the results he wants without time-consuming correspondence with parish clergymen. All of the household examination rolls with personal data of all the people residing in the parish, but also births, marriages and deaths are today microfilmed. Thus genealogy as a hobby has all of a sudden become easier to do, faster and also more successful for the laymen to do.

But secondly, technical progress has also cooperated with the democratization of genealogy in Finland. Earlier when social mobility turned downward, genealogists doing pedigrees, like Axel Bergholm and Elias Robert Alenius, simply noted that this branch of the family had sunk down into the

proletariat, or that descendants of a certain branch were living as peasants in a certain parish, without supplying further genealogical information. In the postwar period ordinary common people began showing interest in their ancestors.

Perhaps this was due to a kind of seeking one's roots, lost for a while during the period of rapid urbanization and industrialization of society. Again, it might also be the result of additional leisure time and the fact that retired people nowadays have more opportunities to practice a pleasant hobby than in earlier generations. The fact remains, however, that the microfilm rooms in our archives are massively crowded by genealogists, who are busy at their machines from the opening hour to the closing bell. Most of these people have a lively interest in finding their roots, but there are also those with greater ambitions and very large research programs. For them the pastime has become almost a second profession or passion.

I have a vivid memory of the astonishment among elderly half-professional genealogists, when we at the end of the 1940s published a genealogical survey of a very interesting peasant family with several branches which had risen high in the learned strata. They asked me and my fellow researcher, Heikki Soininvaara: - "Who could be interested in the common people"? And the astonishment was still greater when in 1949 in the same collection of pedigrees, I published the Stenvall family, the family of our great national novelist and playwright Aleksis Kivi (1834-1872). We were told that for a period of two hundred years this family had clearly been a part of a landless working class family, while the pedigree collections were aimed at the upper and middle class families.

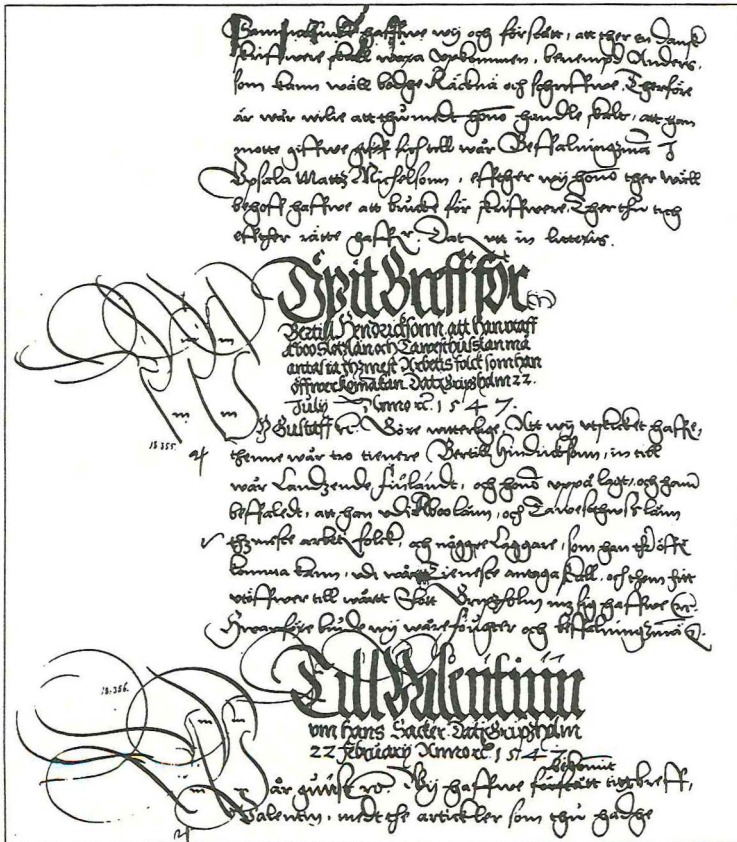
Times have changed and so have the people. Today in Finland the majority of the genealogical research done, and its published results, deal with the common families. The social mobility upwards has been enormous in the last decades and most people have lost contact with their past and their birth places. They have to seek lost and forgotten ancestors in order to discover their real roots so as to find an important part of their own identity.

The genealogist today is no longer seeking a golden pedigree. Most kings, princes and others of that ilk have today thousands and perhaps millions of descendants. An adult living today has about 30,000 and even more ancestors living at the time of Christopher Columbus. Genealogy from this point of view is a very egalitarian discipline. Realizing this, we can say that modern genealogy is more interested in where and how the past generations lived and worked, rather than just to know their biological dates. The genealogist, whether a male or a female, has enlarged the field and has shown more and more interest in the social history of his or her ancestor.

The number of active researchers has increased enormously and modern technology with instant data processing has made finding one's ancestors almost

too easy. There are even more genealogists ready to help foreigners find their Finnish ancestors.

Genealogical research has certain constants, necessary and useful in every single case. Here there has been no change since *Genealogia Sursilliana* or since Axel Kurck. But across the centuries each generation had found its own use for genealogy. First it was more or less a necessary tool for legal use, then it became an auxiliary tool for historians and today its an auxiliary tool for people who have lost their tradition and identity. Nowadays it is also an auxiliary tool in the field of genetics and medicine in the fight against hereditary diseases. But in all its various shifts, genealogy is still genealogy, and it will always keep its charm because its foundations are in the basic facts of human life: birth, reproduction and death.



Gripsholm, 22 February 1547. A letter in which Gustavus Vasa, King of Sweden, asks Bertil Henriksson to recruit labourers from Finland on the King's account. Swedish National Archives/Photo collections of the Institute of Migration.