

## **Arctic Wilderness in Zachris Topelius's Fairy Tale "Sampo Lappeli"**

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In Finnish literature, Lapland has long been depicted as a magical world where the normal laws of nature do not apply. The imaginary North is an Arctic realm of darkness, and its descriptions are comparable to those of the exotic, myth-infused tropics. The Finnish literary tradition that viewed Lapland as a far-away, fabled region was strongly influenced by the Romantic nationalist and Christian fairy tales of Zachris Topelius (1818–1898) – especially by one of his best-known stories, “Sampo Lappelill: En saga från Lappland” (1860, “Sampo Lappeli”).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I explore the tale's description of Arctic wilderness and its literary and cultural roots, along with the connection between the mythical journey described in the story and the contemporaneous attempts to Christianize Lapland.

Zachris Topelius's stories put Finnish fairy tales on a par with international children's literature. Topelius is one of the earliest Finnish authors, best remembered for his eight-volume fairy tale collection *Läsning för barn* (1865–1898, (Reading for Children) and for the textbook *Boken om vårt land* (1875, (A Book of Our Land), which maps out the Finnish provinces, people and history and was read in schools for close to a century. After the 1850s, his works played a significant role in the national awakening that led to Finland's independence in 1917. In both his textbooks and literary works, he viewed nature as an integral part of the Finnish identity and his name has become almost synonymous with the Finnish national landscape, that northern wilderness governed by lakes and forests that lies just south of the Arctic region. As in many other countries, Finnish national identity was built in relation to the wilderness, which Topelius believed to be the source of Finnish feelings of nationality, poetry and fairy tales (see Lassila 1997, 66–68).

The German Romanticism represented by H. C. Andersen, which both admired folk tales and promoted the art fairy tale as a genre suitable for adults, constitutes the roots of Topelius's fairy tale poetics (Lehtonen 2001, 14). Topelius was drawn to the marvellous and irrational, such as common superstition, and towards that part of the psyche that during Romanticism became known as the night side (Lehtonen 2001, 327). At the time, as cultural geographer John Rennie Short (1991, 6, 21) illustrates, the fear of wilderness – which finds expression, for example in European folklore, in depictions of wilderness as a magical or supernatural place – provided a framework for a new kind of description of the psyche. The conscious and the unconscious, the day and night sides of the mind, became parallel to the

division between tamed and wild nature. Accordingly, in literature, and even in Lapland literature of the early twentieth century, wilderness often functions as a metaphor for a mental landscape within which a person struggles with inner demons.

Andersen's "Sneedronningen" (1845, "The Snow Queen") is one of the first fairy tales to describe an Arctic landscape, and it probably inspired Topelius to write tales about Finnish Lapland. Of the fairy tales Topelius set in an Arctic environment, the most widely read and best known is "Sampo Lappelil", in which a struggle between a small boy and a gargantuan mountain troll reaches biblical proportions. The protagonist, Sampo, is an archetypal child saviour, whose journey away from the safety of his community serves the common good: as the child returns from his journey, he brings with him a social change, Christianity, that saves the entire community (see Byrnes 1995, 8). Topelius's tale of enlightenment and Romantic nationalism can be seen as a national development story or history in which the small boy's journey into the Arctic wilderness leads to the decline of paganism in Lapland. Thus, Topelius attempts to incorporate pagan Lapland into the blessed homeland and nature. In this respect, his underlying Christian-based national ideology could be regarded as a form of colonialism.

### **Do you know who the Lapps are? The nature and inhabitants of the Arctic wilderness**

Until the end of the nineteenth century, Lapland's wilderness remained relatively unfamiliar to Finns. The region was known mainly through colourful and exotic descriptions in travel literature. It was typical of early travel literature, whose primary purpose was to entertain a large readership, that facts and imagination blended together – many scientists incorporated literary ingredients in their descriptions. For example, in *Laplandsresa år 1732* (1811, *Lachesis Lapponica: Or, A Tour in Lapland*) Carl von Linné described Lapland as a mythical land of the river Styx, as the Underworld whose inhabitants even poets could hardly have described. It was also common that a writer had never visited Lapland's wilderness himself: for example, Johannes Schefferus's classic *Lapponia* (1673, *Lapponia: id est regionis Lapponum et gentis nova et verissima description*) was mainly based on the stories of local clergymen.

Even Topelius's *Boken om vårt land* (Ch. 16, 61), a textbook of great cultural significance, borrowed most of its descriptions of Lapland from the first volume of M. A. Castrén's travel book *Nordiska resor och forskningar* (1852, *Nordic travels and research*). Castrén's shocked reaction to the untamed elements of the bleak north and its inhabitants is at times manifest in his depictions. Even though Topelius relies on Castrén's stories, he softens

them and adds a description of the Sami, or the Lapps as they were then called, as being content despite the harsh conditions: “He [a Sami] considers himself happy and rich; he would not exchange his mountains for a Paradise on Earth” (Ch. 61).<sup>2</sup> Even the very first description of Lapland, i.e. Tacitus’s *Germania* (98, *Germania*), attaches a similar motif of Arcadia to descriptions of Lapland, with its tales of the poor and primitive Fennians who live happily, safe from both people and gods, in the midst of the unrelenting forces of nature.

The description of a northern paradise in *Boken om vårt land* is preceded by “Sampo Lappelil”, which begins with the narrator guiding the reader to a wondrous land of light and darkness. Lapland is described as “a nightcap” drawn over the very northern tip of Finland, as though it were a land of dreams. This description clearly follows the many discourses that create Otherness that are now connected with Arcticism: the distant region is depicted as strange and an almost otherworldly realm, where even the seasons do not follow the customary laws of nature (Ryall, Schimanski and Wærp 2010, x). The literary descriptions of northern nature and people are intermingled with the textbook-like and didactic features that are typical of Topelius’s works:

There was once a Lapp and a Lapp woman. The Lapps are a people who live north of the Swedes, the Norwegians, and the Finns, far, far up in the north. They have neither fields, nor real forests, nor regular houses, but only great barren bogs and high mountains, and small huts which they crawl into through a hole. The country of the Lapps is strange. Half the year it is light most of the time, for the sun never sets in the middle of summer, and the other half of the year it is dark most of the time, and the stars shine all day in winter. [...] The place was barren and wild, but the Lapp and his wife felt sure that nowhere on the whole earth could you see such white snow, such clear stars, and such beautiful Northern Lights as at Aimio. There they had built themselves a hut such as Lapps usually live in. No large trees grew in that region – only slender birches, that were more like bushes than trees – so where could they get wood for a house? (“Sampo Lappelil,” 105–106)<sup>3</sup>

The land described by outsiders as barren and wild is a most beautiful place to its inhabitants. Even the Lapp hut – its primitiveness frequently a cause of horror in travel literature of the time – is later characterized as “pretty and warm” from the point of view of its residents (“Sampo,” 107). Still, grimmer aspects can also be identified in the northern panorama: the narrator portrays a landscape of useless soil, of bogs and of stunted birches. In travel literature, the Arctic wilderness was frequently described as dark, barren and dangerous, a useless mess outside of culture and civilization. Before Romanticism, which looked for

authenticity and paradise in untouched nature, the wilderness represented a wasteland to be tamed. Nature outside of civilization meant danger, and it only gained significance or value from cultivation, from the touch of a human hand (see Short 1991, 5, 168). Similarly, Topelius's fairy tale reproduces the notion of the worthlessness of the wilderness: there is no land to be cultivated nor are there trees fit for building decent houses.

The meanings of the landscape that unfold in the fairy tale become clearer if Lapland's wild wasteland is considered within the broader context of the author's works, which are suffused by a nationalistic ideology that mixes Lutheran belief and nature mysticism. According to Pertti Lassila (2000, 67–69), even though Topelius's works situate the Finnish spirit and identity within the silence of the wilderness, untouched nature is not considered valuable in the way it is in Romanticism, but is instead presented as if it were God's tool for building and enriching a nation. For example, the fairy tale "Huru Gud skapade Finland" (1891, How God created Finland) rewrites Genesis and practically preaches to children that it is God's will that the "unkempt" wilderness should be turned into a "pleasure garden": "When you see something wretched, dilapidated and uncared for, try to fix it and make it decent" (Topelius 1891/1947, 211). Fulfilling this Christian duty is thus a prerequisite for the growth and wealth of the nation: "It is through you that your country shall progress in all things good, it is through you that it shall be elevated into a garden in God's honour and for the joy of people" (Topelius 1891/1947, 211). Cultivating the wilderness into a garden is, according to Short (1991, 13), one of Christianity's most enduring metaphors: the Bible has made the garden a symbol of human achievement and moral struggles.

In the tale of Sampo Lappelil, the promise of wealth and happiness is contained within a boy born in the poor and useless wilderness. As is common in folk tales, Sampo's destiny is to rise in society. His father predicts that the child will "become the king of the Lapps, and reign over thousands of reindeer and fifty Lapp huts" ("Sampo," 108). *Nomen est omen*; in other words, Sampo bears the sign of wealth in his name:

The man and the woman had a little boy whose name was Sampo, and that means "luck" in Lapland. But Sampo had two names.<sup>4</sup> Once some strange gentlemen in great fur coats had come and stayed in the hut. They had with them little hard, white pieces of snow, such as the Lapp woman had never seen before, which they called "sugar." They gave Sampo a few pieces of the sweet snow and they patted him on the cheek and said: "Lappelil! Lappelil" which means "little Lapp." They could not say anything else, for they could not talk Lapp. And then they travelled away farther north to the Arctic Ocean and the northernmost point of Europe which is called the North Cape. ("Sampo," 107–108)

As the narrator reveals, the boy's name refers to a mythical item often associated with the North, called 'sampo', a magical cornucopia which appears, for example, in the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* (1849) and which has been connected, in its various manifestations, with wealth, fertility and well-being as well as agrarian society in general and even the creation of the world. On the other hand, this creates a kind of double identity for the protagonist: even though Lapland's own Arctic cultural heritage is present in the name Sampo, the affectionate but belittling epithet "little Lapp" is given to the boy by men speaking a foreign language, on their way to the North Cape. According to Ilpo Tiitinen (1971, 86), the foreign men visiting Sampo's home are probably among the European gentlemen who travelled to Lapland from the eighteenth century onwards for purposes of science or leisure. Thus, as though a second omen, Sampo receives his second name from wealthy gentry.

"He was, however," as the narrator of the tale reminds us, "not christened yet, for at that time there was not a priest within a hundred miles" ("Sampo," 108). The motif of the boy's name and the Arcticism of the fairy tale combine colonialist and religious ideologies: christening was part of the colonialization of Lapland and, in the process, there was an effort to give the Sami people new, Christian and Finnish, names. Yrjö Varpio (1997, 78) even calls the time after the mid-nineteenth century in Finland a period of miniature colonialism when the attempt to find Finno-Ugrian people generated a great deal of travel literature, especially from around the Arctic Ocean. A strong spirit of missionary work prevails in these works, and consequently the North is presented as a missionary country much like Africa (Varpio 1997, 100–101). In some of these descriptions, the Sami people are considered a kindred tribe and in some they are the lesser stepbrothers to Finns; sometimes, even a distant kinship is denied. A similar ethos can be found in Topelius's fairy tale, which ends with Sampo's victory over Hiisi, the mountain troll, and thus with the beginning of a new era. As Short (1991, 6) points out, before the influence of Romanticism, the conquest of the wilderness not only meant a victory over the forces of darkness, but it was also a measure of social progress.

### **The child saviour's journey into the Arctic wilderness**

Before Sampo grows up and becomes wealthy, he must make a dangerous and archetypal journey into the wilderness in order to initiate personal and social change. In pre-Romantic literature, the wilderness is often depicted as a godforsaken wasteland that – as the devil's

home – represents both spiritual and physical dangers to those who travel there. Similarly, in folk tales, unreachable locales, such as mountains or the wilderness, often serve as the home of demons or gods (Haavio 1935, 342–343; Short 1991, 8). Topelius’s fairy tale draws from these narrative traditions: the reckless Sampo dreams of riding the mountain troll’s reindeer, whereas his mother warns him of the danger that lurks on the highest mountain of the wilderness: “It is just on Rastekais that the trolls are (...) there lives Hiisi, the great mountain king who eats a reindeer in a mouthful, and swallows boys like gnats” (“Sampo,” 110).

One day, Sampo harnesses his reindeer and runs off into the wilderness filled with wolves that his mother fears will prey on her unchristened child. As the boy travels towards Rastekais, the narrator asks the reader (or the listener to the tale), whether they have ever sung the children’s song “Spring min snälla ren” (1832, Run my kind reindeer): “Do you know the beautiful songs of the dear, good Bishop Franzén, whom all Sweden and Finland love, and have you ever seen the title page of the fourth volume of his songs?” (“Sampo,” 113).<sup>5</sup> The description of Sampo riding in his sled resembles a famous image printed in Frans Michael Franzén’s songbook *Skaldestycken* (1832, Poems). This iconic image of a Sami in a traditional sled pulled by a reindeer became the template for the later illustrations of both the story and the song. As Sampo rushes into the darkness of the wilderness on his sled, he hums the second verse of the song. Franzén’s lyrics include a metaphor of life as a journey as well as wolves as a synecdoche of the wilderness and/or the Devil:

Short is the day,  
The road is so long,  
Oh! Hark to my song  
Let us hurry away!  
The wolf pack lives here,  
Rest not, little deer! (“Sampo,” 114)

The lyrics – which Topelius later included in their entirety in *Boken om vårt land* – are an adaptation of a folk song published in Johannes Schefferus’s *Lapponia*. Unlike Schefferus, Franzén had travelled to Tornio. “Run my kind reindeer” is part of a more extensive poetic work, *Emili eller en afton i Lappland* (1802, Emili, or an Evening in Lapland), which was inspired by these travels. It describes a young pastor and his wife who move to Lapland’s wilderness and whose home forms an idyllic microcosm in the midst of untamed, rugged nature (Lassila 2000, 25). In Topelius’s fairy tale, the song also functions as an anticipation of Sampo’s social rise: in Franzén’s work, the song is part of an embedded narrative in which

a Sami boy, a noble savage, runs away from the circus to become a freedom fighter and finally a wealthy master after his return to his northern home.

Sampo's dreamlike journey through the mist takes an unexpected turn when the sled topples, the reindeer runs away and the boy is left helpless in the snow "in the dark night, in the midst of the desolate wilderness where no one lived for many miles around" ("Sampo," 115). Getting lost in the wilderness is a typical motif in fairy tales and the emptiness that spreads around Sampo, despite its Arctic features, can be described as a universal landscape of fear. Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, 19–20) argues that the metaphor of wilderness is so common in fairy tales because to a child the forest or wild nature represents danger and frightening strangeness in contrast to the cosy and safe world of the home – or the hut. The wide forest – or wilderness – is frightening because of its vastness which transcends a small child's field of experience, and thus represents a realm of abandonment, "a dark chaotic, non-world in which one feels utterly lost" (Tuan 1979, 20). Thus, Sampo feels homesick: "Ah, how gladly would he have been at home with his father and mother in the warm hut. But how should he get there?" ("Sampo," 115).

Tuan does not comment on the fact that descriptions of wilderness in adult literature often also include a sublime experience aroused by uncontrollable forces of nature, one that challenges human comprehension and blends together admiration, wonder and fear – even terror. Furthermore, the motif of losing one's spiritual foothold, featured in "Sampo Lappeli", is also popular, especially in pre-Romantic literature and later in Finnish literature about Lapland. For example, in pre-Romantic literature, like Dante's *La divina Commedia* (1308–1321, *The Divine Comedy*) or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the wilderness is a place where people get lost on their life's journey (Short 1991, 21). This tradition has its roots partly in the Bible's descriptions: the Israeli people stray during their desert pilgrimage when they cast a golden calf and, similarly, it is in the desert that Christ struggles against the Devil's temptations (cf. Short 1991, 10–12).

In the wilderness, Sampo dries his tears after being thrown off his sled and determinedly starts hiking towards Rastekais. On the way towards the gloomy mountain, he meets the highest master-wolf of the mountain king Hiisi. Surprisingly, the wolf does not eat the boy since a festival of the sun marking the end of the polar night is about to start on the mountain and during the festival no living being is allowed to harm another – however, the wolf promises to eat Sampo right after the festival has ended. Sampo travels to the mountains nestled among the bristles of the laughing beast, where he meets the lord of the mountain in his dark den. According to Maija Lehtonen (2002, 312), even though there is nothing

demonic about nature in Topelius's works, the description of Hiisi tells a different story. The creature sitting on top of the mountain is described as though organically growing and rising from Lapland's wilderness, as though he were a pagan personification of Arctic nature:

On his head he wore a cap of white snow-clouds; his eyes were like the full moon when it rises over the woods, his nose like a mountain top, his mouth like a mountain cleft, his beard like long icicles; his arms were as thick as the thickest fir-tree, his hands were like pine branches, and his legs were like coasting-hills in winter, and his great fur coat like a snow mountain. ("Sampo," 119)

The "halo" of northern lights shining around the head of the grim figure gives Hiisi a devilish aura that crackles and roars on the creature's brow so that it frightens the animals but spurs the trolls into cries of joy ("Sampo," 121). Topelius's *Boken om vårt land* (Ch. 95) mentions Hiisi as an ancient Finnish pagan god, "the god of pain and terror," who is kin to witches and lives in Hiitola between desolate mountains. The name Hiisi refers not only to the Devil but also to a pagan, stone idol cult of the Sami people that used large stones and mountain slopes as sacrificial places known as 'hiisi'. The trolls and brownies of the North who have gathered to celebrate the festival of the sun are described as though they were participating in a religious ceremony: "They had collected here [...] to worship the sun, as savages from fear worship the devil; for the trolls do not like the sun" ("Sampo," 120).

The trolls and beasts are said to love the darkness while other animals await the summer, which reflects the division between a nature that is wild and pagan and one that is tamed and blessed. Similarly, the description derives from a mythical model in which the sun and its light, and the goodness and warmth they represent, are a counterforce to Arctic nature or its personification (see Campbell 1988, 384). As the animals go wild with fear, Hiisi bellows that he loves the eternal winter and night, and so the contrast between light (God) and dark (the Devil) sharpens:

"The sun is put out! The sun is dead!" murmured all the animals, and a shiver went through all nature.

The trolls from the North Pole laughed so that their caps flew off, and the great mountain king raised his voice of thunder and called out over the wilderness: "So shall it be! So shall it be! The sun is dead. The whole earth shall fall down and worship me, Hiisi, the king of the everlasting winter and of everlasting night." ("Sampo," 122–123)

As Hiisi declares the sun dead, all of nature – the reflection of God in Topelius’s world – recoils in terror. This is also when Sampo’s role as an archetypal saviour and a Christ figure becomes clear. Sampo steps out from his hiding place and accuses Hiisi of being a liar, as though to deny the power of evil or the Devil himself. But, as Sampo denies the Devil, he also denies his own pagan background, and becomes the mouthpiece for the author’s Christian ideology. According to Alice Byrnes (1995, 26–27), it is typical for this kind of evangelical child character to serve as the voice of divine truths, and often to soften the hard hearts of adults. Sampo’s speech is followed by a divine intervention that nearly melts the icy Hiisi. The boy’s courage enrages the mountain troll, and he tries to grab Sampo, but just then the golden rim of the sun rises over the mountain and light erupts from the sky. The sun shines all the way into everyone’s hearts but blinds Hiisi, whose beard begins to melt into a running brook (“Sampo,” 124).

After the festival of the sun ends, Sampo escapes the mountain on the back of a golden-antlered reindeer pursued by beasts and Hiisi himself. This is an apocalyptic description: in early stories about golden-antlered reindeer, the mountain troll chases this mythical creature, and this has been interpreted as a description of the end of the world similar to the Book of Revelations. The golden-antlered reindeer is a solar animal in Sami beliefs; the gold of the reindeer’s antlers as it runs across the firmament refers to the light of the sun (Autio 1993, 17). Naturally, the golden-antlered reindeer tamed by Sampo can also be connected to Christian symbolism of the sun. The Christian message becomes evident when the boy flees to a priest’s house in the middle of the wilderness. The priest christens the boy and commands “the king of the night and winter” to retreat: “The sun of God’s grace shines over Sampo Lappelil, and he belongs not to you but to God’s kingdom!” (“Sampo,” 127). Even though Hiisi is furious and turns into a storm tearing at the cabin, in the morning the darkness subsides and the sun shines on the calm snowdrifts around the priest’s house: Sampo has been saved through christening.

### **It is said that the Lapps no longer put off christening**

Zachris Topelius’s fairy tale never tells the story of how Sampo Lappelil eventually becomes rich – the narrator declares that the tale would become too long. However, what is disclosed about the later developments in the life of the boy who saves all of Lapland is that he becomes “a great man and [feeds] his reindeer with golden oats from a silver manger” (“Sampo,” 128). Sampo’s journey from rags to riches is not the primary theme of the story, however. The focus is instead on the people of Lapland who, as the reader is told, never again

put off having their children christened as had been the custom. Hiisi disappears after Sampo's journey, and even though it is suspected that he still rules on Rastekais, he has never been seen since – and even if he was seen, he would be powerless against the newly christened children of Lapland.

In the nineteenth century, the Sami were commonly considered an undeveloped people, and this view was strengthened by the scientific discourse in Norway and Sweden at the time. A similar, albeit softer, colonialist ideology dominates Topelius's Romantic nationalist fairy tale in its parallels between Christianity, civilization and social progress. Even though Lapland's wilderness is still seen as a Godforsaken stronghold of darkness, Romanticism's influence on the description of children is already apparent: due to their innocence, they are closer to God and nature than adults. "Sampo Lappeli", therefore, echoes a motif found in Andersen's "The Snow Queen" of a child who is saved from the merciless wilderness by God's protection. Topelius's descriptions of Arctic nature thus combine many literary and cultural influences of the time: travel literature, European fairy tales, Finnish folk tradition and poetry for adults. From these ingredients, Topelius wove his nationalist and Christian story-world, which then formed the foundations for the long tradition in Finnish literature of depicting Lapland as an exotic, magical and disorienting wilderness.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The spelling Zachris Topelius is the one currently in use, which differs from some older publications using a different spelling of the author's name.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *A Book of Our Land* and "How God created Finland" translated by Essi Vatiilo.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from "Sampo Lappelil" are from the translation by Margaret Böcher, hereafter referred to as "Sampo."

<sup>4</sup> The translation of this passage by Ella R. Christie is more accurate: "But Sampo was rich, for he had two names – one was not enough" (32).

<sup>5</sup> This passage was omitted in the translation by Ella R. Christie.