AGNETA RAHIKAINEN:
Poeten och hennes apostlar:
en biomytografisk analys av Edith Södergranbilden.
Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, Helsingfors 2014. Pp. 269.
ISBN: 978-952-10-9790-4.

Over the years persistent myths have grown up round the poet Edith Södergran (1892-1923). In this book, based on a doctoral thesis, Agneta Rahikainen has set out to explore these myths, making particular use of two books written in English: Michael Benton's *Literary Biography. An Introduction* (2009) which considers similar myths relating to the Bronte sisters and others; and Hayden White's *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), which has helped in classifying mainly Scandinavian published attitudes to Södergran's life and work.

Rahikainen begins by reminding us of the facts. Edith Södergran was born in St Petersburg, the only child of well-off middle-class Swedish-speaking parents originally from western Finland, and sent to a local school where German was the main language. When she was still a child, the family moved to Raivola (in Russian Roshchino), a largely Finnish-speaking village on the Karelian isthmus some sixty kilometres north-west of Petersburg. Finland at that time was still politically part of Russia. When she was fifteen her father died of tuberculosis in a Helsinki clinic, and less than two years later Edith herself was admitted to the same clinic with the same disease. In 1912 and 1913 she and her mother spent eighteen months in Switzerland at Davos, where she was treated at a sanatorium and had the opportunity to read widely in a variety of languages. Back in Raivola and with her illness to some extent in remission, she was able to have a first collection of poems published in Helsinki in 1916 and reviewed in the local press. In autumn 1917 she spent several weeks in Helsinki, where she met a number of literary figures. After this her health and previously comfortable economic circumstances took a turn for the worse as war carried Russia towards revolution. Meanwhile she continued to publish Swedish-language poetry in Finland, though her later collections were not always as well received as her first had been. At this difficult time

(1918) Edith got to know Hagar Olsson, an ambitious writer near to herself in age, who was to figure prominently in Edith's few remaining years. Hagar's father was pastor of a Karelian parish not far from Raivola, and Raivola was where the two women first met, though Hagar was otherwise working full-time as a journalist in Helsinki. The two friends, never emotionally easy together, communicated mainly by post for the rest of Edith's life.

Rahikainen defines the classic myth of Södergran's life as that of misunderstood, highly strung female poet, a child of nature deeply anchored in the primeval forests of rural Karelia with few contacts elsewhere and dominated by her losing battle against terminal illness. Some (male) writers considered Edith mentally unbalanced even to imagine that, being a woman, she could ever expect to be taken seriously as a writer. Neither Hagar Olsson nor Elmer Diktonius, the other modernist writer who befriended Edith towards the end of her life, had known her before declining health and the economic and political upheavals of war (including Finland's declaration of independence in December 1917) had severely affected her circumstances.

After Edith's death, Hagar Olsson came to be known as the principal source of information on her life. The poet's first biographer, the Uppsala academic Gunnar Tideström, depended heavily on Olsson. His monograph *Edith Södergran* was published in 1949 (reprinted most recently in 1991), while in 1955 Olsson edited and published the letters Edith had sent her as *Ediths brev.* Unfortunately, it was now over thirty years since these letters had been written, while Hagar's side of the correspondence had been destroyed by Edith or her mother together with most of the other papers left by Edith at her death. In an inadequate attempt to compensate for this, Hagar in 1955 added a running commentary. It is obvious that Hagar's text in *Ediths brev* is far from objective. Rahikainen quotes from and comments on Hagar's description of her first visit (February 1919) to Edith at Raivola:

> I was able to stay only a few days; naturally I had to get back to my editorial work on the paper, and the long journey from Helsinki almost to the Russian border, involving a change of trains at Viipuri, took time. But it was a rare experience. The word 'fairytale' springs to mind

> when I think of it: the Södergrans' little home in the little low-roofed wooden cottage where they lived near the Orthodox church with its cheerful bells; the two captivating women in their unfashionable clothes – one with the bold profile of a young hawk, and rosy cheeks giving the other the image of a beaming little mother troll – their playful private speech, their eccentric manners and wonderful capacity to accept whatever Providence might inflict on them quite independently, it seemed, of the material side of an existence over which they had no control; all this contributed to the impression that they were living in a fairytale far from the familiar realities of everyday life.[1]

Rahikainen draws attention to loaded expressions like 'Russian border', 'little home', 'Orthodox church' and 'Providence' (p. 87), all of which help define the Södergrans as poor, isolated and living in abnormal conditions. This fairytale atmosphere is reinforced by diminutives, with a short step from this world to Elsa Beskow's little old woman. The 'two captivating women in unfashionable clothes', are like eccentric and impractical noble savages, in complete contrast to Olsson's professional career in a Helsinki newspaper office. In fact, those unaware of the local geography would not realise that Olsson's father's parish at Räisälä, though in the same part of the world, was even more inaccessible from Helsinki than Raivola, which at least had a station on the important railway from Finland's second city Viipuri to St Petersburg. In any case, the Raivola district, with its popular nearby seaside resort at Terijoki, had been far from a backwater before the upheaval caused by the First World War. There can be no doubt that Edith Södergran, with her unusually complex background, has been an ideal subject for the tempting simplifications of biographical myth-making.

[1] *Ediths brev* has been translated into English by Silvester Mazzarella, together with Edith Södergran's letters to Elmer Diktonius, in *The Poet Who Created Herself*, Norvik Press, 2001. This excerpt is from p. 42.

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