

MERETE MAZZARELLA:

Fredrika Charlotta född Tengström. En nationalskalds hustru

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A name that has never really figured among those of forgotten authors brought to the attention of readers in the feminist literary research of recent years, is that of Fredrika Runeberg (1807-1879). This author, who is also the first Finnish newspaper-woman, was well known in her own time. The first biography of her was written already over a hundred years ago. Fredrika Runeberg's works have long interested literary scholars. Recent academic studies have examined her impact on the development of the historical novel in Finland as well as her general position as an early woman writer. In contrast to the first biographies and studies written about Fredrika Runeberg, however, current research no longer seeks to examine her through her husband, J. L. Runeberg.

Merete Mazzarella, whose new study is entitled *Fredrika Charlotta född Tengström. En nationalskalds hustru* (Fredrika Charlotta née Tengström. Wife of a National Poet), is well acquainted with the body of critical and biographical works on Fredrika Runeberg and is furthermore able to provide fresh perspectives on her life and works. Her point of departure is first and foremost to capture the essence of Fredrika Runeberg's voice as an author and a person.

Researchers dealing with Fredrika Runeberg do not have to worry about a lack of source material. While J. L. Runeberg's importance should not be overemphasised in this context, it is, however, due to this man, proclaimed a national hero early on in his career, that much is known of Fredrika Runeberg's life. In addition to literary texts, the materials which have ended up in archives of her work include, among other things, flower care instructions, accounting books and a brown paper bag in which she kept her manuscripts. Mazzarella is content, however, to focus mainly on Runeberg's novels, short stories and autobiography as well as her extensive correspondence with relatives and friends, especially her friend Augusta Lundahl. It is precisely this correspondence that makes Mazzarella's study original and relevant, as after several years of relative indifference, literary researchers are showing a renewed interest in using archive materials.

Unlike many biographers, Mazzarella is not concerned with sensational exposure or unearthing scandals regarding her subject's life. Nor is she attempting to thoroughly explain or understand her subject. Instead her work enters into a critical dialogue with that of earlier researchers and remains open to conflicting interpretations and new questions. The picture presented of Fredrika Runeberg is far from being one-dimensional and unambiguous. By no means does Mazzarella show us a privileged member of the intelligentsia; rather, we see a tired mother and self-sacrificing spouse who would not dream of waking the maid to make her husband's coffee at four a.m. but would rather do it herself.

The biographer, who in recent years has explored teaching literature to medical doctors and otherwise reflected on the connection between medicine and humanism, takes a keen look at the illnesses Fredrika Runeberg suffered, such as bad hearing, erysipelas, migraines, neuropathic illnesses and depression. Like many researchers into nineteenth-century women writers, she shows how women's writing and illness often went hand in hand. The otherwise seldom experienced peace and quiet that came with being ill gave a woman the chance to retreat from daily life and concentrate on writing.

Mazzarella tells the story of Fredrika Runeberg's life in fairly traditional, chronological order. Each of the major episodes in her life, her childhood, the first years of her marriage, her life in Helsingfors and then in Borgå, is dealt with in a separate chapter. A chapter is also dedicated to her main works, i.e. the collection of short stories entitled *Teckningar och drömmar* (1861) and the historical novels *Fru Catharina Boije och hennes döttrar* (1858) and *Sigrid Liljeholm* (1862). Finally, the book describes and considers the fourteen-year period during which Fredrika Runeberg acted as a nurse for her paralysed husband. Mazzarella shows how even this period was productive in terms of writing, though not all the texts she produced were ever published.

In addition to presenting a many-sided view of the details of Fredrika Runeberg's life, Mazzarella provides new and interesting interpretations of her literary works. She draws attention to the way many of the short stories in the collection *Teckningar och drömmar* are set in a foreign country and how events in these stories are often shown from the point of view of this 'foreign culture', inviting the reader to question, in turn, the values of 'our culture'. Mazzarella concludes that many of these short stories, including for example 'Sardar Khans maka', contain anti-colonial overtones which have generally been overlooked in previous research. The treatment of women as commodities is another ever-relevant and important theme which Fredrika Runeberg deals with in her writing.

It is easy to agree with Merete Mazzarella. Fredrika Runeberg really does seem like an astonishingly modern writer. This impression can only be

reinforced by hearing that the currently most read novelist in Finland, the multiple-prize-winning Sofi Oksanen, whose novels deal with the past of her half-native Estonia, has named Fredrika Runeberg as one of her role models. Sofi Oksanen, like Fredrika Runeberg, writes historical novels. The two writers are also connected by the way in which the works of both deal with history from the perspective of women.

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