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Revisiting the ‘poisoned lands of Sudbury’: Sakari Pälsi and Finnish immigrant miners in Canada in 1927

Oula Seitsonen & Vesa-Pekka Herva

Abstract

Sakari Pälsi was a pioneer of Finnish archaeology and a globetrotting adventurer, who in 1927 travelled across Canada visiting various Finnish Canadian communities along the way. He was impressed by Canada’s vastness and beauty but appalled by the large-scale extraction of natural resources and devastation of landscapes. Pälsi called the Sudbury-Copper Cliff region in northern Ontario as the epicenter of this destruction and described his impressions of the area and the life of immigrant Finnish workers. This article revisits the Greater Sudbury region and Pälsi’s observations on the extractive industries and Finnish immigrants 95 years after his visit. We use his texts as a baseline for examining Finnish heritage in the area, in honour of his unique approach to travel writing. Pälsi’s account of the area, and Canada more generally, reads out almost as a Socialist critique of the destructive Capitalist practices and careless large-scale exploitation of the environment.

Keywords: Sakari Pälsi, travel writing, extractive industries, Finnish immigrants, Canada

16.1 Introduction

Sudbury is the epicenter of this destruction. It is said that a lot of Finns live there, all of whom are said to be staunch communists. I am proud on behalf of my former countrymen. I am glad they have so much healthy sense and uncorrupted taste that they are not satisfied to live on slag heaps without saying a word and just benevolently watching the barons of money carrying out their outrageous works of destruction. (Pälsi 1927a: 1510; all translations by the authors).

Thus wrote Sakari Pälsi, one of the pioneers of Finnish archaeology, about his encounter with the ‘poisoned lands’ of Sudbury-Copper Cliff mining region in northern Ontario, Canada (Pälsi 1927a; 1927b). Besides being an archaeologist, Pälsi was also a globetrotting adventurer and travel-writer with a keen ethnographer’s eye (see Pälsi 1911, 1927a; 1927b, 1930). In 1927, Pälsi and his wife Aino travelled for the whole summer across Canada, visiting Finnish Canadian communities along the way (Fig. 1). Pälsi acted on their trip as a correspondent for the magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti*, and later that same year published the book *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa* (En. Large, Beautiful and Ugly Country) that expanded on his magazine reports of Canada. As the title of his book readily indicates, his experience of the country was a mixed one. On the one hand, Pälsi was impressed by its vastness and beauty – on the other, he was appalled by the large-scale devastation of landscapes and exploitation of natural resources through industrial land use, such as clear-cut forests and mining, which were not yet practised on the same scale in Finland at the time.

When Pälsi was visiting the Sudbury-Copper Cliff region, it had been subject to intensive mining for copper and nickel for more than 40 years since the rich ore deposits in the region were found in 1883 during the construction of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway (Saarinen 1999). In his writings and photographs Pälsi describes his impressions of the Sudbury region and the life of Finnish immigrants in the area. Pälsi was interested in ethnographic photography and filmmaking (Pälsi 1930), and took nearly 200 pho-



170 Copper Cliffin maisemia.



26. Kainasaakon poraajia
Copper Cliff. (kts 31). neg. 9212

Figure 1. Top: barren rocks of Copper Cliff in the 'Poisoned lands of Sudbury', as Päläsi (1927b: 283) described them; Bottom: Finnish miners at Copper Cliff. Photos S. Päläsi, Finnish Heritage Agency.

tographs while travelling across Canada, currently stored at the Finnish Heritage Agency.

This short article revisits the Sudbury-Copper Cliff region and Päläsi's observations on the extractive industries and immigrant Finnish workers 95 years after Päläsi's visit. We recount Päläsi's perceptions of mining landscapes and Finnish miners and discuss the present-day her-

itage of mining and Finnish immigrant communities in the Greater Sudbury region. This article was born of Seitsonen's travel on the footsteps of Päläsi in Canada in 2022 when he acted as Chair of Finnish Studies at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay (Ontario, Canada), and documented material heritage of Finnish immigrants. That research, in turn, is aligned with our broader on-going undertakings within the projects 'Extractive Industries as Engagement with the Extraordinary Subterranean' (Academy of Finland 2021–2025)

and ‘An Archaeological Perspective on Inequality in Welfare Society’ (Kone Foundation 2022–2027).

Travel writing is often employed in historical archaeology and heritage studies (e.g. Ekengren 2013) with the idea that informal and popular accounts can provide important information that may be lacking from more official documents (of whatever nature). However, our aim here is quite simply to use Päläsi’s book as a baseline for briefly examining Finnish mining heritage in the Greater Sudbury area, and for providing a foundation for broader studies on the subject. This article attempts to take the form of a pastiche to Sakari Päläsi’s characteristic approach to travel writing, celebrating his uniquely free-flowing, stream of consciousness prose.

16.2 Landscapes of extraction and destruction

When Päläsi visited Sudbury-Copper Cliff area, industrial mining had been conducted there for some four decades, which had produced a devastated and scarred landscape. This landscape was unique in the region until the 1970s and Päläsi described it as ‘desolate and empty land’ (Päläsi 1927b: 287) characterized by ‘bare, treeless, bushless rocks, that spread in their barren nakedness, without even a moss cover to veil them’ (Päläsi 1927a: 1510). In the early days the mining work in Sudbury region was very polluting, dangerous, and unhealthy, as everywhere (Saarinen 1999: 97, 180–181). There was a massive need for firewood for the huge, infamous outdoor roastbeds that were used for smelting ore, which caused large-scale deforestation and erosion, and pollution in the form of acidic, poisonous smoke clouds that shrouded the whole region and killed practically all vegetation (Winterhalder 1996). Indeed, it is telling of the ‘otherworldliness’ of this landscape that Sudbury was considered so much a moonscape that astronauts who were part of the Apollo 16 and 17 missions trained there their geology skills in the early 1970s (Sharma 2019) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Left: Rue Finland/Finland Street reminding of the area where the Finnish workers' 'Hökkelikylä' (En. Shantytown) once stood. Photograph is taken from where the Finn Hall, the centre of Finnish social activities, used to be; Right: all the rocks in the Sudbury area are still stained black by the decades of ore smelting and thick smog: the bottom part shows the natural hue of the rock recently revealed from under the soil. Photos O. Seitsonen.

During his visit, Pälsi walked among the 'soot-black rock' (Pälsi 1927b: 284) and contemplated that

This wound was [...] struck deliberately by men. It had been done by the all-conquering labour and human genius, digging up ores and minerals from the earth and spoiling the surface. The destruction had been delivered thoroughly, and the Creator must have closed his eyes when he let his mischievous sons run rampant in his mansions. (Pälsi 1927a: 1510).

It has been estimated that the mining and smelting through the decades resulted in about 20,000 hectares of barren, eroded and vegetationless ground

and some 80,000 hectares of semi-barren land around Sudbury (Gunn 1996). Pälси also noted that farmers complained about the environmental devastation caused by the smelting gas clouds and observed that ‘Nickel company does not say a thing [...] It’s not good for the farmers to start arguing with the cunning lawyers of the nickel kings’ (Pälси 1927b: 293). All in all, Pälси was horrified at witnessing the scars of industrial land use that had created ‘sceneries poisoned by the slag gases’ (Pälси 1927b: 288) as the result of ‘the great “progress” [...] the preached “development” that this country is currently proud of. [...] They have moved on quickly there, acted harshly, and left terribly ugly traces.’ (Pälси 1927a: 1510) (Fig. 1).

In 2022, the Greater Sudbury region is much less barren than in Pälси’s days, thanks to the large-scale re-greening attempts since the 1970s, with millions of trees having been planted in the area (Gunn 1996; Winterhalder 1996) (Fig. 3). Sudbury has also become an international example in the

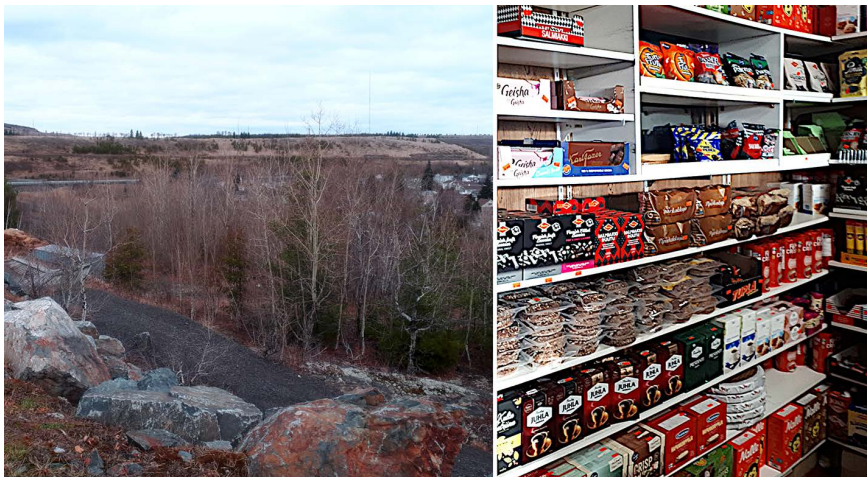


Figure 3. Left: re-greened tailing grounds of Copper Cliff; right: traces of continuing Finnishness, Finnish imports on sale and in demand by the Finnish immigrants, for example Finnish salty liquorice, chocolate, various sorts of rye bread and crispbread, coffee, porridge, and mustard. Photos O. Seitsonen.

re-greening efforts (CBC 2013). However, the rocks blackened by over a century of smelting are a constant reminder of the industrial past, as also the acidic and poisoned soils of the tailing grounds (Figs. 2–3). Also, parts of the area are still under active mining, especially now with the globally rising copper and nickel prices in 2022. This means that tailing ponds and slag piles still dominate large parts of the area owing to the mining activities, and large smokestacks rule the skyline. Canada's tallest, and the world's second tallest, smokestack 'Inco Superstack' (381 m) will soon be dismantled (CBC 2020), which saddens many local people whose skyline it has ruled for decades and who often have miner legacy running in their families. This reminds of the sentiments that inhabitants in many industrial towns in Finland express towards the dismantling of industrial smokestacks dominating the horizon, which they perceive as careless eradication of their own heritage and that of their families and towns, and as emasculation of the industrial past and landscape (Piippumuistoja 2022).

16.3 Finnish mine workers and their heritage in the Greater Sudbury area

A first group of Finnish immigrants arrived in the Sudbury-Copper Cliff area already in 1885. Eleven Finnish men came to Sault Ste. Marie by boat and after finding out that there was no work available, they walked 300 km along the railroad tracks to Copper Cliff arriving in Midsummer 1885 (Saarinen 1999). These men were among the first men hired by the mining company and for a while four out of a total of seven mine workers in Copper Cliff were Finnish (Eklund 1987). Word of the work opportunities spread quickly and by the first census in 1921 there were already over 2000 Finnish immigrants in the Sudbury District, and Finns remained the largest non-English or non-French ethnicity in the area until 1951 (Saarinen 1999: 30). At most, in the

mid-1970s, some 7500 ethnic Finns lived in the area, and nowadays about five percent of the Greater Sudbury population are of Finnish origin (Census 2016). At the time of Pälsi's visit, the proportion of Finns in the area was at its all-time highest, eight percent of the total Sudbury District population (in 1931) (Saarinen 1999: 30). The Sudbury region was one of Pälsi's main destinations on his trip, together with two other important Finnish communities, one in Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) in northern Ontario, and another in Sointula in British Columbia.

Originally most of the Finns lived in what is still remembered as 'Hökkelikylä' (En. Shantytown) that was dotted with ramshackle log cabins (Fig. 2), and then became scattered wherever workforce was needed in fleeting 'Finntowns'. Pälsi (1927b: 115) commented on the mobility and instability of the Canadian-Finnish population: 'The settlement is loose [...] and maybe tomorrow people move into a new place to earn the necessary dollars. They wander around the country like the Indians [sic] of the old.' The first building that Finnish immigrants typically put up in Sudbury, just like elsewhere, was a log-built sauna which often served as a dwelling until a proper house was built (Burkowski 1976; Saarinen 1999: 248). Sauna became, and still is, an important cultural and ethnic marker for the Finnish-Canadian immigrants. Traditionally, sauna was the place where the life of Finns started and the earthly journey ended in that babies were given birth in the sauna and bodies of the dead were washed and treated there for burial (see Warkentin et al. 2005). There was indeed one case in Sudbury where Finnish workers in a poorly equipped mining camp refused to work until a sauna was built for them (Saarinen 1999: 249). Pälsi went to the sauna in all the places where he met Finns in Canada and also described his different sauna experiences, noting that 'A Finn needs to remember his saunas' (Pälsi 1927b: 296).

Ethnicity and language were also relevant to the actual mining work as well because work gangs were typically organised on ethnicity so that at least the foreman spoke English and could pass on the directions to the other men (Fig. 1). During Pälsi's visit in one of the mines 'Finns numbered about a hundred there, speakers of other languages about sixty' (Pälsi 1927b: 293).

He also commented that ‘Miners are soon paid the salaries of our ministers. Nickel affords to pay. The company that dominates world production did not spare dollars’ (Pälsi 1927b: 293). Incidentally, that same company, Inco (The International Nickel Company of Canada) and its English subsidiary The Mond Nickel Co., were the ones who also operated the northern Finnish Petsamo nickel mines in 1934–1939 before the Second World War (Yates 1937; Kuisma 1986).

Some traits of Finnishness are still actively present in the area today, although not to the extent there used to be in the past. Many public Finnish institutions developed in the Sudbury region over the decades, for instance Finn Halls, which were the centres of the immigrant social activities across Canada, as well as Finnish shops and enterprises (see Kinnonen 2013). Now the largest Finnish institution in the Sudbury-Copper Cliff area is the Finnish retirement home, ‘Finlandia Village’, which reflects the ageing of the Finnish population. Besides the retirement home, there are still some Finnish stores, such as ‘Leinala’s Bakery. Scandinavian Foods’. There is also a continued demand for a wide range of Finnish imported goods among the Finnish immigrants and their descendants in Sudbury and elsewhere in Canada, including Finnish salty liquorice, chocolate, rye bread, crispbread, coffee, porridge, mustard, and sauna supplies (Fig. 3). There are still many Finnish speakers in the region, especially elderly people now living in the Finlandia Village, many of whom are descendants of the earliest Finns in the area. However, also some younger people have maintained basic Finnish language skills.

In addition, the old Anderson Farm, owned by Finnish immigrants Frank and Margaretta (Gretta) Anderson in the early 1900s, is now musealized as part of the Greater Sudbury Museums. They were well-known personalities of whom many stories are still being told. Gretta Anderson used to run one of the largest dairy farms in northern Ontario while her husband worked in the mines (Saarinen 1999: 33). As there are no longer Finn Halls as gathering places in the area, the Anderson Farm and Finlandia Village serve now as places for social gatherings and seasonal sales for the local Finnish-descendant community.

16.4 ‘All the sights were nickel’: a covert critique of Capitalist annihilation

Beneath its generally amused and sardonic tone, Pälsi’s commentary on Sudbury, and Canada more generally, can be read almost as a Socialist critique of the destructive capitalist practices and careless large-scale exploitation of the environment. This attitude is illustrated, for instance, by his proudness of the (Communist) Finnish immigrants standing up against ‘money barons’ and ‘nickel kings’ in an attempt to ease the workers’ living and working conditions (Pälsi 1927a: 1510). Many of the early Finnish immigrants were active in labour unions and socialist and communist movements owing to the exploitation of workers and their generally poor and dangerous working environments (e.g. Beaulie et al. 2011). Already in his student days in the early-1900s, Pälsi had been active in the university students’ social democratic movement. Even though his views had been shifting rightwards after the Finnish Civil War (1918), as was a trend in Finland at the time, he nevertheless maintained an admiration for the common man’s and workers’ cause for the rest of his life. This was intertwined with his deep interest in the traditional folk culture and workways, a kind of ‘idealistic socialism’, as his son Hannu Pälsi described in an interview (Seitsonen 2017; 2019).

Pälsi was amused with the omnipresence of nickel in the Copper Cliff region – everything was about nickel:

All the sights were nickel [...] the International Nickel Company and another nickel company that together produce 85 percent of the world’s nickel [...] Nickel Belt Car Club and Nickel Ridge Hotel [...] the pouring of nickel slag to watch, which was said to be an unforgettable scene at night [...] Road to the campground was of nickel slag, and for some reason a large heap of the same substance had been driven on the field. Everybody came here to admire nickel, and we had to follow this established habit. (Pälsi 1927b: 290–291).

Pälsi recounts how one Finnish immigrant worker returning to homeland commented that 'In Canada, a person is not considered a person' (Pälsi 1927b: 309). Instead, in his opinion the workers were perceived as an expedient resource, as small cogs in the massive and oppressive machineries of Capitalism, 'progress' and 'development' that leave entire landscapes devastated and gutted in their wake. In Finland, such an extensive mechanised exploitation and extraction of resources was still ahead, actually just about to start in Pälsi's time. However, 95 years later, it seems that clear cut forests are in fact more common a sight in Finland than in Canada, and mining megaprojects are taking place also in Finland, often owned and ran by foreign companies, such as the Canadian Agnico Eagle Mines Ltd. that operates Europe's largest gold mine in Suurikuusikko, Kittilä.

This being said, many parts of Canada are still today torn up by mining and other industrial land use practices. Pälsi saw Canada as a half-finished country that he thought was developing too fast for its own good, too fast to create any beauty. Indeed, he found beauty in Canada only in more traditional settings in the form of, for example, indigenous art with its ancient roots. 'The highlight of Canada's visual arts' he found in the indigenous artworks at 'Yalis (Alert Bay, British Columbia) (Pälsi 1927b: 180), and to some degree among the Finns in the forests and islands where things were done in the traditional way, 'just like in the home country' (Pälsi 1927b: 271). During his trip, Pälsi was most impressed with the remote, isolated lifeway he encountered among the Finnish immigrants living and working in their own nearly self-sufficient co-operative in Sointula, British Columbia: 'They got by on their own, earned their living with their own work, without ripping off others. There were no rich people in Sointula who would have amassed fortunes by flaying inexperienced newcomers.' (Pälsi 1927b: 139). The co-operative founded by Finns in Sointula in 1909 is indeed still running the local store, even though also there the Finnish community has diminished and aged through the decades. In addition, in Sointula one can find the last working Finn Hall that is still used for communal activities. Upon his departure from Canada, Pälsi sighed,

summing up his feelings that are to some extent paralleled by our own experiences: 'I was glad to leave this country already. We had stayed maybe too long in the unfinished Canada' (Pälsi 1927b: 299).

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