



Nordic News

240 Sparks Street, PO Box 55023, Ottawa, ON K1P 1A1

Remarkable Women

by Hilde Huus

Our Speakers' Event for March featured Anita Maclean's story about her very remarkable grandmother, Anna Sofia Nilsson. Anita was only 13 years old when her grandmother died in 1953, but she still remembers her well. Not your typical grandmother of the time, she was loud and she swore! She was also a nice, generous woman who liked to have fun. She took great delight in treating her grandchildren to an amusement park, screaming the loudest of anybody there, and insisting on going back on the ride for another turn!



Anna Sofia Nilsson (photo courtesy Anita Maclean)

So it's not surprising that many years later Anita wished she had asked her grandmother more about her life while she was still alive. She decided to find out what she could and headed to Sweden's National Archives, then to its National Library, to trace the places where her grandmother had lived over the course of her lifetime and to visit each spot, even if the buildings themselves had in some cases been torn down long ago. She also read about the conditions in Stockholm during her grandmother's time to better understand her circumstances and environment.

Anna Sofia Nilsson was born in 1883 in Värmland, which is in the west of central Sweden. In 1911 she moved to Stockholm. Anita knew from her background reading that the population of Stockholm had doubled in the 20 years from 1880 to 1900 as more and more people came from the country to look for industrial work. Like many others of that time, when Anna Sofia moved to the city she lived at first in poor conditions in a house with several other occupants. Most of the newcomers encountered hard times. They worked very long days and for much of the year had to make their way home in the dark at a time when most streets were not lit at night. There were many more women than men living in Stockholm and some had to turn to prostitution to support themselves. Children born out of wedlock were often put out to foster, and Anita discovered in her research that her grandmother had herself fostered three children.

Anita told us about two big labour strikes in 1902 and 1911, the first lasting a full month and the second ending in a lock-out. Streetcar workers were included in the 1911 strike and they were all fired at the end of it, which led to 100 of them emigrating to the United States.

In addition to labour rights, women were trying to get the right to vote. After a motion of women's suffrage was voted down in 1918, Sweden's National Association for Women's Suffrage marched with three banners representing people who did not have the right to vote. The first banner showed a male criminal in prison; the second a male patient in a mental hospital; and the third banner the respected author Selma Lagerlöf, member of the Royal Swedish Academy and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1909. Selma Lagerlöf was an important spokesperson for the cause because of the widespread respect she was given in all parts of society. Women's suffrage was finally approved in parliament on 24 May 1919, and confirmed in January 1921.

Although Sweden remained neutral during World War I, its citizens were greatly affected by an Allied blockade on trade and shipping. City parks were turned into potato fields and Anita showed us a photo of a very long line of people waiting to buy milk.

Anita's description and photos gave us a glimpse of what life was like for her grandmother as she struggled in the big city. Once in Stockholm, Anita's remarkable grandmother married and had a son. But she soon realized that her husband was not only drinking too much but was unfaithful to her. So she threw him out but kept the family horse and carriage which she used to support herself and her son. From those simple beginnings she became a female entrepreneur. She must have been a very frugal but astute businesswoman who understood the potential of the automobiles that were seen more and more on the streets of Stockholm. By the 1920's, she had purchased some cars, employed some chauffeurs and was running her own taxi business. She cleaned the cars herself each night while her son slept on a bench nearby. When she applied for membership in the Stockholm Taxicab Association in 1922, she was turned down because she was a woman. Four years later she was finally accepted and in 1933, an article by the Association described her as a valued member of

the group. She bought herself a fine house and was clearly respected and liked by her many friends. Anita noted that the chauffeurs that she first hired were loyal to her and stayed with her for their entire working lives.



CNS President Tim Mark thanks Anita Maclean (photo by Hanne Sjøborg)

I am a real fan of the kind of research that Anita undertook to learn more about her grandmother. We often know very little about our female ancestors. By learning about the times they lived in we get a better idea of who they were and what their lives were like. Anita's story made me want to dig a little deeper into what I knew about one of my relatives on my mother's side who lived in Oslo (then Kristiania) in the early 1900s. Her name was Mina Pedersen and she was my grandfather's aunt.

When my grandfather's mother died suddenly in 1903, my grandfather, then age five, was sent to live with his grandmother and Mina Pedersen, his mother's sister. She had taken a job in a match factory after her father's death (he had also been a match factory worker) and was supporting herself and her mother on her earnings. Female factory workers had a hard life, with extremely long hours in a poor working environment for very low wages. The match factory had built apartments for its workers and my grandfather, his Aunt Mina, and his grandmother lived in one of them - a single room plus a kitchen. My grandfather recalled that the family next door had 8 children living in the same kind of apartment.

It was in the match stick factories that Norwegian women first started to organize for better working conditions, and it turns out that my grandfather's Aunt Mina was right in the middle of that movement. She was a member of the newly founded factory supervision committee which was led by Betzy Kjelsberg, co-founder of Norway's National Association for Women's Suffrage. Conditions did start to improve gradually for the female match stick workers thanks to the efforts of the organized workers.



Women working in a matchstick factory

My grandfather described his Aunt Mina as an ardent socialist. She was elected municipal councillor in Östre Aker (now in the north-eastern part of Oslo) sometime between 1910 and 1915. This seems to me to be quite an achievement since it was only in 1910 that all women in Norway could even vote in municipal elections. Mina died in 1915 in a sanatorium, very likely as a result of the significant health hazards involved in working with phosphorus. She was clearly a remarkable woman. I wish I had known her.

The lives of Nordic women have improved in the last hundred years to the point that the Nordic countries are considered the best countries in the world to be a woman, leading the world in gender equality at work. These very significant social changes did not happen by themselves. Women fought for them by pushing the boundaries of social convention like Anna Sofia Nilsson, and by organizing for change like the suffragettes and factory workers. Kudos to them I say!

April Luncheon

Our next luncheon takes place on Monday, April 3, at the Army Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West, at noon as usual.

At our March luncheon, CNS members had the opportunity to meet and chat with visiting Swedish MP Aron Modig. He was keen to learn more about how Swedes and other Nordics had emigrated to Canada and built new lives there.

At the same luncheon, we broke with precedent at the suggestion of Tuula Bigras and presented retiring bartender Mike with the oh-so-coveted CNS mug, usually reserved strictly for people who have addressed the Society at our Distinguished Speakers' Evenings. Thanks for that great suggestion Tuula! Mike has worked at the Mess for many years and CNS is very appreciative of the great service he has given us. And Mike did seem very tickled to receive the mug! (*Photo below by Hanne Sjøborg*)



Distinguished Speaker Series

Our Distinguished Speaker Series takes place at the Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West at 7:30 PM, but we recommend arriving a little early so you can get your name tag and socialize a little if you wish. Speaker events are free for members, with a \$5 charge for non-members. There is some parking available at the mess itself in the evenings.

April 19 Speaker Event: The Ibsen of the Movies: Tancred Ibsen and the Scandinavian Cinema

Gunnar Iversen, Ph.D. (Stockholm University), is a visiting professor at Carleton University for 2016-17. He works on film history, with an emphasis on Scandinavian and Norwegian cinema, documentary, and early and silent cinema. He will talk to us about Norwegian filmmaker and screenwriter Tancred Ibsen, the grandson of Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, whose

colourful life included directing Norway's first feature-length film with sound. We are looking forward to hearing Gunnar Iversen's talk on Wednesday, April 19, at 7:30 PM.



Tancred Ibsen

Other Upcoming Events of Interest

- We are trying something new this year - a Scandinavian Night with the Ottawa Senators! We hope to fill lots of seats on Tuesday, **April 4** for the game against the Detroit Red Wings. \$40 gets you a seat with your fellow Scandinavians in the 300 N section just over 5 rows from the front of the section. **Plus** you get a free Senators scarf **and** a McDonald's food voucher. Sounds like fun! To order tickets, contact Mr. Brian Bonner by email at groupsalesintern3@ottawasenators.com or by phone at (905) 467-6546. Offer a ride/looking for a ride? Questions? Please contact Trygve Ringereide by email at artsandculture@canadianordicsociety.com or by phone at (613) 744-3650 or Vib Reid at vib.reid@gmail.com or (613) 725-3125. This invitation is to the members of: the Canadian Nordic Society, the Canadian Friends of Finland, the Friends of Iceland, the Svenska Klubben and the Danish Club of Ottawa, as well as staff of the Nordic Embassies. And do feel free to bring along family members, friends and neighbours!
- The Finnish Easter Church Service will take place on **April 9**, at 3:00 PM, at St Peter's Lutheran Church, 400 Sparks St., Ottawa. Please note that entry is from the parking lot side door only, and

don't forget your parking permit! Church doors are locked for safety reasons during the service. Everyone is welcome!

- On Tuesday, **April 25**, the Ottawa Storytellers will have a session on “The Nordic Gods.” Watch for details via CNS-announce and on our [Facebook page](#).
- We are starting to prepare for our Annual General Meeting on Wednesday, **May 24**, which will include the annual election of Council for the coming year. Tim Mark, current President of the CNS, is the head of the Nominating Committee. You may reach him by email at presidentcanadiannordicsociety.com
- Finland is celebrating 100 years of independence and the CNS is working with other Finnish-related organizations to mark the occasion. If you would like to help please contact CNS President Tim Mark (president@canadiannordicsociety.com or (613) 733-1744)
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Contributions to Nordic News

We appreciate receiving your articles and news to include in the *Nordic News*! Please email them to the editor, Hilde Huus, at communications@nordicsociety.com

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To join online, go to the CNS website (<http://www.canadiannordicsociety.com/join-cns.html>) and complete the membership form . Payment may be made through PayPal.

Note: it is not necessary to have a PayPal account.

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Please print and complete the membership form below, enclose a cheque payable to the Canadian Nordic Society and mail to:

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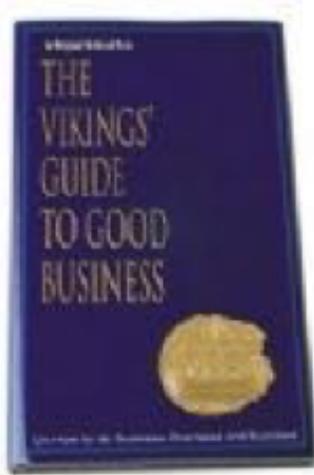
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In person

You can join in person when you attend one of our luncheons or speaker events. Please speak to any one of our Council members

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Gudrun Publishing was established in Reykjavik in 1992. Gudrun books are now represented in museums and bookshops right across Scandinavia and all over the world.

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