Chapter 2

Walking Nordic: Performing Space, Place and Identity

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> Pfaffländ: From the sterile cleanliness of Volvenhaagen to the orthopaedic footpaths of Birkenstockholm, this sub-arctic wonderland provides a smorgasboard of Nordic delights. Take a fauna and sauna safari through its pristine pine forests or if 'clubbing' is more your scene then head to the seal colonies of Cløbberländ. In a land of 24-hour sunshine the days in this ice-encrusted country will somehow feel longer.[1]

Anyone actually tempted to spend an upcoming holiday on a sauna safari in Pfaffländ will, alas, be severely disappointed as this depicted paradise of the outdoors and sensible footwear only exists in the Jetlag Travel Guide series of spoof guidebooks. However, the fake names notwithstanding, it is very likely the reader immediately decoded the text as a parody of an unnamed Scandinavian country. The image of orthopaedic trekking through pristine pine forests draws upon well-known stereotypes connected with the Nordic region – but is there, in fact, any relation between these images and actual regional practices and, if so, in what ways are everyday bodily expressions linked to performances of place identity?

In this chapter I will investigate some examples of popular outdoor practices such as the Finnish innovation of walking with poles known as 'Nordic Walking', as well as the rekindled wave of pilgrimage in the Nordic countries during recent decades. In order to discern some of the ways in which walking practices might be connected with the performance of a national as well as a possible supranational, that is to say Nordic, sense of identity, I will start out by briefly tracing present-day outdoor habits to practices and ideas that developed along, and in conjunction with, emerging national identities in the Nordic countries with special reference to the process in Finland.

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[1] Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner and Rob Sitch, *Phaic Tăn: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (San Francisco, 2006).

'Let us be Finns' – Constructing Nations in the North

The Nordic countries, like most of Europe, faced a complex political situation in the early 1800s. The Napoleonic Wars brought about substantial changes with long-lasting consequences. In the war of 1808–1809, Sweden lost the eastern part of its kingdom, present-day Finland, to Russia, and Finland thus became an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. A few years later, in 1814, the Kingdom of Denmark–Norway was defeated and was forced to cede Norway to Sweden.

Consequently, there was a pressing need for the Nordic countries to redefine themselves – a process much influenced and spurred on by the general movement of nationalism in the development towards modern nation-states in Europe. In this, a patriotic form of Romanticism provided both means and a source of inspiration. For the Nordic countries, the central Romantic concepts of nature and folk culture emerged as important cornerstones for constructing national identity and demonstrating what was 'unique' about their nations. These influences were expressed in the cultural and political climate, but also in concrete endeavours such as expeditions to document folklore. Already in the late eighteenth century, the erudite society Aurorasällskapet [the Aurora Society] in the Finnish university town of Turku had – in the spirit of Enlightenment ideals – encouraged the publication of topographical accounts as a means to advance and disseminate information about Finland. Increasingly, these descriptions came to include information on local dialects, folklore and folkways.[2]

The much-quoted statement attributed to the Turku Romantic A.I. Arwidsson, 'Swedes we are no longer, Russians we do not want to become – therefore, let us become Finns', summed up a budding notion in Finnish intellectual circles of the early nineteenth century. However, the key question following this credo was inevitably, what does it mean to be Finnish? Corresponding debates and the quest to establish a positive national image were central issues in all of the Scandinavian countries at the time. Whereas Sweden and Denmark could fall back upon a long history of continuity and past glory, the process in Norway and Finland consisted of constructing new nations.[3]

Despite different points of departure, similar building-blocks were used in all of the Nordic countries: language, history, the local landscapes and folk culture in the form of fairy tales, folk songs, folk music, traditional costumes and dances. These elements became important tools in consolidating the nations in rhetoric as well as in actual performances. Themes that would awake associations

[2] Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch and Carola Ekrem, *Swedish Folklore Studies in Finland 1828–1918* (Helsinki, 2008), pp. 14–15.

[3] See Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (eds), 'Introduction', in *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo, 1997).

to a rich cultural heritage and a glorious past were, naturally, especially favoured. For example, in Sweden, Norway and Denmark the Icelandic sagas and the Vikings were popularized both by the pan-Scandinavian movement as well as by nationalistic movements in the individual countries.[4] In Finland's case, a special challenge was the lack of a national literature in the Finnish language. Instead, folk poetry became Finland's claim to be acknowledged as a *Kulturvolk*. Little wonder, then, that expeditions to collect ancient folk poetry in remote areas of the country came to be regarded as acts of patriotism. Few epitomized this ideal better than Finland's own master collector Elias Lönnrot.

Elias Lönnrot, a medical student, undertook his first longer expedition on foot in the summer of 1828. The 130-kilometre-long journey traversed the provinces of Savonia and Karelia. In his travelogue Lönnrot described the incentive behind the journey as a wish to 'see more of my own country, get to know its language in its various dialects, but above all to collect samples of its remarkable and beautiful folk poetry'.[5] During his first journey Lönnrot gathered more than 6,000 verses of folk poems and charms. After several longer as well as shorter expeditions, Lönnrot had accumulated a large archive of folklore notations. It was this vast material, gathered from many different Finnish-speaking regions, which Lönnrot drew upon for his compilation of the *Kalevala* – the Finnish national epic. The *Kalevala* (first version published in 1835) soon became a Finnish national symbol and exerted great influence on the output of new 'national' music, art, architecture and literature.[6]

Many of the most prominent Scandinavian folklore collectors likewise demonstrated considerable physical endurance when it came to carrying out long expeditions on foot. The good friends Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, inspired by the Grimm brothers, pioneered the publication of Norwegian fairy tales with their *Norske folkeeventyr* (1841–1844). Both were keen hikers and traversed much of the Norwegian countryside collecting folklore.[7] The

[4] These themes, the Vikings in particular, were later made problematic through their attractiveness to (neo)Nazism and aggressive strands of nationalism. For present-day uses of the Viking theme, see Hanne Pico Larsen, Chapter 4 in this volume, and Katla Kjartansdóttír and Kristinn Schram, Chapter 3 in this volume.

[5] Pekka Laaksonen, 'Elias Lönnrot. En vandringsman i runornas land', in [Elias Lönnrot] R. Knapas (ed.), *Vandraren. Reseberättelser från Karelen 1828–1842* (Stockholm, 2002), pp. 16–17.

[6] Ibid., p. 20; Lauri Honko (ed.), 'Upptäckten av folkdiktning och nationell identitet i Finland', in *Folklore och nationsbyggande i Norden* (Åbo, 1980), p. 43; see also W.R. Mead, 'Kalevala and the Rise of Finnish Nationality', *Folklore*, 73/4 (1962): 217–229; Jouko Hautala, *Finnish Folklore Research 1828–1918* (Helsinki, 1969).

[7] Olav Bø, 'Romantikk, tradisjon og nasjonalkultur', in Lauri Honko (ed.), *Folklore och*

passionate Danish folklore collector Evald Tang Kristensen accumulated his vast and unique material collection predominantly by frequent expeditions on foot that often lasted many weeks at a time. In Sweden, Artur Hazelius, the founder of the world's first outdoor museum, Skansen, took several extensive walking trips in his mission to explore the Swedish countryside and its different provinces.[8]

Especially among students, it became next to *de rigueur* to take summertime walking expeditions in order to collect folklore, study the flora and fauna, visit famous geographical or historical sites, or otherwise advance one's knowledge about the fatherland. Towards the end of the century, a new wave of *Kalevala*-romanticism blossomed in Finland. Many architects, writers and artists, such as the painter Akseli Gallén-Kallela and the composer Jean Sibelius, made pilgrimages in Lönnrot's footsteps to Karelia – the province that had become recognized as the cradle of Finnish culture, much in the way Dalecarlia (Dalarna) became the archetypical Swedish landscape. The general purpose of these expeditions was to experience and gain artistic inspiration from the Karelian nature and culture.[9] This inspiration was subsequently expressed in literature, paintings, symphonies and architecture during what has become known as the Golden Age of Finnish art.

Increasingly, the landscape as such emerged as a source of national pride and patriotic fervour. The Nordic emphasis on the importance of nature, as well as the connection made between nature and culture, can be found long before the nineteenth century.[10] However, parallel to, and in conjunction with, the political process of defining the national, this relationship was now accentuated and affirmed, not least in visual art, music and literature.[11] The wave of cultural expressions greatly contributed to the establishment and reconfirmation of the image of the iconic Nordic landscapes. As a result, the act of walking in nature came to be perceived as a means of experiencing the national landscape and, moreover, as a way to demonstrate patriotism.

[8] Bjarne Stoklund, 'Between Scenography and Science: Early Folk Museums and their Pioneers', *Ethnologia Europaea*, 33/1 (2004): 24; see also Sten Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Öresund, 2007).

[9] Honko, 'Upptäckten av folkdikten', pp. 43–44.

[10] Bernd Henningsen, 'The Swedish Construction of Nordic Identity', in Ø. Sørensen and B. Stråth (eds), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo, 1997), p. 114.

[11] See, for example, Anssi Paasi, 'Finnish Landscape as Social Practice', in M. Jones and K.R. Olwig (eds), *Nordic Landscapes: Region and Belonging on the Northern Edge of Europe* (Minneapolis, 2008), p. 522; Hugo Palmsköld, 'Ett uppsökande av det gamla. Fornnordiska motiv i svensk 1800-talskonst', in C. Raudvere, A. Andrén and K. Jennbert (eds), *Hedendomen i historiens spegel. Bilder av det förkristna Norden* (Lund, 2005), pp. 83–96.

The Outdoors as a Way of Life

The centrality of nature in the Nordic Romantic nationalism not only engendered a new way of *looking* upon nature and landscape, but also established the *use* of nature, through various outdoor practices, as a Nordic 'national characteristic'.[12] Thanks to the influence of continental fashions and conventions, an interest in exercise as a part of a healthy life was already noticeable among the Nordic upper classes in the eighteenth century. The most popular form of what could generously be labelled 'exercise' was the sociable walk or promenade. The social aspect was also very important in the growing trend of health spa tourism, where leisurely strolls were part of the prescribed treatment.[13] A number of spas centred on thermal springs were established in the Nordic countries, the oldest being Medevi (1678) in Sweden. The growing interest in bodily regimes and health promotion led the way for organized exercise. In the early nineteenth century the gymnastics movement quickly gained ground in Denmark and soon also in Sweden. In Norway and Finland its introduction was somewhat slower, but it eventually gained an enthusiastic following.[14]

Nevertheless, it was outdoor sports and related forms of exercise that were to become instrumental in the consolidation processes of the Nordic nations. For Norway and Finland especially, sport has been recognized as a crucial component of national self-definition.[15] The importance of sport for the Nordic nations has two different facets: the level of competitive sport with its accompanying collective rituals and the dimension of everyday popular outdoor activities.

The defining stages of nation-building for the Nordic countries from 1880 to the First World War (1914–1918) coincided with the spread of organized sport and outdoor movements and with the dramatic societal changes brought on by rapid industrialization, urbanization and an extensive migration. Upper- and middle-class practices and the Romantic idealization of nature now developed

[12] Cf. Tove Nedrelid, 'Use of Nature as a Norwegian Characteristic', *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 21 (1991): 28, 32–33.

[13] Antero Heikkinen, *Terveyden ja ilon tähden. Herrasväki liikkeellä Suomessa 1700–ja 1800–luvuilla* (Helsinki, 1991). See also Gudrun M. König, *Eine Kulturgeschichte des Spazierganges. Spuren einer bürgerlichen Praktik 1780–1850* (Vienna, 1996).

[14] Henrik Meinander, *Lik martallen som vågfältet. Hundra år finlandssvensk gymnastik* ([Ekenäs] 1996), pp. 11–12.

[15] Henrik Meinander, 'Prologue: Nordic History, Society and Sport', in H. Meinander and J.A. Mangan (eds), *The Nordic World: Sport in Society* (London and Portland, 2011), p. 1.

Figure 2.1 Two girls on skis, Vörå, Finland, 1919

into mass movements.[16] Outdoor forms of exercise were intrinsically linked to the mobilization behind the national project. Organized exercise activities were seen as a way of shaping and educating the youth. Another important aspect was the attempt to foster a population prepared and fit to defend its country.[17] However, the effort to promote education and a healthy lifestyle among the people also had a broader ambition that could be described as the vision of 'a sound population in a sound nation'. The Nordic tradition of outdoor life that developed around the turn of the nineteenth century was, to a significant extent, a direct result of accelerated urbanization and industrialization. Outdoor activities became a way of reconnecting with nature, of enacting the ideals of Romanticism and of instilling 'sound' standards into a population with sudden access to free time and means for consumption.[18]

The Right of Public Access

A salient present-day example of when outdoor practices and national discourses meet is in the usage of *allemansrätten*, the Right of Public Access or, literarily, 'the right of every man'. *Allemansrätten* is not a law proper, but a tradition based on several different laws concerning matters such as access to water and nature protection.[19]

[16] Klas Sandell and Sverker Sörlin, 'Naturen som fostrare. Friluftsliv och ideologi i svenskt 1900-tal', *Historisk Tidskrift* 114 (1994): 4–43; Matti Goksøyr, 'The Popular Sounding Board: Nationalism, "the People" and Sport in Norway in the Inter-war Years', in Meinander and Mangan, *The Nordic World*.

[17] See Sandell and Sörlin, 'Naturen som fostrare'; Jørn Hansen, 'Politics and Gymnastics in a Frontier Area Post-1848', in Meinander and Mangan, *The Nordic World*; Erkki Vasara, 'Maintaining Military Capability: The Finnish Home Guard, European Fashion and Sport for War', in Meinander and Mangan, *The Nordic World*.

[18] Lars Aronsson, 'Rörlighet och naturturism', in K. Sandell and S. Sörlin (eds), *Friluftshistoria. Från 'härdande friluftslif' till ekoturism och miljöpedagogik* (Stockholm, 2000), p. 208; Hans Gelter, 'Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life', *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 5 (2005): 79, 81; Orvar Löfgren 'Människan i naturen', in J. Frykman and O. Löfgren, *Den kultiverade människan* (Malmö, 1979), p. 68.

[19] All of the Nordic countries, apart from Denmark, have an extended Right of Public Access. The concept is interpreted slightly differently in the individual countries, with the traditions of Sweden and Finland being the most similar to each other. *Allemansrätten* is a cornerstone for access to outdoor life and is often referred to as one of things that sets Nordic outdoor life and use of nature apart from the rest of the world, despite the fact that similar traditional rights exist in many other countries as well.

When the Right of Public Access is introduced in official descriptions, the theme of heritage is prominent. *Allemansrätten* is described as a cultural heritage and a national symbol both for the Nordic region at large and for the individual Nordic countries. For example, the home page of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency explains that the tradition can be traced to provincial laws and customs established during the Middle Ages and asserts that 'we [Swedes] tend to regard the Right to Public Access as part of our cultural heritage, sometimes even as a national symbol'.[20] On the Åland Islands, where the Right of Public Access is slightly more restricted than in Sweden and Finland, the local environmental authorities embrace the idea of an ancient Nordic tradition: 'In the Nordic countries we have since time immemorial maintained the right to move freely in forests, lands and over water'.[21] A similar statement is made by the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management: 'It is important for us to have contact with nature. Access to woods, fields, mountains, rivers, lakes and sherries [*sic*], irrespective of who owns them, is an ancient, unwritten right in Norway'.[22]

The Right of Public Access is frequently described as something particularly Nordic. In a publication from 1997 the Nordic Council concisely states that, '*Allemansrätten* is a Nordic concept'.[23] On the website of Finland's environmental administration, *allemansrätten* is singled out as unique for the Nordic countries and something which is linked to a distinctive 'Nordic' cultural characteristic of craving unrestricted movement in nature versus other European countries where this tradition is, presumably, not so strong:

> The Right of Public Access is most comprehensive in the Nordic countries. For us it is an important part of our culture to be able to move freely in nature and to pick berries and mushrooms. In other EU-countries this right is much more limited and the content varies. ... The European Union does not try to standardize the right to public access in the EU-countries since it in each country is based on local conditions and part of the country's cultural history.[24]

[20] 'Vi betraktar ofta allemansrätten som ett kulturarv, och ibland till och med som en nationalsymbol': Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, http://www.naturvardsverket.se, accessed 13 January 2010.

[21] 'I Norden har vi sedan urminnes tider haft rätt att röra oss fritt i skog, mark och över vatten': Åland Parliament, http://www.regeringen.ax, accessed 30 January 2011.

[22] Allemanretten_eng 2007-pdf, Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management, http://www.dirnat.no, accessed 31 March 2011.

[23] Nordiska ministerrådet, *Allemansrätten i Norden* (Copenhagen, 1997), p. 5.

[24] 'Jokamiehenoikeudet ovat laajimmat Pohjoismaissa, joissa vapaa liikkuminen luonnossa marjastaen ja sienestäen on tärkeä osa kulttuuria. EU-maissa oikeudet ovat huomattavasti rajatummat ja oikeuksien sisältö vaihtelee. ... Euroopan unionilla ei ole pyrkimyksiä yhdenmukaistaa EU-maiden jokamiehenoikeuksia, koska ne ovat kussakin maassa kiinteä osa maan kulttuurihistoriaa ja perustuvat paikallisiin olosuhteisiin': Finland's Environmental Administration, http://www.ymparisto.fi, accessed 31 March 2011.

The fact that people are allowed to move around freely in the countryside has resulted in fewer marked trails for the public in the Nordic countries than in many other nations where walking is a popular pastime, such as Great Britain and Germany. In this way, *allemansrätten* might, quite paradoxically, keep a group of potential nature walkers who would be more comfortable following a marked trail from going for longer forest walks. Nonetheless, the Right of Public Access can be said to encourage special patterns of movement, such as the possibility of picking berries and mushrooms, which seems to be a practice that all Nordic countries pride themselves in as being typical of their nation. While walking around in nature purely for the enjoyment of it might still be frowned upon in some places, combining the walking with fishing or picking berries is conceived of as 'doing something sensible with one's time'.[25] Albeit that the custom is still widespread and popular in the Nordic countries, berry-picking has shown indications of declining of late, whereas there has been an increase in walking purely for the sake of walking.[26]

Nordic Walking

Above any other sport, cross-country skiing has been labelled as 'Nordic'. However, when it comes to spare-time pursuits, walking in nature is frequently named, if not *the* most popular, certainly one of the most popular leisure-time activities in the Nordic countries.[27] Perhaps it should come as no surprise that these two activities were, at least in certain aspects, merged in a recent Finnish sport innovation. Walking with poles, known by the international name of 'Nordic Walking', is today regarded as a national form of exercise in Finland and approximately every fifth Finn is reported to practise this activity.

Finnish cross-country ski athletes had previously used ski poles for summer fitness training, but it was not until the late 1980s that the idea took hold that walking with poles could make a suitable form of exercise for the general public.

[25] Nedrelid, 'Use of Nature as a Norwegian Characteristic', p. 25.

[26] Lars Emmelin, Peter Fredman and Klas Sandell, *Planering och förvaltning för friluftsliv. En forskningsöversikt* (2005), http://www.naturvardsverket.se/Documents/publikationer/620-5468-6.pdf, p. 58; Eija Pouta, Tuija Sievänen and Marjo Neuvonen, 'Recreational Wild Berry Picking in Finland – Reflection of a Rural Lifestyle', *Society and Natural Resources*, 19/4 (2006): 285–304.

[27] Cf. Aronsson, 'Rörlighet och naturturism', pp. 214–215; Norman McIntyre, 'Internationella tendenser', in Sandell and Sörlin, *Friluftshistoria*, p. 242.

Power walking was one of the big fitness trends of the 1980s, and there was a great interest in further developing walking for fitness. Studies were carried out at the Vierumäki Sport Institute in Southern Finland on how to make walking with poles more efficient.

In the mid-1990s the Finnish outdoor organization Suomen Latu started cooperating with the sports equipment manufacturer Exel Oyj in developing pole walking. Together with students of the Vierumäki Institute it was discovered that making the 'walking poles' shorter than poles for skiing significantly raised the efficiency of the activity. Moreover, the walking poles were equipped with a soft rubber tip suitable for asphalt and similar surfaces. In 1997, Exel began to manufacture poles specifically for walking and launched the international term 'Nordic Walking'.

Nordic Walking was not an immediate hit. The consensus among the general public was that using poles for walking rather than skiing looked ridiculous; furthermore, the media made fun of the new form of exercise, and sports equipment retailers and sports fairs had doubts about the marketability of the product. Nevertheless, the number of people exercising through walking with poles increased steadily. The outdoor organization Suomen Latu actively worked to promote Nordic Walking by, for example, arranging walking events led by instructors. Eventually, the attention Nordic Walking received in the media was not as a ludicrous sport fad but as a successful innovation.

Nordic Walking was promptly launched abroad. By 1998 the first walking poles had been sold in Sweden and Switzerland. The new concept was marketed especially to other Nordic countries' outdoor associations, with tangible results. In 2000, only three years after the term Nordic Walking had been launched, the International Nordic Walking Association (INWA, from 2009 The International Nordic Walking Federation) was founded in Finland with the support of the company Exel Oyj. The purpose of the INWA is to sell, develop, protect and teach the principles of Nordic Walking. Great importance is placed on ensuring that the correct technique – and equipment – is used. To promote this aim, the association has created a system of certified INWA instructors and coaches.[28]

In 2000 the Exel Corporation was presented with the Innovation of the Year award in Finland for successfully launching a new form of exercise. Part

[28] Apart from the INWA, there are a number of other international Nordic Walking associations, both European- and North American-based. Walking with poles as a fitness activity had in fact already been introduced in the United States before the Nordic Walking boom. In the mid-1980s the American ski instructor Tom Rutlin developed a pole-walking technique he referred to as 'exerstriding'. After the term 'Nordic Walking' gained acceptance as a generic concept, Rutlin started calling his version of pole walking the 'Exerstride Method Nordic Walking'.

of the explanation for the international success of Nordic Walking is that the activity corresponded to market demands. At a time when obesity had become a serious public health concern and an increasing number of people were leading sedentary lives, Nordic Walking was introduced as a non-threatening method for novice exercisers to get in shape. One of the major advantages of Nordic Walking is that it can be adapted to individual levels of fitness and carries a low risk of injury. The aspects of health and fitness promotion inherent in Nordic Walking have been described in a number of scientific studies and articles. While these types of report are not normally read by the average walker, they constitute more or less compulsory reference material for those promoting the activity.

According to consumption researchers Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar, the international success of Nordic Walking constitutes a prime example of when the interests of the consumer and the producer meet.[29] The consumer is, in other words, part of the innovation process, and Nordic Walking can be regarded as a folk movement in more ways than one. In Nordic Walking, a well-established practice is combined with a component claimed to raise the efficiency of the activity. This is obviously a clever marketing strategy on the part of manufacturers of walking poles, but it also corresponds to a general trend towards the specialization and sportification of outdoor life.[30] Nordic Walking is walking with the added ingredient of specialized equipment but also carries the prescription of proper technique and the need, at least initially, for expert guidance. The underlying message is clear: simply knowing how to walk is not enough.

Nordic Walking has met with the most enthusiasm in countries where outdoor life is considered part of a national lifestyle. Besides the Nordic countries, Nordic Walking has gained particular popularity in northern and central Europe, especially in German-speaking countries. This pattern seems to correspond to two different traditions connected with walking – a general 'Northern' culture of walking that favours brisk walking, alone or with a walking partner, preferably in nature or along park pathways or exercise trails, versus a general 'Southern' *flâneur*-esque tradition of leisurely social walking in urban environments.[31]

[29] Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar, 'Consumers, Producers and Practices: Understanding the Invention and Reinvention of Nordic Walking', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1 (2005): 62.

[30] Sandell and Sörlin, *Friluftshistoria*, pp. 204–205; Ingemar Ahlström, 'Utomhus i konsumtionssamhället', in Sandell and Sörlin, *Friluftshistoria*, p. 180; Emmelin, Fredman and Sandell, *Planering och förvaltning för friluftsliv*, p. 15.

[31] See, for example, Giovanna Del Negro, *The Passeggiata and Popular Culture in an Italian Town: Folklore and the Performance of Modernity* (Montreal and Kingston, 2004). See

Figure 2.2 Nordic walkers by the shore

The typical Nordic walker is not found in city centres. However, it is not particularly usual to take the walking poles along for a walk in 'wild' nature either. The most typical settings for the Nordic walk are along country roads or along the gravelled park paths and the networks of walking trails characteristic of Nordic suburbia.[32]

Nevertheless, the aspect of nature has retained a significant role in the marketing of the activity internationally. Promotional pictures of Nordic walkers tend to be set in scenic landscapes with little visible habitation. The concept of 'fresh air' is frequently employed to characterize Nordic Walking in direct marketing as well as by private advocates. In their book *Schlank und Fit mit Nordic Walking* (*Slim and Fit with Nordic Walking*), the German Nordic Walking instructors Ulrich Pramann and Bernd Schäufle claim that brisk pole walking in nature helps to develop a sensitivity for one's own body and to find a balance between body and soul – which subsequently will develop a new

also Annick Sjögren, 'Allemansrätt i själen', in E. Johansson (ed.), *Mångnatur. Friluftsliv och natursyn i det mångkulturella samhället* (Tumba, 2006).

[32] Cf. Tage Wiklund, *Det tillgjorda landskapet* (Gothenburg, 1995).

vivacity.[33] It is not only the exercise that is described as health-promoting in Nordic Walking – spending time outdoors is portrayed as an equally healing factor. The perceived spiritual effect of the activity is underlined by many of its proponents.[34] The message disseminated in most instructional guides on Nordic Walking is explicit: adding poles to walking not only burns more calories – it induces serenity and well-being.

Nordic: The Brand

Nordic Walking is clearly associated with nature and with a healthy body and mind. But to what extent does the term 'Nordic' help to promote this image? At least in a European context, Nordic countries seem to be commonly perceived as particularly nature-loving (an image, one might add, much endorsed by the Nordic countries themselves). 'Nordic is outdoors. Nordic is nature. Absolutely,' states instructor Frank van Eeckhout at the Nordic Fitness Center in Brussels in answer to the question of what Belgians perceive as 'Nordic'. Eva Johansson, Nordic Walking instructor at the Swedish Friskis & Svettis Gym in Brussels concurs: 'Outdoor activities are not paid much attention to here in Belgium and many Belgians do not know how to prepare in terms of clothing and shoes for an outdoor activity. Scandinavians have a closer relationship with nature and view it differently. We both are and are perceived as outdoor people.'[35] Jens Werner, Nordic Walking instructor in Bad Kreuznach in Germany, notes that Scandinavia, as well as Canada, are both considered meccas for outdoor sports. 'Scandinavia is generally associated with a love for nature and environment-friendliness,' he adds.[36]

A common association for Nordic Walking is winter sports, especially during the early years of Nordic Walking when it was widely conceived of as 'skiing without skis'. Exel's marketing manager confirms that in choosing the name 'Nordic Walking' the company deliberately wanted to create identification with an established image. The target was to create a new market for the training

[33] Ulrich Pramann and Bernd Schäufle, *Schlank und Fit mit Nordic Walking* (Munich: Südwest Verlag, 2006).

[34] See, for example, Malin Svensson, *Nordic Walking* (Los Angeles, 2009).

[35] '... utomhusaktiviteter agnas ingen storre uppmarksamhet har i Belgien och de flesta belgare vet inte hur de ska forbereda sig (klader, skor mm) for en utomhusaktivitet. Skandinaver har ett narmare forhallande till naturen och ser den pa ett annat satt. Vi bade ar och uppfattas som friluftsmanniskor', interview, Brussels, 28 April 2010.

[36] 'Generell gilt Skandinavien – neben Kanada – als das Mekka der Outdoorsportarten. Die Liebe zur Natur und die Naturfreundlichkeit steht hierzulande ebenfalls sprichwörtlich für Skandinavien': interview, Bad Kreuznach, 22 November 2010.

method in central Europe. She explains: 'Scandinavian style was a trend at that time. The name refers both to Scandinavia and also to Nordic skiing, as Nordic Walking can be compared to Nordic skiing classic style.'[37]

Consequently, by using the adjective 'Nordic' it was possible to build on an existing 'brand' and tap into a set of stereotypes and values. Exel Oyj has elaborated on the concept by introducing Nordic Fitness Sports, which, in addition to Nordic Walking includes Nordic Fitness Skiing, Nordic Blading and Nordic Snowshoeing. A further development is to not only market the activity and the equipment, but also the actual *places* as a part of Nordic Fitness. The concept of a Nordic Fitness Sport Park was registered in 2003. The chain of Nordic Fitness Sport Parks, which offer scenic trails for Nordic Walking for different levels of fitness, can be found in Finland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, the Netherlands and Italy. Accordingly, having a 'Nordic' park in Italy is, in this connection, no contradiction, since it is the activity that makes it Nordic. Similarly, the Nordic Fitness Center in Brussels defines itself as Nordic because of the range of outdoor activities it offers.

Other examples in which 'Nordic' has been employed for its brand value is in various types of 'Nordic design' products and in the New Nordic Cuisine movement, perhaps most famously exemplified by the celebrated Danish restaurant *noma*. The name *noma* is an abbreviation of *nordisk mad* ('Nordic food') regardless of the fact that the main fare on offer at the restaurant is of Danish origin.[38] The brand 'Nordic' aims to evoke associations with nature, freshness, health, simplicity (in the sense of naturalness), honesty and authenticity, as well as being simultaneously ecological and high-tech. In the examples above, the brand 'Nordic' has consequently been chosen above the national alternatives of, for example, 'Danish food' and 'Finnish walking'. Attempts to connect with perceived common Nordic values are also discernible in the naming of certain cultural institutions, such as the Nordiska museet (Stockholm) and the Nordic Heritage Museum (Seattle).[39]

Pilgrimage: New and Old Walking Traditions

It is worth noting that even though the 'Nordic' in Nordic Walking is decisively underscored internationally, the activity is simply called pole walking in the

[37] Email interview with Marja-Leena Koskinen, Marketing Manager, Exel, 5 May 2010.

[38] Hanne Pico Larsen, 'Performing Tasty Heritage: Danish Cuisine and Playful Nostalgia at Restaurant *noma*', *Ethnologia Europaea*, 40/2 (2010): 90–102.

[39] See Magdalena Hillström, Chapter 10 in this volume, and Lizette Gradén, Chapter 8 in this volume.

Nordic region – *sauvakävely* in Finnish, *stavgång/stavgang* in the Scandinavian languages and *kepikõnd* in Estonian. In the Nordic countries, the marketing and promoting of Nordic Walking has focused on introducing it as an 'ordinary activity for ordinary people' and on underlining the benefits involved in adding the poles to normal walking.[40] In other words, the launch of Nordic Walking entailed introducing an element to an already existing practice, rather than pioneering a completely new activity and behavioural pattern. Finnish studies have shown that the majority of Nordic walkers in Finland were already ardent walkers prior to picking up their walking poles.[41]

A walking-related phenomenon that builds on tradition in a different way is the recent upsurge of interest in pilgrimage. The growing popularity of pilgrimage in the Nordic countries is part of a global trend, but also retains some regional characteristics. In the present-day Nordic context, the term 'pilgrimage' covers a range of different walking practices. There are traditional pilgrimages consisting of a solitary walker or small group of pilgrims walking long distances to a famous religious site, but shorter group walks led by the local parish parson may also be referred to as a pilgrimage. Some of the arranged group pilgrimages have a marked emphasis on meditation and spiritual reflection whereas others place more importance on the social aspects of community and sharing experiences.

The two most important Nordic pilgrimage sites in the Middle Ages, Nidaros Cathedral (in present-day Trondheim) in Norway and the Birgittine abbey in Vadstena in Sweden, are nowadays both homes to active pilgrim centres that organize, promote and provide information about pilgrimage. In addition, organized pilgrimage activities have been established in Finland and Denmark. In 2010 the Saint Olav pilgrimage to Nidaros was accorded the status of a Council of Europe Cultural Route. The Council of Europe homepage describes the route as follows:

> The pilgrim ways through Scandinavia are a network of routes through Denmark, Sweden and Norway, many of them the remnants of historic routes leading to Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim where Saint Olav lies buried. Since the 1990s, the ways have been improved and signposted, in order to set out a variety of walks through the spectacular landscape of Scandinavia.[42]

[40] Shove and Pantzar, 'Consumers, Producers and Practices', p. 50.

[41] Katja Oksanen-Särelä and Päivi Timonen, 'Diversification of Practice: The Case of Nordic Walking', in M. Pantzar and E. Shove (eds), *Manufacturing Leisure* (Helsinki, 2005), p. 212.

[42] Council of Europe, 'The Route of Saint Olav Ways', http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/routes/Olav_en.asp, accessed 28 March 2011.

This description with its remarks about a common Scandinavian historical heritage and 'spectacular landscape' could easily have been taken from a tourist brochure. Indeed, besides the religious aspects, increasing pilgrim tourism is a contributing impetus for developing the Scandinavian pilgrimage routes. The potential of increased pilgrim tourism is subtly hinted at in the Norwegian press release (3 June 2010) announcing the Council of Europe's recognition of the Saint Olav ways as a European heritage route:

> It is now settled that the pilgrim roads through Denmark, Sweden and Norway, under the name Saint Olav ways, will have the status of European route of culture. This will be very important for the Nordic pilgrimage cooperation. When the pilgrim roads to Santiago de Compostela, as the first one, received the status of European route of culture in 1987, the number of pilgrims increased from two-three thousand to over a hundred thousand pilgrims a year. The Saint Olav ways will now be directly connected to the road to Santiago and all the great European pilgrimage routes.[43]

Scandinavian routes that have been officially approved as belonging to the Nidaros pilgrimage network are marked with a special patented symbol – a Saint Olav logo that brands the route as 'authentic'. In Sweden there is also a similar patented symbol for marking other pilgrimage routes, especially ones related to the Saint Bridget pilgrimage to Vadstena. The common Nordic interest in developing the Scandinavian pilgrimage network is primarily expressed in cooperation between the different pilgrim centres through yearly conferences, joint pilgrimages and projects. As a sign of the pan-Nordic importance there is even a special Nordic pilgrimage flag with the Nordic colours.

However, not only the Nordic pilgrim centres but, increasingly, also many dioceses, parishes, museums, hiking associations, local pilgrimage and heritage societies, as well as tourist entrepreneurs, are involved in expanding the Scandinavian pilgrimage routes. Building on *allemansrätten*, cultural–historical landscapes as well as large areas of unpopulated nature, the various pilgrim projects offer walking and heritage tourism with a spiritual dimension for pilgrims near and far.

Parishes in all of the Nordic countries arrange both shorter and longer pilgrimages as a communal activity: a number of parishes even have their own pilgrim pastors. Pilgrimages present alternatives to traditional church services and attract many participants that might not otherwise be regular church-

[43] 'Pilegrimsvegene til Nidaros får status som Europeisk kulturveg', http://www.pilgrim.info/artikkel.aspx?id=4096057, accessed 28 March 2011.

goers. Today, several religious educational institutions offer courses in becoming a pilgrim guide. The present-day popularity of pilgrimage is often seen as connected with a growing interest in spirituality and ecological questions. These interests go beyond traditional religiosity, and a large number of participants in pilgrimages are in fact agnostics or non-believers. Tomas Wettermark, pilgrim pastor at the pilgrim centre in Vadstena, interprets the current broad appeal of pilgrimage as an answer to general late-modern concerns in that people do not want to be told what to do, but want experiences. He observes that many of those who visit the Vadstena pilgrim centre might even hold a negative opinion about the Church:

> On the other hand, [our visitors] say that they do believe, or that they are searching, but they want to do in their own way and, preferably, they want to do it in nature – that's where one experiences the presence of God in some way. ... This whole thing about being outdoors and walking, and that you get by with rather simple means. You have a small backpack with an extra sweater and an extra pair of socks. Really very simple. And this appeals to people tremendously.[44]

The pilgrim pastor Fjalar Lundell of the Swedish-speaking pilgrim centre in Sibbo, Finland, has long experience in Nordic pilgrimage work and sees the accentuation of the practices of a slower pace and reflection as characteristic of the Nordic pilgrimage culture. He describes, as does pastor Tomas Wettermark, the pilgrimage profile in the Nordic countries, despite certain national differences, as having a common basis and considers that the positive attitude to outdoor life in general has influenced the proliferation of pilgrimage activities.[45]

An often-observed trend in contemporary Western pilgrimage is the attention given to the road rather than to the goal and the arrival.[46] This tendency is prominent in the case of Nordic pilgrimage and is in line with the Protestant tradition of not recognizing certain objects and places as more spiritually charged than others, but rather seeing God as omnipresent.[47] The pilgrim pastors in Vadstena and in Sibbo both emphasize that present-day Nordic pilgrimage actively avoids the image of pilgrimage as an achievement, which was often a

[44] Fieldwork interview with T.W., 13 June 2011.

[45] Fieldwork interviews with F.L., 11 November 2009, and T.W., 13 June 2011.

[46] See, for example, Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London, 2005).

[47] See, for example, Arne Bugge Amundsen, 'Naturvandring eller indre reise? Moderne norske pilegrimer i ideologisk dobbeltlys', in A. Eriksen, J. Garnert and T. Selberg (eds), *Historien in på livet. Diskussioner om kulturarv och minnespolitik* (Lund, 2002), p. 164. Also fieldwork interviews with F.L. and T.W.

prominent aspect of mediaeval pilgrimage, and instead attach great importance to the process of walking. Walking in nature is often described by representatives of the Protestant Church as instrumental for a deepened spiritual experience. The comments of Sweden's first pilgrim parson Hans-Erik Lindström on the Church of Sweden homepage seem to sit well with the tradition of Nordic outdoor ideals:

> In nature people let go of much of what goes on between walls and ceilings and floors, where one is closed in. One feels a greater degree of freedom. Then one will more easily open up to both exterior and internal impulses. The beauty, *not least for us Scandinavians* [*nordbor*], also contributes.[48]

Hans-Erik Lindström's 'seven keywords' of pilgrimage (freedom, simplicity, slow pace, peacefulness, light-heartedness, sharing and spirituality) that lie at the foundation of the pilgrimage work at the Vadstena pilgrim centre have generally been embraced and promoted by the other Nordic pilgrim centres as well.

The Solitary and Athletic Roamers of the Forest?

The ideal of the slowed-pace Nordic pilgrimages notwithstanding, a more common perception of the typical Nordic hiker, including the Nordic pilgrim, seems to be one of speed and capacity for walking. This image is particularly associated with the Norwegians, for whom the concept of 'going on a hike' [*gå på tur*] has become part of the national self-definition. The co-workers at the Finland-Swedish pilgrim centre in Sibbo did not find it surprising that the new Nordic wave of interest in pilgrimage started in Norway with its strong tradition of long-distance walking. One of the pilgrim pastors remarked:

> It is absolutely impossible to have a pilgrimage with Norwegian participants. They will just run off. You don't know where they have gone, while you yourself are huffing and puffing behind them. I have tried to keep up with them but it is a real effort.

However, in the context of European pilgrimage it seems that this reputation does not only cover Norwegians. Interviewed Finnish pilgrims who walked the Camino de Santiago testify that Scandinavians in general are often singled out

[48] Svenska kyrkan (Church of Sweden), 'Pilgrim i dag', emphasis added, http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=643800, accessed 29 March 2011.

as fast walkers. One young female Santiago pilgrim from Helsinki answered the question about what characterizes pilgrims from the Nordic countries by saying:

> Well, they are always in a rush. And they are great walkers. And that's what people from other countries said too. That the Finns and [other Scandinavians] were great walkers. Yes, that's how it was. ... Even Scandinavians who were not particularly sporty walked quickly. Some people from other countries also did, but then they were the sporty kind.

Several of the Finnish pilgrims I interviewed were experienced hikers who had previously gone on longer camping trips in Scandinavia. All of them felt that walking the sometimes quite busy pilgrim route to Santiago was a very different experience from hiking in Nordic nature. For example, one interviewee described the two walking experiences as complete opposites:

> If you compare it [the Camino de Santiago] with walking here in Finland or in Sweden I would in some ways perceive it as night and day. Here in Finland you go hiking in order to *not* meet people [laughs], to be in the forest, to take it easy, easy and peaceful, have your backpack, live in your tent, drink the water from the lake. To be there in the mountains or in the forest, the less people, the better it is. It is like you are your own master. You have everything you need with you, food and clothes and home, the tent. You are your own master, you can decide everything for yourself.[49]

The Nordic propensity to seek out the remoteness of unpopulated nature has been explained both as having developed out of bourgeois pastimes and as the result of a prevailing pre-industrialized, or even pre-agrarian, mentality.[50] Recent urbanization is a likely reason for the lingering strong attachment to the countryside among the urban population, not least in Finland, believes one of the investigators for a project on mapping walking routes for the city of Turku:

> Most town-dwellers here [in Finland] are new arrivals. There are not many generations of town-dwellers: if they are born [in a town] then their parents are born in the countryside, and they will have summer cottages out of town. So most urban people in Finland are as a matter of fact rather rural. And that's why they enjoy walking in the forest and go hiking away from the urban scenes, if you can

[49] Anonymous interviewee, pilgrims and walkers (2008–2011).

[50] Wiklund, *Det tillgjorda landskapet*, p. 68; Björn Tordsson, 'Rötter i "barbari" och "romantic"', in Sandell and Sörlin, *Friluftshistoria*; Löfgren, 'Människan i naturen', p. 66.

> put it that way. I am certain that it has a strong connection with people's other identity, before they settled in town.[51]

The Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren has described the Scandinavian image of nature as 'compensatory' – nature and outdoor life offer a contrast and a relief from working life, demands and artificiality. From early childhood, this originally urban middle-class view is taught through cultural habits, popular culture and institutions. Nature is seen to represent leisure, freedom and non-artificiality or, in other words, *naturalness*. At the same time, outdoor life has inevitably become part of a growing leisure industry.[52]

Today, a significant part of the population in the Nordic countries has its roots elsewhere. Considering the strong emphasis on spending time in nature in Nordic culture, it is not surprising that outdoor life has been explored as a way of integrating immigrants into their new home countries. Despite their good intentions, these projects have been criticized for not involving immigrants at the planning level and for adopting a patronizing attitude of teaching the 'correct' way of interacting with nature. Another serious critique concerns the tendency of viewing immigrants as a homogenous group and not acknowledging that there are also considerable differences among the Nordic 'non-immigrant' population with regard to knowledge about, access to and interest in nature and outdoor activities.[53] However, it has also been pointed out that outdoor activities may constitute a particularly useful meeting space in this context. Nature can offer a neutral arena for different groups and, moreover, introduce the documented health benefits connected with outdoor life.[54] Comparisons of attitudes to nature within the 'outdoors' integration projects have often centred around cultural differences in behaviour patterns and expectations: While the traditional Nordic perception of nature is as a space for solitude, sports and nature study, the tradition among many immigrant groups has been to see nature as a space for socializing.[55]

The institutionalized love of nature in the Nordic countries may seem innocuous but, driven to its extreme, the implications of the 'sound mind in a sound body' dogma may quickly pick up less benign connotations of elitism,

[51] Fieldwork interview with H.E., 22 February 2009.

[52] Löfgren, 'Människan i naturen', pp. 66–71.

[53] Emil Plisch, 'Naturliga möten', in Johansson, *Mångnatur*.

[54] Pernilla Ouis, 'Grusade förhoppningar. Friluftsliv som integration i Arrie', in H. Dahm, E. Lisberg Jensen and P. Ouis, *Man lär sig genom att vara där. Utvärdering av studiefrämjandets projekt Mångfald och Integration 2007–2009* (Lund, 2010), p. 189.

[55] Ella Johansson, 'Om meningen med att gå en sväng. En introduktion till tema och innehåll', in Johansson, *Mångnatur*, pp. 9–10; Ouis, 'Grusade förhoppningar', p. 180.

xenophobia and a division between 'us' and 'them'. A truly multicultural Nordic society, on the other hand, will need to accept different uses of nature and see them as enriching rather than threatening.[56]

Conclusion

Nordic Walking and pilgrimage are seemingly very different types of walking phenomena. However, the recent success and spread of both in the Nordic region build on established popular practices. In other words, a pre-understanding of, and a willingness to, embrace the activities already existed. Nordic Walking and pilgrimage fit into a tradition of outdoor life. Idealization of nature is a key aspect in both activities, and in both cases nature is linked to ideas of health, whether physical or spiritual.

Nature has, arguably to a greater degree than in many other nations, become a central element in expressions of nationalism in Nordic countries.[57] The themes of nature and outdoor activities have evolved into a central mythology and common Nordic stereotype.[58] Part and parcel of this paradigm are ideals and ideas concerning health, soundness and (national) identity. In this context, a brisk forest walk emerges as a moral imperative. While outdoor life as ideology might deny and hide the contemporary reality of an increasingly plural and multicultural northern Europe, these types of mythologies, as pointed out by outdoor life researcher Björn Tordsson, tend to create their own realities.[59]

Very few countries can compare with the Nordic countries statistically when it comes to practising outdoor and sporting activities.[60] This is supported by studies and surveys that consistently rank outdoor life at the top of popular pastimes.[61] Whether this is because people feel a social pressure to rank leisure-time pursuits this way or whether it reflects actual practices is a question for discussion. The survey results do, however, clearly reflect a societal ideal. This ideal is also maintained at an official level – as exemplified in information about

[56] See ibid.

[57] Cf. Orvar Löfgren, 'Parkvandringer', in K. Hastrup (ed.), *Den nordiske verden* 1 (Copenhagen, 1992), p. 150.

[58] See Sandell and Sörlin, 'Naturen som fostrare'; Tordsson, 'Rötter i "barbari" och "romantik"'; Paasi, 'Finnish Landscape as Social Practice'.

[59] Tordsson, 'Rötter i "barbari" och "romantik"', p. 57.

[60] Seppo Hentilä, 'Jaloon uskomme urheiluun', in A. Heikkinen *et al.* (eds), *Suomi uskoi urheiluun. Suomen urheilun ja liikunnan historia* (Helsinki, 1992), p. 14.

[61] Nedrelid, 'Use of Nature as a Norwegian Characteristic', p. 24; Aronsson, 'Rörlighet och naturturism', p. 214.

allemansrätten by governmental institutions, where outdoor life is described as a cultural heritage of great significance and, moreover, something of intrinsic importance to the national identities of the Nordic countries.

Besides the more or less compulsory references to *allemansrätten*, previous studies have singled out simplicity and everydayness as typical for Nordic outdoor life. The widespread popular foundation (*folklighet*) of outdoor life has also been described as characteristic.[62] Yet another aspect of the Nordicness of outdoor life is sensory experience. Walking through a landscape gives tangibility to the sense of place. The special features of a particular landscape, the flora and fauna, the changing seasons and weather conditions – such as snow and autumn colours, the darkness of winter and long twilight hours of summer nights – are all instrumental in shaping the experience of the walk. First-hand experiences and accounts of particular types of Nordic landscapes tend to reconfirm their iconic position and act as a reminder of their 'Nordic' quality.

The nature walk is a Nordic stereotype and ideal, but also a common practice that is part of many people's lifestyle and self-image – the awareness of which simultaneously brings out the ritual and performative aspect of everyday patterns of movement. In situations where these practices are highlighted – for example, in rhetoric and when contrasted with cultural practices elsewhere – they are frequently framed specifically as Nordic. Precisely because of their mundaneness, popular patterns of movement have an integral role in the processes of creating, negotiating and performing Nordic identities.

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