

UTOPIANS AND UTILITARIANS: *Environment and Economy in the Finnish-Canadian Settlement of Sointula*

MIKKO SAIKKU

There – where virgin nature, unaltered by human hand, exudes its own, mysterious life – we shall find the sweet feeling that terrifies a corrupt human being, but makes a virtuous one sing with poetic joy. There, amidst nature, we shall find ourselves and feel the craving for love, justice, and harmony.

Matti Kurikka, 1903¹

THE HISTORY OF SOINTULA IN BRITISH COLUMBIA – the name of the community is a Finnish word roughly translatable as “a place of harmony” – provides ample material for an entertaining narrative. The settlement was founded in 1901 as a Finnish utopian commune on the remote Malcolm Island in Queen Charlotte Strait. Although maybe a quarter of Malcolm Island’s eight hundred inhabitants are still of Finnish descent, little Finnish is spoken in the community today.² Between the 1900s and the 1960s, however, the predominant language of communication in Sointula was Finnish.

The essentials of Sointula’s fascinating history are rather well known: they include the establishment of an ethnically homogenous, utopian socialist commune; its inevitable breakup; strong socialist and co-operative

¹ I wish to thank Pirkko Hautamäki, Markku Henriksson, Kevin Wilson, the editor of *BC Studies*, and two anonymous readers for their thoughtful comments on the manuscript. A 2004 travel grant from the Chancellor’s Office at the University of Helsinki and a 2005 Foreign Affairs Canada Faculty Research Award enabled me to conduct research in British Columbia. Tom Roper, Gloria Williams, and other staff at the Sointula Museum were most supportive of my research on Malcolm Island, while Jim Kilbourne and Randy Williams kindly provided me with the hands-on experience of trolling for Pacific salmon onboard the *Chase River*.

Matti Kurikka, “Ihmiskunnan tulevaisuus, I” [The Future of Humankind, I], *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 41. The Finnish equivalent of the English word “mankind” has always been “ihmiskunta” (humankind). It should be noted that Finnish is a gender-blind language: the pronoun “hän” can mean either “he” or “she.” All translations from Finnish to English in this article are mine.

² Estimate by Leo Viljakainen in Timo Jaakkola and Jouni Korkiasaari, “Kalevalaista perinnettä länsirannikolla 1999,” *Siirtolaisuus/Migration* 3 (1999): 33.

traditions among the island's population ever since; a move from agriculture and lumbering to fishing as the community's economic base; and, since the late 1960s, a reputation as a haven for alternative lifestyles.³ With tourism on the rise in coastal British Columbia, the story is today being told again and again in travel guides and on websites connected to the industry. The beach on the northern shore of Malcolm Island, regularly visited by orca whales, is a popular destination for ecotourists and serves as an important setting for many scenes in Bill Gaston's

³ The colourful history of Sointula has generated some interest among Finnish and Canadian scholars and writers. The existing research on the history of Finns on Malcolm Island has, however, largely concentrated on the founding and collapse of the utopian experiment and the charismatic presence of its leader, Matti Kurikka. Subsequent developments in the community have received less attention.

Two recent monographs on Malcolm Island history are Paula Wild's *Sointula: Island Utopia* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1995) and Kevin Wilson's *Practical Dreamers: Communitarianism and Co-operatives on Malcolm Island* (Victoria: British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, 2005). The standard account on the commune era is Matti Halminen, *Sointula: Kalevan Kansan ja Kanadan suomalaisten historiaa* (Mikkeli, FIN: Mikko Ampuja, 1936). All three have been extensively used in establishing the background for this article. For shorter general accounts, see Doris Andersen, "Malcolm Island," in *Evergreen Islands: A History of the Islands of the Inside Passage* (North Vancouver: Gray's/Whitecap, 1979), 189-201; Aili Anderson, *History of Sointula* (Vancouver: Sointula Centennial Committee, 1958); Gordon Fish, *Dreams of Freedom: Bella Coola, Cape Scott, Sointula*, Sound Heritage Series, no. 36 (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1982), 1-2, 31-40, 67-77; John I. Kolehmainen, "Harmony Island: A Finnish Utopian Venture in British Columbia," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 5 (1941): 11-25; Teuvo Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa: Suomalaisten ihannesiirtokunnat 1700-luvulta nykypäivään* (Helsinki: Otava, 1985), 41-62; Yrjö Raivio, *Kanadan suomalaisten historia 1* (Copper Cliff, ON: Canadian Suomalainen Historiaseura, 1975) 373-96.

For more specific studies on Sointula, see Varpu Lindström, "Utopia for Women? The Sointula Experiment, 1901-1905," *Journal of Finnish Studies* 4 (2000): 4-25; Sakari Sariola, *Amerikan kultalaan: Amerikansuomalaisten siirtolaisten sosiaalhistoriaa* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1982), 100-18; Heikki Uimonen, "Pois maailman mellakasta: Sointulan siirtokunnan ääninympäristön muutos," in *Kuultava menneisyys: Suomalaisen äänimaiseman historiaa*, ed. Outi Ampuja and Kaarina Kilpiö (Turku, FIN: Turun historiallinen yhdistys, 2005), 38-70. Canadian historian J. Donald Wilson has published numerous articles on the community and its leaders. These include "Matti Kurikka: Finnish-Canadian Intellectual," *BC Studies* 20 (1973-74): 50-65; "Matti Kurikka and A.B. Mäkelä: Socialist Thought among Finns in Canada, 1900-1932," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 10 (1978): 22-37; "A Synoptic View of the *Aika*, Canada's First Finnish-Language Newspaper," *Amphora* 39 (March 1980): 9-14; "Matti Kurikka and the Settlement of Sointula, British Columbia, 1901-1905," *Finnish Americana* 3 (1980): 6-29; "Never Believe What You Have Never Doubted': Matti Kurikka's Dream for a New World Utopia," in *Finnish Diaspora I: Canada, South America, Africa, and Sweden*, ed. Michael G. Karni (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), 131-53; "The Socialist Legacy on Malcolm Island after the Collapse of the Utopian Settlement of Sointula," *Journal of Finnish Studies* 1 (1997): 155-64; "Matti Kurikka and the Utopian Socialist Settlement of Sointula, British Columbia," in *Pitkät jäljet: Historioita kahdelta mantereelta*, ed. Eero Kuparinen (Turku, FIN: Turun yliopisto, 1999), 367-85; and "A.B. Mäkelä as a Political Commentator in Early Twentieth Century Canada," in *In Search of a Continent: A North American Studies Odyssey*, ed. Mikko Saikku, Maarika Toivonen, and Mikko Toivonen (Helsinki: Renvall Institute for Area and Cultural Studies, 1999), 227-40.



Malcolm Island and surroundings, showing the most important fishing grounds for Sointula fishers. Alert Bay on Cormorant Island is home to a large Kwakwaka'wakw community. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

acclaimed 2004 novel entitled *Sointula*. For many visitors to Vancouver Island, Sointula and Malcolm Island have become synonymous with the striking beauty of the BC coast and a lifestyle in harmony with the natural world.⁴

⁴ Bill Gaston, *Sointula* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2004). In addition to the website maintained by the community, "Sointula, British Columbia, Canada, on Malcolm Island," <http://www.island.net/~sointula/>, see also the tourist industry websites "Vancouver Island," <http://www.vancouverisland.com/Regions/towns/?townID=74>; "Vancouver Island Travel Guide," <http://www.victoriabc.com/vancisland/sointula.html>; and "Travel in BC," <http://www.travelinbc.com/Sointula.cfm> (all viewed 10 May 2007). See also Gaston, *Sointula*, 207-10.

Unfortunately for those interested in the environmental experience of Finnish-Canadians, the historiography on Finns in Canada – whether written in Finland or in Canada – has largely focused on the immigrants' social and political organization. In this article, two aspects of the Finnish settlers' and their descendants' environmental experience are studied in both the intellectual and socioeconomic realms of environmental history.⁵ First, how have the people of Finnish origin on Malcolm Island perceived their natural environment throughout time? The intellectual realm is justly prominent in contemporary environmental historiography. Different aspects of nature have different meanings in different contexts and for different human beings; human ideas about the environment cannot be considered in isolation from their cultural context. Throughout history, humans have conceived of their environment in a myriad of ways, and differences in the ways that societies conceptualize both nature and the human-made environment are immense. Individual and societal attitudes towards the environment have provided the basis for human-induced changes in nature. Furthermore, many cultural values stem from economic practices and are related to the use of certain resources. Thus, they can be connected with particular human societies and the ways such societies utilize the natural world.

The Finnish experience on Malcolm Island provides ample material for this approach, as the dominant ideologies of the community have changed considerably over the last century. The utopian socialist ideology of the original Finnish settlers was strongly influenced by National Romantic and theosophical ideas, while the co-operative movement and even Soviet-style socialism gained more support after the collapse of the original communal experiment. During the twentieth century, rapidly increasing integration of the island community into the capitalist marketplace changed the way Sointula residents viewed their natural surroundings. The intellectual component of Sointula's environmental history is therefore closely related to changes in the socioeconomic realm, where the means of subsistence are extracted from the natural environment and divided within a given society. How does this process shape

⁵ See the discussion and sources quoted in Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 5-12. For environmental historiography on British Columbia, see Graeme Wynn, "Shall We Linger along Ambitionless? Environmental Perspectives on British Columbia," *BC Studies* 142/43 (2004): 5-67. Richard White's classic *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980) traces the environmental history of Whidbey Island and Camano Island in Puget Sound, where agriculture came to play a much more important role for European settlers than it did on Malcolm Island.

both human society and its natural environment? To understand these developments, major transformations in the Finnish settlers' economic base have to be examined. The move from ideals of self-sufficiency to the incorporation of a very localized economy into the regional and even global marketplace via commercial logging and fishing physically transformed Malcolm Island and affected the surrounding seascape.

During the last century, British Columbia has experienced enormous growth characterized by, among other developments, rapid urbanization and the decline of distinctive coastal communities.⁶ Since the Second World War, Sointula as a community may have lost some of its most renowned features but has managed to retain a distinct identity without rejecting modernity. Even today, many of Sointula's inhabitants attempt to adjust to economic change and persist without succumbing to the homogenizing forces of globalization. The remote location of Malcolm Island obviously accounts for some of this, but the utopian ideals and socialist beliefs of the original Finnish settlers have continued to inspire the community and emerge as even more important for the Sointulans' outlook toward economy and the natural environment.

In this article, my goal has been to let the people of Sointula speak for themselves. The early leaders of the community, Matti Kurikka and A.B. Mäkelä, were prolific writers, and many of their publications explicitly touch upon environmental issues. Between November 1903 and July 1904, the first Finnish newspaper in Canada, the biweekly *Aika* (Time) was published on Malcolm Island, offering a unique insight into the life of a utopian commune. There are also numerous published and unpublished memoirs and interviews of early settlers, while, since the late 1960s, local historians have conducted dozens of taped interviews among the island's population.⁷

Between 1870 and 1930, some 380,000 Finns migrated to North America. The ultimate destination for most of the Finnish immigrants was the United States, but Canada also attracted a substantial number of Finns.⁸

⁶ On the post-1945 modernization of the provincial economy and its consequences for small communities, see Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 270–96. See also Tina Loo, "People in the Way: Modernity, Environment, and Society on the Arrow Lakes," *BC Studies* 142/43 (2004): 162–67.

⁷ The interviews of Malcolm Islanders of Finnish ancestry used in this article were conducted between 1967 and 1993 by Imbert Orchard, Murray Kennedy, Gordon Fish, Paula Wild, and Gloria Williams. All were taped and partially transcribed. The interviews prepared by Orchard, Kennedy, Fish, and Wild are located in the British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), Victoria, and the ones by Williams in the Sointula Museum.

⁸ Jouni Korkiasaari, *Suomalaiset maailmalla: Suomen siirtolaisuus ja ulkosuomalaiset entisajoista tähän päivään* (Turku, FIN: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 1989), 24. According to Reino Kero,

While they could be categorized as “Western” Europeans because of their cultural heritage, Finns still differed significantly from the other Nordic immigrants to Canada. Finland had been a Swedish province from the twelfth century until 1809, when it was annexed by the Russian Empire. Granted the status of an autonomous Grand Duchy, Finland retained its old legislation and was allowed to develop its own central administration with Swedish as its official language, along with a legislative body of four estates, an army, and a separate currency. During the nineteenth century, a sense of national unity and common cultural identity developed in the country. The Finnish language, the non-Indo-European mother tongue of a great majority of Finns, was granted an official status in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and an edited collection of Finnish folklore, the *Kalevala*, was elevated to the position of national epic in the spirit of National Romanticism. Towards the end of the century, however, the Grand Duchy’s loyalty to the Empire came to be questioned, and a period of intense Russification began. At the same time, Finland’s population was growing, and the number of tenant farmers and other landless people rose rapidly. Industrialization and urbanization had commenced in the country, but unemployment remained high and living conditions in the few industrial cities proved poor. Around the turn of the century, Finland’s separate army was disbanded, and conscription of Finnish men into the Russian army was introduced. Is it any wonder that many Finns, especially in the lower socioeconomic classes, chose to emigrate and join the ranks of millions of European immigrants to North America? Some Finnish migrants, however, were not content to seek only personal freedom and better economic opportunities.

The future founder of Sointula, Matti Kurikka, was born in 1863.⁹ After passing the matriculation examination in 1881, he studied at the University of Helsinki without attaining a degree. Working as a journalist and playwright, he was very active in the Finnish labour movement, which had not yet accepted a purely socialist platform. He was fascinated by the writings of Leo Tolstoy and theosophists such as Madame Blavatsky, and he strongly supported the emerging women’s equality movement in Finland. Fiercely opposed to the Lutheran Church, the state church of Finland, Kurikka nonetheless preached his

Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War (Turku, FIN: Turun yliopisto, 1974), 47, altogether some 300,000 Finns had emigrated before the First World War.

⁹ On Kurikka, see Kalevi Kalemaa, *Matti Kurikka, legenda jo eläessään* (Porvoo, FIN: Werner Söderström, 1978); Arvi Hautamäki, “Matti Kurikka: Utopistinen sosialisti,” in *Tiennäyttäjät*, vol. 1, ed. Hannu Soikkanen (Helsinki: Tammi, 1967), 277–317.

own concept of Christianity, blended with socialism and theosophy, as the foundation for a perfect society. His grand idea was nothing less than to establish abroad a socialist and self-sufficient “New Finland” for the country’s mistreated intellectuals and working class.

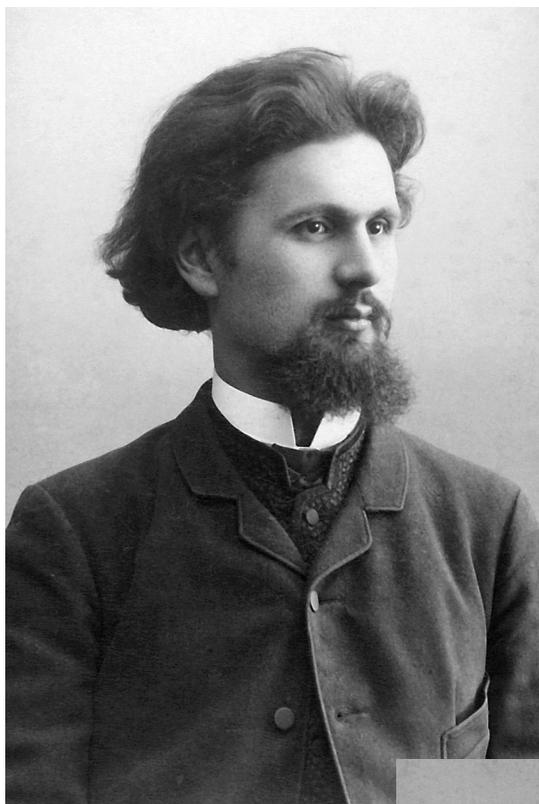
In 1899, Kurikka emigrated to Australia in search of a suitable location for his utopia, followed by almost two hundred of his countrypeople. The Finnish colony-to-be in Queensland, however, failed miserably almost from the beginning, and Kurikka soon left his followers and travelled to Canada. His passage to North America was provided by a culturally and politically active group of disenchanted Finns working in James Dunsmuir’s coal mines near Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. Mesmerized by Kurikka’s writings and reputation, the miners wanted him to establish in British Columbia a Finnish-speaking colony where there would be no exploitation of workers and where the fruits of labour would be divided evenly. All – including women – would be strictly equal, and little personal property would exist in this envisioned commune. Finns were by no means the only Nordic group attempting to establish an ethnic community in British Columbia: there had been both Norwegian and Danish settlements in Bella Coola and Cape Scott since the mid-1890s. The difference between the envisioned Finnish settlement and the other ethnic communities already in existence was Kurikka’s desire to create an entirely new kind of society.¹⁰

Kurikka arrived on Vancouver Island in the fall of 1900 and soon managed to talk Nanaimo’s Finns into funding the first Finnish-language newspaper in Canada, the *Aika*, with Kurikka as its editor and main writer.¹¹ The newspaper gathered subscribers not only in Canada but also in the United States, Finland, and Australia. Not surprisingly, the *Aika* eagerly promoted Kurikka’s latest utopian venture. Through the newspaper and his lecture tours, Kurikka spread the word of a commune to be founded in British Columbia, still called the *Kalevan Kansa* (the People of Kaleva) after the utopian venture in Australia. Admitting that he needed someone to act as “a brakeman” and “slow him down a bit,” Kurikka solicited help from a close friend in Finland, August Bernhard Mäkelä, another prominent journalist and an active figure in the Finnish labour movement.¹² In Finland, Mäkelä was also known as an author of

¹⁰ On the Queensland commune, see Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 31–40. On the Bella Coola and Cape Scott settlements, see Fish, *Dreams of Freedom*, 1–2, 5–29, 41–65. On Kurikka’s ideology, see J.D. Wilson, “Never Believe What You Have Never Doubted.”

¹¹ On the *Aika*, see J.D. Wilson, “Synoptic View of *Aika*.”

¹² Halminen, *Sointula*, 33. On Mäkelä, see Erkki Salomaa, “A.B. Mäkelä,” in *Tiennäyttäjät*, 207–36.



The charismatic but ineffective Matti Kurikka (1863 – 1915) was the leading utopian socialist in Finland. By the turn of the century, he had become something of an outcast in his home country and chose to emigrate, founding utopian communes for Finns in Australia and Canada. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.

August Bernhard Mäkelä a.k.a Austin McKela (1863 – 1932) had been Kurikka's close comrade in the Finnish labour movement. After the break-up of the utopian commune of Sointula, Mäkelä became the undisputed intellectual leader of the Finnish community on Malcolm Island. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.



humorous short stories, which he published under the pseudonym Kaapro Jääskeläinen. In comparison with Kurikka, whose ideas about socialism were growing increasingly unusual, Mäkelä was a more conventional follower of Karl Marx and scientific socialism. Mäkelä, who in Canada came to be known as Austin McKela, arrived on Vancouver Island in 1901 and proved a hard worker and organizer for the colony.

The negotiations between Kurikka, now the president of the Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company, and the chief commissioner of lands in Victoria proved successful, and the remote and uninhabited Malcolm Island – soon renamed *Malkosaari* – was chosen as the location for the commune. The people of Kaleva were not the first Europeans who tried to settle Malcolm Island. Colonization had been attempted since the 1880s, but by the turn of the century only a Danish hermit permanently inhabited the island. On 29 November 1901, Kurikka was able to sign a 28,000-acre lease from the Crown on Malcolm Island. Under the provisions of the Land Grant Act, the ownership of the island was to be transferred to the company in seven years provided that 350 settlers had built homes and had made improvements to the amount of \$2.50 per acre. If successful, the Finns were guaranteed a similar grant in the vicinity. Mäkelä commented on the agreement in the pages of the *Aika*, heavily criticizing some of its clauses. The required oath of allegiance to the Crown and the possibility of being called upon to “bear arms in defence of the country” were especially offensive to this socialist and pacifist in search of an entirely new type of society.¹³

The actual settlement of Malcolm Island began in the spring of 1902. The start was auspicious as there was a steady flow of eager settlers arriving to the colony; even the ownership of the island’s timber, a concession originally held by the Industrial Power Company, had passed to the Kalevan Kansa on a legal technicality. During the Midsummer’s Eve cultural festivities – called *Luomispäivät* (Creation Days) – a decision was made to name the new settlement Sointula. However, the colonization company’s chronic lack of capital was already becoming evident, while many of the incoming settlers still insisted on paying for their shares through work. Further to this, many of the arrivals were not experienced in agriculture or lumbering (surprisingly few Finnish loggers and miners joined the company). By the end of the year, over

¹³ “Agreement between His Majesty the King and the Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company, Limited,” 29 November 1901, Kalevan Kansa Co. Papers, Sointula Collection (325), Finnish Labour Archives (hereafter FLA), Helsinki; Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä], “Maan hallitus ja Malkosaarelaiset,” *Aika*, 9 May 1902. For accounts of the commune era, see Halminen, *Sointula*; Wild, *Sointula*, chaps 6–10; J.D. Wilson, “Kurikka and Settlement of Sointula.”

two hundred people – utopian craftspeople, tailors, blacksmiths, and even a medical doctor – were living on Malcolm Island.¹⁴

The *Aika* was now published in the colony rather than in Nanaimo. The first Sointula issue of the *Aika* – now in a magazine format – was published on 1 November 1903, with Mäkelä as the co-editor. The *Aika* never tired of praising the aesthetic qualities of the landscape around Malcolm Island. Many references were made to the beauty of the BC coast and the striking “Finnishness” of the landscape (except for the mountains).¹⁵ In his poem, “En Suomehen palajakaan” (“I Shall Not Return to Finland”), Mäkelä claimed to have found “The forests of Finland here, together with / snow-capped mountains of Switzerland – / Here in the midst of a summery winter / I saw Finland in Sointula.” However, after visiting Finland later in the decade, Mäkelä had to confess that the landscape of the old country seemed incredibly “meek, naked, and flat” compared to that of British Columbia.¹⁶

In addition to the *Aika*, many of the songs in the two songbooks published by the commune in 1903, *Kalevan Kansan Sointuja I* (Tones of the People of Kaleva) and *Kalevan Kansan Sointuja II*, contain references to the exceptional beauty of the BC landscape and the healing powers of nature as opposed to the hectic and alienated life in big, dirty cities. Most of the lyrics were written by Kurikka, but Mäkelä, Martti Myrty, H. Hantula, and Alfred Koski also wrote some. All of these lyrics emphasized the mythical connection between the free worker and the bounties of unspoiled nature.¹⁷ A more conventional pioneer spirit was

¹⁴ Katri Maria Riksmán, interview by Imbert Orchard (translated and conveyed by her daughter Ethel Cadorin), tape-recording, 1967, Orchard 1017/1, BSA; A.B.M. [A.B. Mäkelä], “Muutama muistosana ‘Kalevan kansa’ -vainajasta,” in *Lehtipaja: Työmiehen neljännesvuosisatajulkaisu* (Superior, WI: Työmies Society, 1928), 152; “Kalevan Kansa C.C:n vuosikertomus vuodelta 1903,” *Aika*, 1 March 1904, 245.

¹⁵ See, for example, And. J-nen, “Kalevan Kansan taloudellisesta asemasta,” *Aika*, 15 May 1904, 387; “Tietoja tänne aikoville: Wastauksia useimmasti esiintyviin kysymyksiin,” *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 62; Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä], “Ensi kertaa inletissä,” *Koti-juttuja Sointulasta* 5, *Aika*, 15 February 1904, 212; Kaapro Jääskeläinen [A.B. Mäkelä], “Amerikan matkalta,” in *Iloisia juttuja IV*, 2nd ed. (Helsinki: Vihtori Kosonen, 1908), 34–35; E.H., “30-vuotismuistoja Malkosaarelta,” *Taistelun Viiri* (1933), 33.

¹⁶ Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä], “En Suomehen palajakaan,” *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 38; A.B. Mäkelä, “Jotakin Kanadasta,” in *Työkansan Kalenteri 1913* (Port Arthur, ON: Työkansa, 1913), 72.

¹⁷ See “Kalevan Kansan marssi” [March of the People of Kaleva], 1, “Vuosisadan raunioilla” [On the Ruins of the Century], 4, “Suomen kansalle” [To the People of Finland], 5, “Voi Malkosaari” [Oh, Malcolm Island], 8, “Tässä kansa Kalevan” [Here Are the People of Kaleva], 14, and “Ennen ja nyt” [Before and Now], 15, by Matti Kurikka; and “Malko kaunis kotimaamme” [Malcolm, Our Beautiful Homeland], 6–7, by Martti Myrty, all in *Kalevan Kansan Sointuja I* (Sointula: Kalevan Kansa, 1903). In *Kalevan Kansan Sointuja II* (Sointula: Kalevan Kansa, 1903), see “Luonnon kirja” [The Book of Nature], 19–20, and “Luonnon kukalle” [To the Flower of Nature], 55, by Kurikka; “Saaremmen rantamilla” [On the Shores

expressed on the pages of the *Aika* by the pseudonym “Rauta” (Iron). The article, entitled “Erämaatunnelmia” (Wilderness Moods), stressed the male strength needed to conquer and dominate nature.¹⁸

In his *Aika* columns, Kurikka preached that the settlers’ “church” was to be the island itself, a peculiar combination of pristine nature and advanced technology with “whispering pines, bubbling brooks, chirping birds, glittering electric lights, and humming mills.” Everything on Malcolm Island was to be harmonious with “the spirit of *Luonnotar* [The Goddess of Air in the *Kalevala*] prevailing.”¹⁹ In Kurikka’s thinking, the modern city and the organized church were seen as the antitheses of the good life and true religion. In accordance with his pantheistic and theosophical ideals, Kurikka published numerous articles about the beauty and divinity of nature, and the importance of the natural world for human welfare, both as a model and as a source of renewal. Even the unfortunate disharmony and violence present in nature could be erased when humans evolved far enough to be able to control their murderous instincts – and those of animals. Humane treatment of animals and vegetarianism were seen as the first steps in this direction.²⁰ In this spirit of universal peace, an early decision was made to prohibit hunting in Rough Bay, which was in the immediate vicinity of the new settlement and, at the time, was known as *Raubalabti* (Peace Bay, soon to be renamed *Kotilabti* [Home Bay]): “The enormous flocks of waterfowl will be able to swim there without disturbance and will not have to fear the beastly human for their lives.”²¹ It is not known how long this decree stayed in effect.

Kurikka’s often somewhat obscure ideas were not universally accepted by the readers of the *Aika* and could be met with sarcasm.²² After the collapse of the commune, Mäkelä published two ironic stories about a

of Our Island], 35–36, by H. Hantula; and “En Suomehen palajakaan” [I Shall not Return to Finland], 37–38, by Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä]. See also “Pois maailman mellakasta” [Away from the Worldly Buzz] by Alfred Koski, *Aika*, 15 January 1904, 144. A more traditional pioneer spirit, with images of tree felling and land clearing, is present in McKela’s “Kotirantamilla” [On Home Shores], in *Kalevan Kansan Sointuja* 1, 10; and in “Työmiesten maa” [Land of the Workers], and an unnamed poem in his play, “Pappi Sointulassa” [A Priest in Sointula], both in Kaapro Jääskeläinen [A.B. Mäkelä], *Muistoja “Malkosaarelta”: Kuvia ja kuvauksia “Kalevan Kansan” kommunistisesta siirtola-yrityksestä Sointulassa, Malcolm saarella, Brittiläis-Columbian rannikolla Kanadassa v. 1901–1905* (Helsinki: Työväen Sanomalehti, 1907), 24–25; 47–48.

¹⁸ Rauta [pseudonym], “Erämaatunnelmia,” *Aika*, 15 August 1902.

¹⁹ Mathias Maaton [Matti Kurikka], “Viikon varrelta,” *Aika*, 28 March 1902.

²⁰ Matti Kurikka, “Ihmiskunnan tulevaisuus I: Luonnon sielutiede,” *Aika*, 1 November 1903, 9–12; “Luonto,” *Aika*, 29 August 1902; “Kalevan Kansa ja sen luottomiehät,” *Aika*, 1 March 1904, 247.

²¹ “Malkosaarelta,” *Aika*, 28 March 1902.

²² H. Hantula, “Luonnon vapaudesta,” *Aika*, 15 December 1903, 88–90.

Sointula man who, influenced by theosophy, transformed from an avid hunter and fisher into a vegetarian. Mäkelä sarcastically noted that the ban to kill animals would leave only those who had died of natural causes available for human consumption, and he himself would not touch them. Clearly, vegetarianism was not an option for him.²³ While unmoved by Kurikka's theosophical ideas, Mäkelä greatly appreciated British Columbia's natural environment. He especially valued the freedom found on Malcolm Island, far from the constraints of suffocating civilization. He maintained that this had cured his alcoholism; instead of taking to the bottle for escape, he could now rig up his sailboat (made from a Native canoe) and sail wherever he wanted, or he could explore the vast forests of Malcolm Island in solitude, observing the island's rich fauna and flora and admiring its natural beauty.²⁴ His writings reveal a keen natural historian who closely observed the exotic fauna of his new surroundings. Mäkelä was especially fascinated by the occurrence of both "arctic and tropical species," whales and hummingbirds, on the BC coast.²⁵

Before the arrival of Europeans, Malcolm Island had been an important seasonal site for the Kwakwaka'wakw, who collected clams and picked berries on the island. They had no permanent habitations there, presumably because of the abundance of salal, but had taken "several of the beautiful cedar trees for their totem poles and their dugout canoes."²⁶ Many Kwakwaka'wakw lived in Alert Bay on Cormorant Island, only a few miles from Malcolm Island. In the beginning, Mäkelä did not think too highly of Aboriginal peoples and their culture. On the boat from Nanaimo to Sointula, he had witnessed drunken "flirting between [fishers of European origin] and those half-animal [Aboriginal] females" and deemed it "loathsome."²⁷ On his arrival at Malcolm Island, Mäkelä found the inhabitants of Alert Bay and their traditional customs odd and even frightening, but he soon came to appreciate his new neighbours as "complete natural socialists." Besides, these fellow socialists were clearly exploited by the canneries, which were owned by the common

²³ Kaapro Jääskeläinen [A.B. Mäkelä], "Kuinka hanhia ammutaan," in *Muistoja "Malkosaarelta,"* 139-46; and "Jumalallinen johdatus' eli kuinka Esa Huttunen sai eukkonsa takaisin synnilisestä maailmasta," in *Köyhälistön nuji 1, 1907* (Hancock, MI: Työmies, 1906), 87.

²⁴ McKela, "Yö Alert Bayssa," *Koti-juttuja Sointulasta II, Aika, 1 January 1904, 19;* "Harhajarvi," *Koti-juttuja Sointulasta III, Aika, 15 January 1904, 150-8.*

²⁵ McKela, "Yö Alert Bayssa," 125-26; McKela, "'Luomispäivät' Sointulassa," *Aika, 11 July 1902.* On Malcolm Island fauna, see also "Malkosaarelta," *Aika, 17 January 1902.*

²⁶ Wayne Homer [Väinö Honkala], interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 12 February and 6 March 1982, Fish 4031/26-29, BCA. The famous German-American ethnologist Franz Boas made several research trips to the area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The scientific name for salal is *Gaultheria shallon.*

²⁷ McKela, "'Luomispäivät' Sointulassa," *Aika, 4 July 1902.*

enemy, the capitalists. By 1904, “those gloomy-looking men speaking in mysterious tongues” had turned into “everyday guests” of the community and were welcome to attend the communal dinners at Sointula. Further, Mäkelä seriously questioned the prevailing stereotype of the “Injun thief” and maintained that Aboriginal people had stolen far less from the commune than had its own departing members.²⁸ Matti Kurikka is even supposed to have granted the Kwakwaka’wakw special permission to get lumber from Malcolm Island, praising their courtesy in selling game and fish to the settlers. He also speculated that there existed a close common ancestry between Finns and First Nations in ancient Central Asia.²⁹

Throughout the twentieth century, Malcolm Island Finns claim to have maintained good relations with the Kwakwaka’wakw, and marriages between the two groups are not unknown.³⁰ In a 1982 interview, seventy-nine-year-old Wayne Homer idealistically claimed:

Never here, or on the fishing grounds or anywhere else, we never had any quarrel with them whatever. Of course, we honored their rights, we didn’t butt in like some people do. They try to shoulder the Indian out of his heritage and out of his fishing grounds and make it difficult for him to fish. You know, we don’t do that. We consider that they were here first and they’ve got equal rights to anybody else, and they realize that, too. They are quick to realize that.³¹

The reason for choosing Malcolm Island as the settlement site had to do with the presumed large amount of arable land available on the island. Another was the island’s proximity to transportation lines, important for the envisioned manufacture of lumber and artisan products. Initially, the island seemed to provide excellent opportunities for agriculture.

²⁸ McKela, “Yö Alert Bayssa,” 121–4. Finns were amused when Aboriginal people, upon meeting a Sointula hunting party in the woods around Kingcome Inlet, shook hands only with those carrying guns. It should be noted that, when Finnish settlers collected clamshells from the beach for their chickens, Aboriginal people considered this intrusion into their shell middens to be very offensive. See McKela, “Ensi kertaa inletissä,” 213; Sakari Pälä, *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa: Kuvia ja kuvauksia Kanadan-matkalta* (Helsinki: Otava, 1927), 150.

²⁹ Evert Savela, *Suomesta Sointulaan: Siirtolaiselämän kuvauksia* (Superior, WI: Työmies, n.d.), 79–80.

³⁰ Homer, Fish interview 1982; Jussi Hämäläinen, interview by Pertti Virtaranta, Vancouver, May 1980, in Pertti Virtaranta, *Hauska tutustua: Amerikansuomalaisia tapaamassa*, ed. Jaakko Yli-Paavola (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1996), 115–6. A Kwakwaka’wakw band has lived on the 480-acre Pulteney Point reserve since 1916.

³¹ Homer, Fish interview 1982. In the early 20th century, however, Katri Riksmán found the island frightening after the men had left for the fishing grounds. Sointula felt dark and lonely, while “wild Indians were lurking nearby.” Riksmán, interview.



Theodore Tanner planting fruit trees around a red cedar stump during the early days of the settlement. In a few years, the settlers' dream of transforming Malcolm Island from old-growth forest into a pastoral idyll of fields and meadows proved utterly unrealistic. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.

Compared with typical Finnish farmlands, the soils on Malcolm Island seemed very fertile. Land clearing, however, proved much harder in British Columbia than it had in the old country. The settlers encountered enormous trees and massive windfalls in the temperate rainforests, which simply could not be compared to the Finnish woodlands. Sointula's children, however, were "excited about these big trees. We used to go in the woods and look who – can find the biggest one. The biggest one that I know of here was 15 feet [in] diameter, a cedar growing."³²

Mäkelä tried to make the best of the clearing task, noting that "the great nature" will "in the beginning humble the proud humans, before gradually uplifting them with her own greatness." Finnish methods of slash-and-burn clearing, however, did not work in the dense coastal rainforests. Clearing by fire proved immensely hard work and required repeated burnings, and by the time the huge trees were fully removed, the topsoil had been destroyed and fertility lost. The settlers had "burnt out their bread." Compared to the Scots pine, Norway spruce, and white birch – the most common Finnish forest trees – the Douglas firs and red cedars of the Pacific Northwest were much more resistant to

³² A.B.M., "Muutama muistosana," 147; "Malkosaareltä," *Aika*, 17 January 1902; Arvo Tynjala, interview by Imbert Orchard, tape-recording, 22 June 1967, Orchard 1016/5, B.C.A.

rotting. Only in a few places on Malcolm Island did the settlers succeed in carving prime agricultural land out of the forest. Most of these early fields also came to be located a long distance from Rough Bay, the hub of the commune.³³

In the beginning, little food was produced on the island as “there wasn’t that much cleared land because they had to fall all the trees.” Doubts about the suitability of the island for intensive agriculture had been expressed as early as January 1902, and a proposal was made to locate meadows elsewhere instead of establishing fields on the island. Soon it became evident that there was not enough hay on the island for the settlers’ livestock. Since hay was too expensive to be bought, Sointulans tried to obtain it from nearby Vancouver Island, and ventured as far as Kingcome Inlet on the mainland in search of fodder. Not surprisingly, milk and butter – central items in the Finnish diet – were in short supply.³⁴

The potential of salmon fishing for the community’s economy was noted early on, while hunting was seen as another important food source. From the beginning, the settlement was supported by “hunters that would go up and get the game to bring the meat and then there was fishermen that would bring the fish.” Fish and game offered easier subsistence – not to mention a little cash for purchasing commodities from the outside – than did agriculture. Thus, almost from the beginning the community was directed towards the capitalistic marketplace, much to the disappointment of those who had envisioned Sointula as a self-sustaining community of farmers.³⁵

During the early days of the colony there were many deer on the island. In the beginning, the Sointula Finns were not experienced hunters, and deer hunting proved difficult. In addition to being conducted on Malcolm Island, hunts were also organized on nearby Vancouver Island and, indeed, sometimes as far away as the mainland. In addition to deer,

³³ Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä], “Koti-juttuja Sointulasta. I. Räätäli-runoilija,” *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 57; A.B.M., “Muutama muistosana,” 149–50. See also Pälsi, *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa*, 140, 169–70. The scientific names for the Finnish tree species are *Pinus sylvestris*, *Picea abies*, and *Betula pendula*; the scientific names for the Canadian ones are *Pseudotsuga menziesii* and *Thuja plicata*. For problems associated with farming on logged-off lands in the Pacific Northwest, see also White, *Land Use*, 113–41.

³⁴ Alfred B. Williams, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, August 1979, Fish 4031/38–39, BCA; “Malkosaarelda,” *Aika*, 17 January 1902; “Kalevan Kansa C.C:n vuosikertomus vuodelta 1903,” *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 221; McKela, “Ensi kertaa inletissä,” 211; Martti Hendrickson, “Kaikuja Sointulasta: Historiallinen muistelmä,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Sointula Collection (325), FLA, Helsinki.

³⁵ “Tietoja tänne aikoville,” 62; A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979; A.B.M., “Muutama muistosana,” 150–1.

the settlers hunted for the abundant geese and killed even a few bear and wolves. Cougars were seen as unpredictable but as not especially threatening to humans. Hunting could prove dangerous for reasons other than vicious predators: one settler lost his life during a deer hunt in Wakeman Sound, when his shotgun accidentally fired in his canoe.³⁶

There was also an abundance of wild berries to be picked and made into jams and jellies. Mäkelä cited the profusion of salal on the island as the reason for surveyors not exploring it carefully – all to the benefit of the colonists, who later received the island without compensation as the land was not considered very valuable. Originally named *kiusapensas* (“the nuisance bush”) by Mäkelä, it was soon proposed that the name for the omnipresent salal be changed to *hyötypensas* (“the useful bush”) after its value as a convenient food source was discovered.³⁷

Sointula was founded amidst one of the world’s greatest fisheries, and the Strait of Georgia was “teeming with salmon” when the Finns arrived. Valuable commercial fish included all five species of Pacific salmon, the chinook (king), coho (silver), humpback (pink), sockeye (red), and chum (dog), in addition to the Pacific halibut. Not surprisingly, the settlers soon carried out a collection among themselves in order to purchase a seine. In the early days, the coho run at the mouth of the Nimpkish River provided ample fish for the community, although selling the surplus proved problematic. Tauno Salo’s father could catch salmon from the nearby Cluxeve River even without equipment as fish would jump into his canoe on their own. In 1903, some Malcolm Islanders were also fishing for the canneries in Rivers Inlet. Still, fishing was far from being the mainstay of the community’s overall economy. Lacking experience and equipment, the settlers were able to catch enough fresh fish for their needs only during summer and fall; during the winter, they had to put up with salted fish. Finns had grown accustomed to consuming salted herring and vendace in the old country, and on Malcolm Island the species eaten most was considered to be nothing less than “the best fish in the world ... sockeye salmon.” In addition to salmon and halibut, the candlefish (eulachon) and dogfish were commonly caught. These two species produced enough oil for Sointula’s limited lighting and industrial needs.³⁸

³⁶ Pälsi, *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa*, 159–62; E.H., “30-vuotismuistoja Malkosaarelta,” 34–5; Austin McKela [A.B. Mäkelä], “Ensi kertaa inletissä,” 211–19; “Kalevan Kansa C.C:n vuosikertomus vuodelta 1903,” *Aika*, 1 March 1904, 242; “Uutisia,” *Aika*, 1 November 1903, 32.

³⁷ A. Tynjala, Orchard interview, 1967; McKela, “Luomispäivät Sointulassa,” *Aika*, 11 July 1902; KALSO [pseudonym], “Kirje Sointulasta,” *Aika*, 15 August 1902.

³⁸ E.H., “30-vuotismuistoja Malkosaarelta,” 33; KALSO, “Kirje Sointulasta”; Martin Hendrickson, *Muistelmia Kymmenvuotisesta Raivaustyöstäni* (Fitchburg, MA: Raivaaja, 1909), 37–8; Matti

For the 1904 season, Sointula fishers working for the canneries in Rivers Inlet were guaranteed at least fifty dollars in addition to the usual pay of seven cents per one sockeye salmon. Furthermore, they were free to bring in their own food and thus did not have to rely on the company store. The Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company had been granted a monopoly to set up its own cannery at Knight Inlet, but lack of capital made this impossible; instead, the Malcolm Islanders decided to invest more money in their lumbering and sawmill operations.³⁹

During 1903, the production of raw lumber was the only real source of income on Malcolm Island, and the little sawed lumber produced was reserved for building purposes. Despite hard work, the settlement soon faced grave difficulties caused by hostile creditors, incompetent planning, and bad fortune. For example, a devastating fire completely destroyed the main housing unit of the commune in January 1903, killing eleven people. The settlers still would not give up, and they kept working in their sawmill, brickyard, and blacksmith shop in addition to spending time lumbering and land clearing. By July 1904, a new sawmill with two steam engines had been completed, raising hopes that the community could sell sawed lumber instead of logs. For the first time electricity was produced on Malcolm Island, using self-made dynamos. More hay was being gathered on the mainland, and high-quality limestone had been located nearby, raising hopes for commercial exploitation. At the same time, a fatal building project commenced near Vancouver. The increasingly erratic Kurikka practically bankrupted the colony by placing an exceedingly low bid on a contract to build two bridges over the Capilano River and the Seymour River with workers and lumber from Malcolm Island. The bridges were finished on time, but the Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company did not make any profit; rather, most of Sointula's male population worked for months without compensation, and thousands of board feet of the company's best lumber were given away.⁴⁰

Halminen, "Kalevan Kansa: Sointulan historia," manuscript, Sointula Collection (325), FLA, Helsinki, p. 13; Tauno Ragnar Salo, interview by Paula Wild, tape-recording, 7 July 1988, Wild 4355/2-3, BCA; Arvo (John) Tynjala, interview by Murray Kennedy, tape-recording, 13-25 May 1972, Kennedy 1016/1-4, BCA; McKela, "Yö Alert Bayssa," 126.

The scientific names for the Pacific salmon species mentioned here are *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, *O. kisutch*, *O. gorbuscha*, *O. nerka*, and *O. keta*; the halibut is *Hippoglossus stenolepis*; the European fish are *Clupea harengus* and *Coregonus albus*; and the two species that provided oil for the community are *Thaleichthys pacificus* and *Squalus acanthias*.

³⁹ "Uutisia," *Aika*, 15 April 1904, 347; Halminen, "Kalevan Kansa," 13; Artturi Tienari, "Sorvarina Sointulassa: Muistelmia 50 vuoden takaisesta ihanneyhteiskunnasta," *Suomen Kuvalehti*, 7 March 1953, 20-1.

⁴⁰ "Kalevan Kansa C.C:n vuosikertomus vuodelta 1903," *Aika*, 1 March 1904, 242; "Kalevan Kansa C.C:n vuosikertomus vuodelta 1903," *Aika*, 1 December 1903, 221; "Uutisia," *Aika*, 1 July 1904, 61-2.

In Finland, Kurikka had been known as a ladies' man, and his increasing preaching of sexual freedom – the so-called “free love” principle – on Malcolm Island estranged many settlers. Combined with his incompetent handling of finances, disagreements over communal childcare, and even a scandal involving Mäkelä's wife, Kurikka was fast losing his credibility and chose to resign. He left Sointula in October 1904, followed by his most loyal followers – approximately half of the island's population. Kurikka's last attempt to create a utopian commune near Vancouver, the all-male *Sammon Takoijat* (“Forgers of the *Sampo*,” yet another reference to the *Kalevala*), never took off and he died forgotten in the United States in 1915.⁴¹ Mäkelä assumed leadership on Malcolm Island and remained an important figure in the community for decades to come.

Kurikka's departure did not save the indebted utopia, whose remaining settlers tried unsuccessfully to earn their living from sawmill operations. The Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company officially folded in the spring of 1905. Its assets were acquired by a Vancouver-based trust company, and the forests of Malcolm Island were sold for five dollars an acre to pay off its debts. The ownership of Malcolm Island was returned to the Government of British Columbia, and none of the settlers was compensated for their shares. The publishing of the *Aika* had ceased in July 1904, and the printing press was sold at a bargain price to raise cash. By 1907, the sawmill had also been sold, dismantled, and moved off the island.

As a socialist utopia Sointula survived only for a couple of years. The more than one hundred people remaining on the island purchased land from the provincial government and, in addition to farming and lumbering, turned to fishing and mink trapping for their livelihood.⁴² They also found work in the logging float camps up and down the coast and in salmon canneries. The following expansion of the local economy resulted in more efficient exploitation of natural resources on Malcolm Island and its surroundings. Despite the collapse of the utopian experiment, Malcolm Islanders sustained a sincere belief in the labour movement. The settlers had already been exposed to the co-operative movement in their home country; thus, it is not surprising that, since 1909, Malcolm Island has supported the oldest co-operative store in Western Canada, the Sointula Co-op. As demonstrated by co-

⁴¹ On the *Sammon Takoijat*, see Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 63–9. On the influence of the *Kalevala* on the communes founded by Kurikka, see J.D. Wilson, “Kalevala in Sointula: The Intellectual Background of Matti Kurikka,” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 3 (1988): 115–31.

⁴² For general accounts on Malcolm Island between the collapse of the commune and the Second World War, see Wild, *Sointula*, chaps. 11–13; K. Wilson, *Practical Dreamers*, chap. 3.

op researcher Kevin Wilson, the Sointula Co-op has always been the heart of the community. It has acted as a uniting force for the island's population, serving as bank, property owner, and supplier of groceries, hardware, and fishing gear.⁴³

Most of the settlers joined the Socialist Party of Canada in 1907 but split with its British leaders in 1911 and formed a branch of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, which operated a hall in Sointula for political meetings and cultural events. During the First World War, due to government pressure, the name was shortened to Finnish Organization of Canada.⁴⁴ The organization closely allied itself with the Workers' Party of Canada, later known as the Communist Party of Canada. By the early 1930s, there were already over four hundred people living on the island, although some Malcolm Islanders had left for the Karelian Soviet Republic in the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, Sointula maintained a reputation as a socialist centre well into the 1940s. The community remained close-knit and solely Finnish-speaking, although the younger generation was now learning English. For more than half a century, Sointula was a place where "everybody knew everybody ... You saw a man coming on the street, you knew where he was coming from, you knew where he was going to, and you knew what he was thinking about."⁴⁶

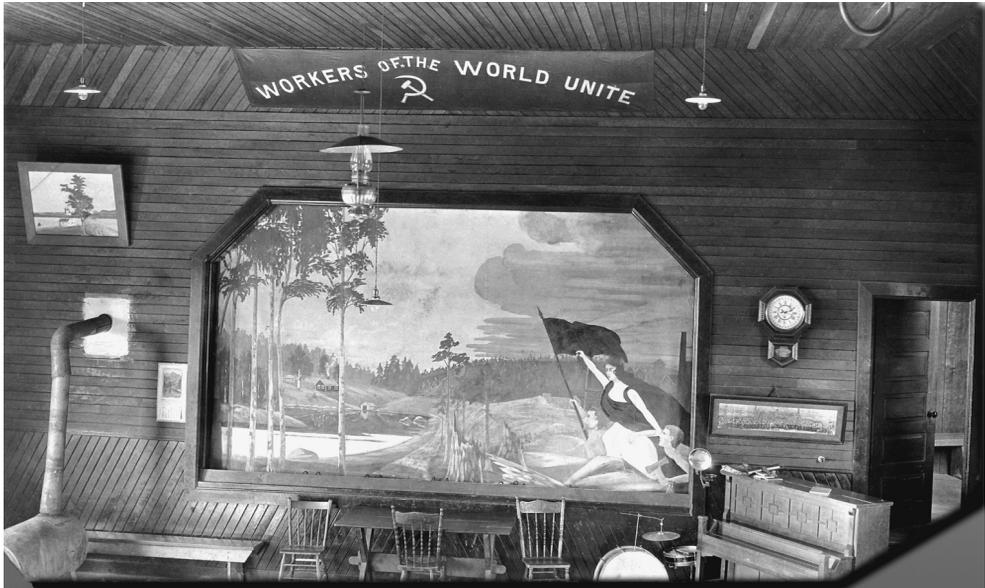
A.B. Mäkelä became the community's justice of the peace and found employment as a civil servant, serving as the keeper of the island's Pulteney Point lighthouse. He lived in Sointula until his death in 1932, except for short stints as a newspaperman in the United States and Finland. Mäkelä joined Canada's Socialist and Communist parties but did not actively participate in politics. He continued to support

⁴³ Urho Tynjala, interview by Murray Kennedy, tape-recording, 3 May 1972, Kennedy 74/1, BCA; K. Wilson, *Practical Dreamers*.

⁴⁴ On the Finnish Organization of Canada, see William Eklund, "The Formative Years of the Finnish Organization of Canada," in Karni, *Finnish Diaspora*, 49-59. See also Arja Pilli, "Finnish-Canadian Radicalism and the Government of Canada from the First World War to the Depression," in Karni, *Finnish Diaspora*, 19-32; J.D. Wilson, "The Finnish Organization of Canada, the 'Language Barrier', and the Assimilation Process," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 9 (1977): 105-16; and J.D. Wilson, "Socialist Legacy on Malcolm Island."

⁴⁵ A. Anderson, *History of Sointula*, 16. During the early 1930s, some two thousand to three thousand Canadian Finns emigrated to the Soviet Union. See Ronald Harpelle, Varpu Lindström, and Alexis Pogorelskin, eds., *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia during the Depression Era* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia, 2004); Reino Kero, "The Canadian Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s," in *Finnish Diaspora*, 203-13. Cf. Lynn Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan, 1982), 56.

⁴⁶ Hendrickson, "Kaikuja Sointulasta"; Olavi (Ole John) Anderson, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, August 1979, Fish 4031/39-40, BCA.



Sointula Finnish Organization Hall in 1932. The hand-painted stage curtain by Toivo Aro was undoubtedly inspired by Delacroix's "La Liberté guidant le peuple." It depicts Freedom leading enslaved labourers from a smoky, industrial city to a peaceful landscape of green forests and clear lakes. The scenery is that of stereotypical Finland in the vein of nineteenth-century National Romanticism, not of British Columbia or Malcolm Island. For example, the trees are identifiable as Scots pines and white birches. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.

the workers' movement and had high hopes for the future of the Soviet Union, but he preferred to stay on his beloved island and claimed to have "no interest whatsoever in Canada" and its affairs. The disillusioned recluse offered a total condemnation of his new "home" country and its values in his long article on Canadian history, "Jotakin Kanadasta" [Something about Canada], which he wrote for the Finnish-Canadian workers' 1913 yearbook. Much of Mäkelä's harsh judgment derived from the environmental degradation caused by rampaging capitalism in British Columbia:

I can surely see how these bandits around here rape and pillage [the natural world]. Only stumps are left of the valuable primeval forests; after recurring forest fires there will not even be stumps left, but only bare bedrock. Fish are being exterminated to extinction with vengeance, deer are killed just for fun – they do not even bother to gather the carcasses; and right now they are about to start all this with the whales, too. And so will this wild coast gradually become as empty and barren as all the other "civilized" countries. And then – surprise!

– it will come a time to plant new forests on those rocky barrens, where rains already have washed out the little soil left by fires; and to stock with fish those bodies of water, from which the existing fish are now being annihilated.⁴⁷

Mäkelä acidly noted the depletion of natural resources everywhere in the country, citing the disappearance of the bison and passenger pigeon as good examples of Canada's enterprising spirit. On the other hand, "a fine collection of millionaires" was rapidly "replacing the spoiled natural riches."⁴⁸

After the collapse of the utopian commune, agriculture and lumbering by Malcolm Island Finns were practised mainly to meet the settlers' own needs. By the mid-1930s, the forested area on the island had shrunk considerably, and lumbering had become much less important for the local economy. Hopes for an agricultural community were similarly abandoned. By the 1920s, Sointula families typically grew only some berries, fruit, and vegetables for their own use. Still, there were adherents to the yeoman ideal. A dozen families concentrated on farming, selling their surplus produce through the co-op.⁴⁹

Matti Halminen, one of the original settlers and the man who wrote the invitation letter to Kurikka in Australia in 1900, "was a farmer, a farmer once and for all. He cleared about eight acres of farmland out of the green timber with his own bare hands. And, he didn't even have a horse, but he cleared the land anyway." By the 1920s, Halminen was producing enough potatoes on his fields to sell some to Aboriginal people in Alert Bay. Despite his lack of formal education and his somewhat shaky Finnish grammar, Halminen demonstrated scholarly tendencies. In 1936, with the informal backing of the Finnish Social Democratic Party, he published a short history of the utopian experiment. He was greatly interested in the culture of his Kwakwaka'wakw neighbours, familiarized himself with their creation myths, and taught himself some of their language. In his spare time, Halminen even ventured to write fiction about BC Aboriginal peoples.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mäkelä, "Jotakin Kanadasta," 66, 68-9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 82-3. See also J.D. Wilson, "Mäkelä as Political Commentator."

⁴⁹ E.H., "Piirteitä Sointulasta ja osaston toiminnasta siellä," in *Canadian Suomalainen Järjestö 25 vuotta: Kuvauksia ja muistelmia 25-vuotiselta toimintatapailelta 1911-1936* (Sudbury, ON: Vapaus, 1936), 143; Hendrickson, "Kaikuja Sointulasta."

⁵⁰ Homer, Fish interview 1982; Pälvi, *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa*, 170-2; Matti Halminen, letter, 1936, Sointula Collection (325), FLA, Helsinki; Mikko Ampuja, "Matti Halminen, Sointulan historian kirjoittaja," in *Demokraattisen kansan kalenteri 1948* (Helsinki: Suomen Kansan Demokraattinen Liitto, 1947), 50.

Malcolm Island provided the remaining Finns with ample natural resources: “There was all the fish in the ocean and deer in the woods, and your own cattle and all ... right here in Rough Bay, there’s a good clam bed right there and there’s crabs and fish.” The inventory made of the colonization company’s assets at the time of the bankruptcy included three rifles and two shotguns. The company also owned one seine in addition to several nets.⁵¹

The settlers were strapped for cash after having to buy their farmsteads, and deer meat continued to provide a welcome source of animal protein at minimal cost. Unfortunately, the abundant deer caused massive damage to the settlers’ gardens. In addition to deer, many settlers hunted for duck, geese, and grouse.⁵² Wayne Homer’s father tanned hides in addition to blacksmithing because “people were killing deer and [kept] throwing the hides away. So he set up a tannery and took the hides on a 50-50 basis. He tanned their hides, kept half and gave the other half [back]. He sold them to shoe factories in Vancouver – deerskins and cowhides, anything at all.” In the 1930s, Malcolm Islanders were still doing some commercial hunting and trapping.⁵³

Deer and other game were easy to shoot when they visited the beach during low tide, but even more effective was the illegal night-time hunting with lights. Sometimes game wardens would come in from nearby Cormorant Island, and the hunters had to hide their deer meat. Still, “the first settlers here had a license for pit lighting.” The local game warden had “given” it by looking “the other way always” because he understood the settlers needed “the game for food purposes.”⁵⁴

After the collapse of the communal experiment, commercial fishing soon became crucial for Sointula’s economy: “That was really the summation of the whole thing ... the salmon.” According to Wayne Homer, “Well, but for the whole of Malcolm Island – the people [who] stayed here – fishing was it, it was the start. The first job away from home

⁵¹ Sally Petersen, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 11 February 1982, Fish 4031/21-22, BCA; “Kalevan Kansa C. Co. Ltd. Inventario,” 1 January 1905, Kalevan Kansa Co. Papers, Sointula Collection (325), FLA, Helsinki. Interestingly, Finns on Malcolm Island did not pick any mushrooms until a Finnish immigrant family to Sointula introduced the custom in the early 1950s. It is still not a common practice. Gloria Williams, conversation with the author, Sointula, 20 August 2005.

⁵² Vilho Oksanen, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 12 February 1982, Fish 4031/14, BCA; Homer, Fish interview 1982; A. Tynjala, Orchard interview 1967 and Kennedy interview 1972; 1930 photograph of Tauno Salo hunting grouse in Wild, *Sointula*, 151.

⁵³ Homer, Fish interview, 1982; E.H., “Piirteitä Sointulasta ja osaston toiminnasta siellä,” 143.

⁵⁴ Diane Hufnagel, interview by Paula Wild, tape-recording, 22 June 1988, Wild 4355/1, BCA; Robert Belveal, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, January 1993, Sointula Museum.

was fishing. They went fishing on Rivers Inlet and Skeena River and wherever they could find equipment to fish with.”⁵⁵

In the beginning, Malcolm Islanders joined crews of fishing boats working in the nearby waters. For example, Ole Anderson’s father’s first appointment in 1911 was “on the drag seine crew on the mouth of the Nimpkish River with a half a dozen people from Sointula here.” The crew consisted of Finns and Kwakwaka’wakw, with an Alert Bay Aboriginal as the skipper. On the mainland, Rivers Inlet became the most important sockeye fishing ground for the Sointula fishers: “Just about everybody” fished there from late June to early August.⁵⁶ In addition to Malcolm Islanders, until the end of the Second World War, the fishers in Rivers Inlet consisted mostly of Aboriginal people. A few fishers were of other European or Japanese background. The canning company would pick up a shipload of Aboriginal people along the coast and bring them to work at Rivers Inlet, with men fishing and women working at the canneries. During the winter, many Aboriginal people had accumulated a debt at the company store. Consequently, “they were easy to scare because they didn’t ... know anything about these regulations and white man’s laws ... they were cheated out of many things.”⁵⁷ In addition to Aboriginal women, canneries in Rivers Inlet provided work for Finnish women and Chinese immigrants of both sexes. Nine-year-old Meralda Pink started working for a cannery at Knight Inlet in 1936; she did not find her job of packing cans into cases too hard “because the Chinese boys used to carry the cases away from us. We got five cents an hour for doing that. But it was still money I had earned.” She continued cannery work as a teenager, noting that, in those days, “there was no such thing as eight-hour shifts. You started work at eight in the morning and you finished about two or three the next morning, when it was a peak time.”⁵⁸

“Getting started in [commercial] fishing was a simple operation.” In the beginning, canneries owned the fishing equipment. Younger Sointula fishers typically rented a skiff and net from one of the cannery companies to fish the salmon runs. In this set-up, the fishers did not need much capital, just “a pair of oars, a sail and a tent and a little Swedish Primus stove” for cooking. However, “nobody made money either because the

⁵⁵ A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; Homer, Fish interview, 1982.

⁵⁶ Ole (Olavi John) Anderson, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 11 February 1982, Fish 4031/24, BCA; O. Anderson, Fish interview, 1979.

⁵⁷ A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972. See also McKela, “Yö Alert Bayssa,” 122-3.

⁵⁸ A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; Meralda Pink, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, 19 April 1993, Sointula Museum.

fish prices were so low. You barely made expenses, but you gained experience.” The skiffs were towed up to fishing grounds where they stayed for about five days and were then towed back in.⁵⁹ In a 1992 interview, Robert Lousenberg explained this obsolete method of fishing:

[The s]ailing skiff is a row skiff, no engine, no drum. Just had the rollers and they threw out the net and picked it up by hand. It had one sail and it had a canvas – what you would call a tent – which was propped up at night in order to get in and daytime it was dropped down ... [T]hose row skiffs were 24 feet long and we had 600 feet of towline out to tow them. There were islets spliced into the main towline and the skiffs would hook on with a special knot that one [could] yank and [the] skiff [would then] ride free, because we couldn’t stop but we didn’t go fast anyway.⁶⁰

The skiffs did not anchor for the night, and the fishers made sure their equipment was secured by tying their boat to the nets. The large driftnets used by Sointula fishers were made of linen with wooden corks, and, typically, two to three nets were set per day. The non-synthetic nets rotted easily and had to be cleaned every week with a bluestone solution.⁶¹

Gillnetting was gruelling work because the heavy nets had to be pulled in by hand. Also, “those [linen] nets were rough.” Nylon began to surpass linen in net construction only during the 1950s. Fishing was also hard because of sleep deprivation, although sometimes the fishers were able to catch some sleep if the fishing grounds were not too rocky and there were no sea lions nearby to damage the nets. Despite the hardships, there was “something amusing in [fishing] too ... [especially] in comparison with logging or something like that, you know ... [working] in the hot hillsides, I’d sooner be in a boat.”⁶²

Fishers were typically paid by the number of fish caught. In 1912, one sockeye was worth seven cents, and by 1932 the price had risen to twenty-five cents per piece. According to Victor Virkki, “in my beginning years, the humpies [humpback salmon] [were] two cents a piece, dog salmon [too] even if it was a twenty-two-pounder. [For d]og salmon good price was five cents a piece.” The best catch Arvo Tynjala ever had was 240

⁵⁹ Homer, Fish interview, 1982; O. Anderson, Fish interview, 1979; Salo, Wild interview, 1988.

⁶⁰ Robert Lousenberg, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, December 1992, Sointula Museum.

⁶¹ O. Anderson, Fish interview, 1979; A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; Mauno Ahola, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, May 1993, Sointula Museum.

⁶² Victor Virkki, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, November 1992, Sointula Museum; A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972.

sockeye in one net, although he heard rumours about catches of over one thousand.⁶³

For their month-long fishing trip to Rivers Inlet, Sointula fishers would stack up with canned foods, dried rye bread, and an old Finnish delicacy, the *korppu* – dried white bread seasoned with sugar and cinnamon, and enjoyed dunked in coffee. Children as young as six to eight years of age could accompany their fathers to the fishing grounds. Six-year-old Ingrid Belveal developed a lasting memory of her father getting tangled in the net and going overboard. With the child yanking and pulling the net, he finally got loose and made it back to the boat.⁶⁴

Many of the skiff renters would later buy their own boats – often a skiff – that was then converted into a gas boat. Independence greatly improved the fisher's position as “the canneries didn't have much say about it – they just had to buy the fish and pay for it.” Rivers Inlet opened for gas boats in the mid-1920s, and, by 1927, “it was busy in every shipyard to make gillnetters. After that there were hardly any oars and sail.” Robert Lousenberg, however, remembered towing hand-row skiffs to fishing grounds as late as 1945.⁶⁵

Trolling for salmon supplemented gillnetting from the beginning. Fishers would troll their lures on their way to and from Rivers Inlet. Some Sointula fishers maintained that trolling was at least as effective as gillnetting. Trollers usually received better pay for their fish than did gillnetters because they also dressed their catch. The early trollers made their own lures: “Some of them got table spoons [and] made spinners out of them.” Over time, people came up with new materials for the manufacture of lures, making them more effective. In the 1930s, a Sointula fisher invented a new lure for salmon trolling: the so-called “red spoon.” Dipped in a solution of red lead and shellac, the metal lures would then be hung up on the roof to dry – at first to the considerable amusement of passers-by. As the effectiveness of the new lure was discovered, however, the inventor became known as the “Million-Dollar Finn.”⁶⁶ Sointula fishers also trolled for halibut, originally with handlines. Some

⁶³ Matti Halminen, “Kalevan Kansa,” 13; Salo, Wild interview, 1988; Virkki, Williams interview, 1992; A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972.

⁶⁴ Alfred B. Williams, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 10 February 1982, Fish 4031/18-20, BCA; Alex Pouttu, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 11 February 1982, Fish 4031/23, BCA; Dickie Michelson, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 26 February 1982, Fish 4031/32-33, BCA; A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979; Ingrid Belveal, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, January 1993, Sointula Museum.

⁶⁵ Homer, Fish interview, 1982; A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; Ahola, Williams interview, 1993; Lousenberg, Williams interview, 1992.

⁶⁶ Virkki, Williams interview, 1992; A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979.

early fishers did handline fishing from the shore at low tide; a cowbell attached to the rig would ring when the fish took the bait. Once, off the community wharf, a couple of Sointula women managed to catch a halibut that weighed more than 450 pounds.⁶⁷

In addition to fishing at Rivers Inlet, Sointula fishers had begun to gillnet in Kingcome Inlet and Knight Inlet, and they started fishing in Johnstone Strait in 1936. Other important fishing grounds came to include the mouths of the Fraser, Skeena, and Nass rivers. By the mid-1930s, the fishing season had been prolonged to five months, with all species of salmon being included in the catch. Sointula had turned into a true fishing village, where almost all males earned their living from fishing: “You could tell it was spring: everyone was in a hustle and bustle. Fishermen were down at the beach working on their boats and painting them up. You always painted your boat in the spring. And then when Rivers Inlet opened, you wouldn’t see a man on the streets – women and the kids was all that was left.”⁶⁸

In 1929, the Finns on Malcolm Island founded the first fishing co-op in British Columbia: the short-lived British Columbia Fishermen’s Co-operative.⁶⁹ Malcolm Islanders also played a decisive role in the historic 1936 fishers’ strike against the canneries: “The leaders in the strike, who held us together, were the Sointula fishermen.” While the Sointula co-op offered credit to the fishers on strike, Malcolm Island women cooked “fresh bread and buns for the whole [fishing] fleet.” That year, seventeen-year-old Victor Virkki had received his first fishing licence and was active in the strike, which “started in the Rivers Inlet and ... stayed on ‘til the sockeye was up in the salal bushes. There was only one week of fishing that year.” However, “all the fishermen didn’t stick together. You cannot get them all to do that in strike time,” and the strike ended without a clear winner.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Theodore Teuvo (Ted) Tanner, interview by Gordon Fish, tape recording, Sointula, 12 February 1982, Fish 4031/30-31, BCA; Salo, Wild interview, 1988; Hämäläinen, Virtaranta interview, 1980, 116.

⁶⁸ Ahola, Williams interview, 1993; A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; E.H., “Piirteitä Sointulasta ja osaston toiminnasta siellä,” 143; Gloria Williams, interview by Gordon Fish, tape-recording, Sointula, 10 February 1982, Fish 4031/18-20, BCA. See Roderick L. Haig-Brown, *A River Never Sleeps* (New York: William Morrow, 1946), 177-83, for a superb description of the different methods the BC salmon fishing industry used at the time.

⁶⁹ A.V. Hill, *Tides of Change: A Story of Fishermen’s Co-operatives in British Columbia* (Prince Rupert, BC: Prince Rupert Fishermen’s Co-operative Association, 1967), 9-32. After the co-op went bankrupt and ceased operating in 1932, Malcolm Island fishers founded the short-lived (1946-50) Sointula Fishermen’s Co-operative. See Hill, *Tides of Change*, 187-9.

⁷⁰ Lester Ray Petersen, interview by Gordon Fish, tape recording, Sointula, 11 February 1982, Fish 4031/11-13, BCA; union organizer Scotty Neish in Alan Haig-Brown, *Fishing for a Living* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1993), 104; Virkki, Williams interview, 1992. On the 1936 strike,

An important twentieth-century innovation in commercial fishing can be traced to Malcolm Island and a Finnish fisher and boat builder. The gillnet drum was invented by Lauri Jarvis (Järveläinen) in 1931. Before its debut, the heavy nets had to be set and hauled by hand. After some experimenting with the strength of the salvage twine and the amount of lead used in the net, the gillnet drum proved itself. Soon all Sointula fishers were constructing drums for their boats. According to Alfred Williams, “it made fishing a lot faster. You could set your net in places where you wouldn’t normally set. You could set right against reefs, in more or less dangerous places, because you could pull up your net so much faster. We could fish in dirtier weather because you could pull it up in bigger swells and stronger winds. It made quite a difference.” After the gillnet drum came into use, children were charged with rolling the drum to get the nets off into the bluestone tanks. Dickie Michelson once toppled into the tank and was blind for a few days: “Swallowed some of the water and my lungs were awful sore and stuff[ed]. It was a pretty strong potion.”⁷¹

Jarvis had hoped to patent his drum concept, which later proved revolutionary for the whole fishing industry. For a while, he ran a drum-manufacturing plant in Sointula, but it soon became clear that the invention was too simple to be efficiently protected by patent laws. “He was hoping to get a patent out for it, but they wouldn’t give him one on account that they already had drums on donkey engines ... [and] the principle of the drum was in use already in the logging industry.” The use of the laboursaving device spread quickly among the region’s fishers: “The Yugoslavs down below, they improved on it; they had bigger boats and so they put on bigger drums.” Eventually, fishers around the world copied and improved upon Jarvis’s original concept. Still, Sointula was the first place to have both the gillnet and seine drums in use.⁷²

Jarvis’s gillnet drum may not have been the only innovation from the Finnish community that had implications for BC salmon populations. In a 1964 treatise on Vancouver Island fly-fishing, the eminent conservationist Roderick Haig-Brown lamented the change in methods of sport fishing for Pacific salmon. The so-called flasher equipment used in trolling for salmon in BC waters came into wide use during the

see also Geoff Meggs, *Salmon: The Decline of the British Columbia Fishery* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991), 149–50.

⁷¹ A. Haig-Brown, *Fishing for a Living*, 144; A. Williams, Fish interview, 1982; Michelson, Fish interview, 1982.

⁷² Lousenberg, Williams interview, 1992; A. Williams, Fish interview, 1982; Sam Olavi Maki, interview by Gordon Fish, tape recording, Sointula, August 1979, Fish 4031/40, BCA.

1940s. Interestingly, the flasher shares certain characteristics with the traditional Finnish *pohjapeiliuistin* (mirror lure), and some features of this technological development could possibly be traced back to Malcolm Island and, ultimately, to Finland.⁷³ In the late 1950s, an innovation of a different kind was made in Sointula. Helmi Pakkalen, who had moved to the island from Finland in 1952, conceived of a convenient way to recycle the fishing nets discarded in abundance on the island. Cut apart and crocheted, they made durable and surprisingly attractive rugs. Her idea caught on, and over the years hundreds of such rugs have been made on the island.⁷⁴

By 1948, Sointula's fishing fleet included seventy gillnet boats and twelve deep-sea trollers in addition to several purse seiners, fish packers, and halibut vessels. The biggest problem for the island's fishing industry was still the lack of a breakwater in the Rough Bay harbour: during summer westerlies and winter storms smaller boats had to be hauled onshore, while bigger ones relied on their anchors out in the bay.⁷⁵ Fishing around Malcolm Island was potentially very dangerous because of the combination of high winds and strong tides. In a 1993 interview, retired fisher Mauno Ahola could easily list sixteen Sointula colleagues who had drowned since the 1930s. A memorial in the Sointula harbour holds the names of thirty-one men, most of them with Finnish names, who lost their lives at sea between 1932 and 2001. The worst marine accident in Sointula's history was the shipwreck of the *Ocean Star* in January 1966. The seventy-two-foot herring seiner capsized in Georgia Strait with the loss of all seven men aboard. Five of the drowned fishers were from Sointula.⁷⁶

Sointula fishers would occasionally catch orca whales in their seines while fishing for salmon. Jussi Hämäläinen praised the intelligence of the species and remembered the time Sam Mäki (Mäki) caught four whales in his seine, but yet another orca was able to release all except one of its captured companions by lowering the selvage with its tail.

⁷³ R. Haig-Brown, "Pacific Salmon in Salt Water," in *The Seasons of a Fisherman: A Fly Fisher's Classic Evocations of Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter Fishing* (Guilford, CT: Lyons, 2000), 273-4. See also Ossi Seppovaara, *Vuoksi: Luonto ja ihminen vesistön nuovaajina* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1984), 74, 154-5.

⁷⁴ Kathleen Gray, "Sointula's Rugs from Nets Combine Beauty and Durability," photocopy (17 pp.), n.d., Sointula Museum.

⁷⁵ John Anderson, "Grit and Harmony Built Sointula," *Vancouver Sun* (magazine supplement), 13 November 1948. A modern breakwater was constructed during the 1960s.

⁷⁶ Pälsi, *Suuri, kaunis ja ruma maa*, 157-8; Ahola, Williams interview, 1993; "Ocean Star Sinking" and "Tragedy Strikes BC Herring Fleet," *The Fisherman* (Vancouver), 4 February 1966. For a powerful description of riding out a 1946 storm, see Hämäläinen, Virtaranta interview, 1980, 118-9.



Fishing boats tied up at the Sointula wharf in 1950. By the mid-twentieth century, the utopian commune had turned into an ethnic community sustained almost solely by commercial fishing. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.

The remaining whale was then towed to Sointula harbour, followed closely by the others. The orca was held in the harbour for a few days – with other whales regularly visiting it – until it was sold to Holland via an American intermediary.⁷⁷

By the 1950s, the nickname for trolling equipment had changed from “starvation pole” to “money tree.” New lures, such as the plastic squid imitation known as the “hootchie” (which sported an impressive palette of colours targeting different species), came into wide use. According to Alfred Williams, trolling was the type of fishing that was “the easiest on any fish” because fish were caught only when they were hungry, whereas “netting gets the fish regardless [of] whether they are hungry or not.” Sointula fishers would troll as far as the Queen Charlotte Islands to the north, but most would stay within a sixty-mile radius of Cape Scott at the northern tip of Vancouver Island.⁷⁸

Many fishers worked as loggers after the salmon season ended in the fall. Logging was hard work, but it was neither as demanding nor as dangerous as was fishing. Besides, the unions used to be strong: “In

⁷⁷ Hämäläinen, Virtaranta interview, 1980, 117–8.

⁷⁸ A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979.

those days, [logging work] was quite easy. Because the loggers ruled the roost. If they didn't want to go out on call one day they stayed in and the boss couldn't do anything about it. Now [1982] they have to go there, rain or shine, seven days a week. No mercy at all ... [Compared to fishing,] logging was so much easier, no risk whatsoever." In a 1967 interview, an original settler maintained that, with the change from old-growth to managed forests, clearcuts, and fields, Malcolm Island had become an absolutely "different place now than what it was with the forest on it." By the early 1990s, there was very little old-growth left on the island, most of it in the Bere Point Regional Park on the northern shore. Still, "quite a few fellows" in Sointula logged for a living, at least temporarily and to stay off unemployment insurance during winter.⁷⁹

In interviews conducted between 1967 and 1993, Sointulans emphasized the importance of the fishing industry for the community as a whole. "Without fishing we would have been practically starving, we wouldn't have anything. Everything we have here comes from fish," said Alfred Williams. Compared with the contributors to the *Aika*, the post-utopia inhabitants of Malcolm Island were reluctant to elaborate on the aesthetics of the natural world and focused instead on the more materialistic aspects of the human/nature relationship. Thorough knowledge of local conditions was seen as the crucial factor behind the rise of the fishing industry and subsequent economic development on Malcolm Island. Wayne Homer described fishing as "a trade that requires considerable knowledge ... You've got to study the habits of fish and the effect of tides and currents on the fish movements. You've got to know it right to the very minute of the day to be a successful fisherman." Arvo Tynjala's assessment was almost identical. He saw fishing as "a trade that anybody can do, the fishing. The key to fishing is to know the country, the waters where you are fishing. That's the big thing." His explanation for Sointulans' reputation as good fishers was very simple: "They're no better than the next man otherwise, but they know the places where the fish are and how to catch them and where to catch them and that ... if you don't know where the fish are, you're not a fisherman." Alfred Williams echoed this sentiment by stating that Malcolm Islanders "are number one fishermen because they have been born here. You see, you grow up with it and you get to understand the ocean."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Homer, Fish interview, 1982; A. Tynjala, Orchard interview, 1967; Lorrie Belveal, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, November 1992, Sointula Museum.

⁸⁰ A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979; Homer, Fish interview, 1982; A. Tynjala, Orchard interview, 1967.



The *Western Ace* with a catch of 7,500 sockeye salmon off northern Malcolm Island in 1994. The 1980s and early 1990s, before the implementation of strict federal fishing regulations, were the halcyon days for Sointula salmon fishers. Courtesy of the Sointula Museum.

Despite the risks involved in it, fishing was generally seen as an ideal way to make a living: as Alfred Williams pointed out, “It’s a good life, you are free, you are your own boss, and if for instance you want to educate yourself, what is better than working five months in the summertime and make enough money to get by the rest of the year and then you can do what you want.” Growing old and giving up the trade was not easy for men who had fished all their lives. For Ted Tanner, “it was kind of a strange feeling when you sell the boat and you watch the other boats to pull out and you were left on the beach.” Fishing was often transformed into a hobby for retirees who were unwilling to give up their close connection to the ocean.⁸¹

By the 1980s, Sointula had its own “fishing millionaires,” but, typically, these people did not show off their wealth by engaging in conspicuous consumption.⁸² With the bigger profits and increased efficiency, however, something was lost. Remembering the old days, Olavi Maki commented:

⁸¹ A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979; Tanner, Fish interview, 1982.

⁸² Homer, Fish interview, 1982.

It wasn't as hectic as now. In them days we knew when we were going out, and ... we knew we'd have so many days each week. And we had a longer season. Mind you we didn't make the money in the olden days that we make now ... Our prices were so low before, it didn't matter what poundage you got. We used to get over a half a million pounds of salmon a year and make \$4,000 share on that. And we worked a lot harder. I mean times weren't as good, but we had more fun. It seemed we had time to do things on the weekends, whereas we don't anymore.⁸³

Life on Malcolm Island had begun to change after the Second World War. Radios, telephones, and the fact that Malcolm Island children were now being educated in English, brought new influences to Sointula. At the same time, the number of fishers of non-Finnish background increased. Still, in the mid-1950s, over 90 percent of the island's inhabitants were of Finnish origin.⁸⁴ The first church was built on the island in 1961, but to this day the settlement has remained unincorporated and is without a permanent police force. The ethnic base of the population started to shift after the late 1960s. As a result of the Vietnam War and the rise of a counterculture in the United States, draft dodgers and hippies began to arrive on Malcolm Island in growing numbers. They purchased old Finnish farms and attempted to live off the land. The new arrivals came from different backgrounds, but a common denominator was their disenchantment with the conventional way of life and a strong desire "to get back to the land." Initially, the arrival of people with a very different lifestyle caused an upheaval in the community, but the predominantly American newcomers were accepted within a decade. During the last three decades, this new generation of settlers – who sometimes have explicitly identified themselves with Matti Kurikka – has actively developed new co-operatives on the island, including tree planting, shellfish, and food co-ops.⁸⁵

Since the late 1990s, one result of the controversial Salmon Revitalization Strategy (the so-called Mifflin Plan), instituted by the federal government to protect salmon stocks by cutting down the number of

⁸³ Maki, Fish interview, 1979. See also Chuck Wilman, interview by Gloria Williams, tape-recording, Sointula, December 1992, Sointula Museum.

⁸⁴ Eero Jäntti, "Kertomus 'Kalevan Kansan' Sointulan särkymisestä 50 v. sitten," *Työväen Osuustoimintalehti* (Superior, WI), 22 September 1955. For developments on Malcolm Island since 1945, see Wild, *Sointula*, chaps. 14–16; K. Wilson, *Practical Dreamers*, chaps. 4–8.

⁸⁵ Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 62; Warren Ekness, interview by Paula Wild, tape-recording, 9 August 1988, Wild 4355/4, BCA; Ralph Harris, interview by Paula Wild, tape-recording, 12 August 1988, Wild 4355/4, BCA; K. Wilson, *Practical Dreamers*, 136–8, 166–94.

fishing boats, has been the collapse of the island's previously flourishing fishing industry. Under the new licensing system, only the biggest operators now seem able to afford the fishing permits. Of course, the fishing industry has always been notorious for its wild fluctuations. In 1992, Chuck Wilman pointed out that "fishing is always changing, it seems like there is always a crisis of some kind or other. Fishing industry was in crisis even when I was younger. My dad always told me, 'Never be a fisherman! Don't ever be a fisherman, it is a dying industry.'" This time, however, the problems faced by Sointula's traditional fishing industry seem incurable.⁸⁶

Not surprisingly, Malcolm Island fishers have always been quick to point out that overfishing is not the only factor contributing to the decline of salmon stocks in British Columbia. In 1972, Arvo Tynjala admitted that fishing pressure in Rivers Inlet was often too severe, but he added that there were "so many things" involved and that the deteriorating conditions in the spawning grounds had been overlooked. Whatever the reason, the situation in many rivers was alarming; streams "that used to be so thick with fish that you could just about walk on them" were now "dead." In a 1982 interview, Wayne Homer elaborated on the same question, sometimes echoing the sentiments of Roderick Haig-Brown's classic conservation essays from the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁷ Homer pointed out that much of the decline in salmon stocks resulted from the destruction of spawning habitat. He blamed the federal authorities for allowing logging operators to scoop up gravel to build logging roads, a practice that had totally destroyed numerous rivers and streams. Now there was "no place for [the salmon] to spawn – just bare rock. And the gravel when you look at it it's on the road." Also, much of the destruction was entirely in vain, because "the roads made of round [streambed] pebbles, they've been washed away by the rain, because pebbles don't hold together." When the government "finally stopped [the practice], they said they couldn't take any more gravel, it was too late, the damage [was] done." Even good intentions had resulted

⁸⁶ Wilman, Williams interview, 1992. On the changing BC fishing industry, see Patricia Gallagher and Kelly M. Vodden, "Tying It Together along the BC Coast," in *Fishing Places, Fishing People: Traditions and Issues in Canadian Small-Scale Fisheries*, ed. Dianne Newell and Rosemary E. Ommer, 276-97 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and the evaluation report by the federal Department of Western Economic Diversification, "Western Economic Diversification and Pacific Fisheries Adjustment," http://www.wd.gc.ca/rpts/audit/ceaia/ta_e.asp (viewed 10 May 2007).

⁸⁷ A. Tynjala, Kennedy interview, 1972; Homer, Fish interview, 1982; R. Haig-Brown, "The Great Destroyers" (1959) and, especially, "A Word for the Small Streams" (1964) in Haig-Brown, *Seasons of a Fisherman*, 199-204, 258-64.

in further destruction. Homer recalled a case in which a lumber company was ordered to clean up after itself, with disastrous results:

The fisheries laid the law to them that to be sure after you logged to clean the river bed of the tops and branches, don't leave them there – pull them up out of the river. They not only pulled their own tree tops out of there but the windfalls that had been there, well, for probably a hundred years or more in the bottom of the stream. They were holding the gravel, and they pulled the windfalls up! And the fish run was over, they just washed it clean. Now the fish that spawn there, they have to go to the headwaters of the river and up some small creeks to spawn – they never spawned [there] before, [but now] it's the only place where there's gravel.⁸⁸

By the 1990s, increasing governmental regulation combined with recent development on Malcolm Island was embittering people involved in the traditional fishing industry. Outsiders were building new sport fishing lodges on the island. The lodges brought in most of their provisions and supplied their guests with self-caught fish and crab, much to the disappointment of local merchants. Fisher Lorrie Belveal was greatly irked by the situation in which “you have a commercial fishery being the mainstay of the community, and it seems kind of contrary to have these sport fishing lodges right in the middle of our community, because the two factions really don't get along.” Belveal found it extremely unfair that, at a time when the commercial fishing sector was being “cut back in a lot of fishing areas [based on escapement estimates by the federal authorities], never to be open again for commercial fishing,” the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was not able to estimate exactly how much fish was being caught by the sport fishers. Many had big yachts with large freezers and were suspected of selling their catch illegally. Belveal found it “unfortunate that the fishing industry has to be subsidized by UIC [Unemployment Insurance Commission, today known as the CEIC, Canada Employment Insurance Commission] for a good majority of us people in the winter months. Because really if the salmon rivers were looked after and the runs were looked after properly, I think most of us would not need UIC in the winter time.” In addition to all the other problems faced by the profession, fish farms were starting to appear on the BC coast. Judging from the Norwegian experience with farmed Atlantic salmon, there seemed to be a grave risk of the farm fish transmitting diseases to wild salmon stocks. Belveal also questioned the

⁸⁸ Homer, Fish interview, 1982.

quality of farmed salmon as food: “I guess they are good for the people that never have had the real good fish. They haven’t had a chance to eat good fresh wild fish.”⁸⁹

Despite the vast changes in their community, Malcolm Islanders of Finnish ancestry have tried to sustain their strong sense of place. In a 1979 interview, Alfred Williams stressed that he would “never live across the way. People are in too much of a rush there.” On quiet Malcolm Island, there was no “trying to beat the other guy to get home after five o’clock.” In Sointula, one could “take it easy; you can find a beach and walk and nobody is there, if you want to be by yourself.” In 1992, Lorrie Belveal simply stated: “I would never move away from here. I am going to die here. This is where my grassroots have been since my great-grandmother’s time, and I am going to stay here.”⁹⁰

In the early 1990s, Malcolm Islanders were still able to hold on to their lifestyle “fairly well.” As Lorrie Belveal put it, the idea that “it would be nice to just hold on to what we [have] got instead of going too haywire” had been formalized in the 1980 development plan for Sointula as a part of the Regional District of Mount Waddington. Still, there already seemed to be “too much Yankee money coming in,” a process that has accelerated during the last decade. Wealthy people from southern Vancouver Island, the Vancouver metropolitan area, and the United States are increasingly using the island as a summer resort, going back to their city homes for winter, and leaving little money in the community as a whole. Of late, tourism has become increasingly important to the local economy, a development lamented by many long-time residents with no connections to the fast-growing service sector made up of B&Bs, fishing tours, whale watching, and other wilderness excursions. The recent economic trends have been recorded in the 2004 Regional Development Strategy, which, in addition to the growing importance of tourism, documents a 50 percent decline in the active fishing fleet as well as a rapid rise in the number of fish farms in the area.⁹¹

In the conclusion of his comprehensive history of the communitarian tradition on Malcolm Island, Kevin Wilson maintains that “Kurikka

⁸⁹ L. Belveal, Williams interview, 1992. The Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) belongs to a different genus from the Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus*). On the risks posed by farmed fish to native salmon populations, see *On the Run: Escaped Farmed Fish in Norwegian Waters*, Report 2/2005 (Oslo: WWF-Norway, 2005), 16–22.

⁹⁰ A. Williams, Fish interview, 1979; L. Belveal, Williams interview, 1992.

⁹¹ L. Belveal, Williams interview, 1992; George E. Penfold, Blair Slater, and Diane Carley, *A Regional Economic Development Strategy for the Regional District of Mount Waddington, March 31, 2004*, <http://www.rdmw.bc.ca/malcolmisland.html> (viewed 10 May 2007).

dreamed of utopia, and did not remain when he saw it fail. [Mäkelä] worked for a viable community that looked after its own, and stayed to see it succeed. The residents of Malcolm Island, whether newcomers or old-time Finns, are the descendants of [Mäkelä] – the practical dreamers of Sointula.”⁹² In regard to the Malcolm Islanders’ perceptions and uses of the natural world, the dichotomy between the two men and their legacy is becoming less clear. Kurikka would presumably find the organic food, aromatherapy, and traditional Chinese medicine available on today’s Malcolm Island not incompatible with his theosophical ideas, while the contemporary vacationers’ dream of combining pristine nature with modern amenities is not that far removed from Kurikka’s reverie, which merged “whispering pines” and “glittering lights.”⁹³ After the collapse of the utopian experiment, the Sointula Finns were forced to adopt a practical attitude towards nature, with little room for aesthetics. Echoing Mäkelä, the inhabitants of the fishing community nevertheless appreciated their natural surroundings and developed a keen sense of place. Still, Mäkelä’s utilitarian dream of independent but united workers seems to be fading fast. In today’s globalized economy, the small primary producers of older OECD countries have lost much of their footing. Unlike the situation at the time of the founding of Sointula in 1901, the problems faced by independent fishers and small farmers are now identical in Finland and British Columbia.

⁹² K. Wilson, *Practical Dreamers*, 224.

⁹³ “Sointula, British Columbia, Canada, on Malcolm Island,” <http://www.island.net/~sointula/> (viewed 10 May 2007); Maaton, “Viikon varrelta.”