The ‘Lapland Giantess’ in Britain

Reading Concurrences in a Victorian Ethnographic Exhibition

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Victorian Britons lived in an age in which peoples, ideas and images were thrown violently together, torn apart, and reconstituted by the machinery of modern global imperialism. This was an age in which the past and future seemed to take territorial form, from the primitive to the industrially advanced, to be explored and quickly mastered lest they over-ride the Victorian here and now. It was an age in which an unprecedented yearning for the exotic, savage, subversive, and sophisticated clashed with an intense desire to protect the familiar, the traditional, and the banal. And it was an age that frequently defied convention, eluded comprehension, and incited visceral fear and excitement as people charted the boundaries of ‘normal’ life in a rapidly changing world.

In the summer of 1851 this turbulent concurrence of people, ideas, and things was refracted, as if through a prism, by the vast canopy of high-tech glass plates that made up the Crystal Palace in London. Here, at the Great Exhibition, which ran from May to October, empires and countries from around the world were invited to compete against each other by showcasing objects that illustrated their technological, manufacturing, and cultural prowess. Above them all stood their host, Great Britain, which had allocated itself about half of the entire ten miles of exhibition space in order to flaunt its imperial and industrial superiority before more than six million visitors.

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2 For discussion of the Great Exhibition, see, for example, John Willinsky, Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998): 75.
Yet, among all the modern and futuristic marvels stood a woman, literally head and shoulders above the crowd, who seemed to many to have stepped out of a distant, exotic past. The fact that she was singled out by the newspaper reporters who saw her at the Crystal Palace on 19 August as the week’s great “curiosity” is all the more remarkable, given that she was attending as one of the 51,525 visitors that day rather than as an exhibit. Her name was Christina Larsdotter, a Sami woman, known to the press and public as ‘the Lapland Giantess’. Measuring around 210 cm tall, Larsdotter spent her working hours being exhibited at another location in London during the summer of 1851, together with her relative Maria Christina Sjulsdotter, a woman of contrasting much lesser height. For an entry fee of only one shilling, people could see the women, both natives of Swedish Sápmi (Lapland), exhibited in Saville House, Leicester Square. Together, the Sami visitors piqued the curiosity of both intellectuals and those in search of the latest ‘freak show’. Not only were the women presented as examples of an exotic pre-modern race of people on the fringes of Europe, one of whom exhibited the unusually short stature of the typical ethnic Sami, or ‘Lapp’, but they also provided a unique and exciting contrast to all that in the form of Larsdotter.

Public fascination with the Sami among Victorians extended beyond the exhibitions of 1851 to recurring newspaper articles, scientific and ethnographic reports, novels, children’s books, poems, and travelogues. Sami people therefore played a significant role in the development of the nineteenth-century cultural imagination, to which Larsdotter made her very own contribution. Yet, there is a real dearth of academic research on Victorian interest in the Sami. Larsdotter, for instance, has been absent from international scholarship and studies examining Victorian ethnographic exhibitions.

While acknowledging the value of Sjulsdotter and Larsdotter as subjects, it must be stressed that these are only two among quite a large number of Sami...