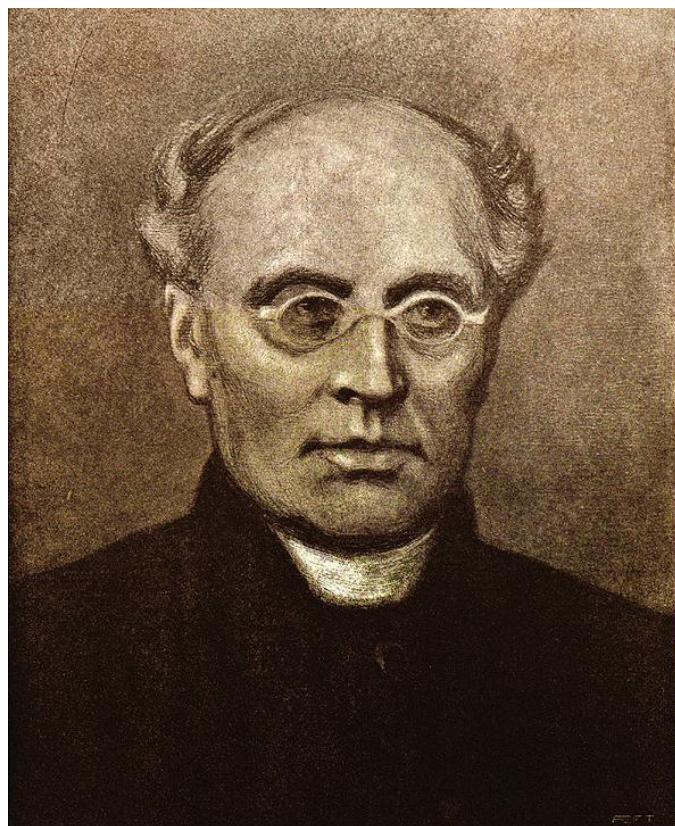


# Svensksund, Gustavus III and the Finnish National Poet, Johan Ludvig Runeberg

Marcus Lepola, 2019.

Johan Ludvig Runeberg (5 February 1804 – 6 May 1877) was a Finnish-Swedish poet. He also made a career as a teacher in the town of Borgå (Fin. Porvoo). Runeberg is praised as the national poet of Finland and he is celebrated annually on February 5, the day of his birth.

Runeberg authored the lyrics of “*Vårt land*” (Eng. Our Land), that became the Finnish National Anthem.



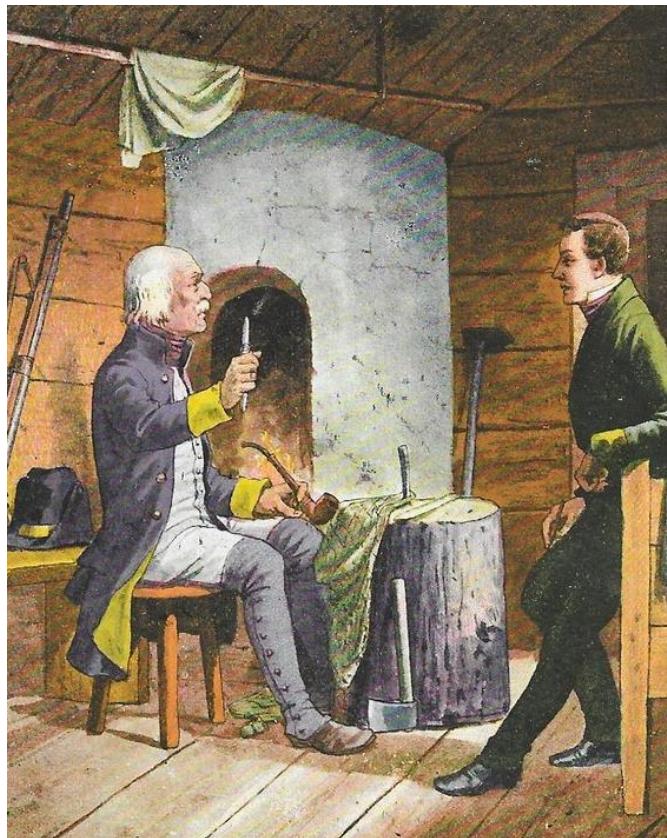
*Johan Ludvig Runeberg (portrait by C. P. Mazer)*

The poem is the first poem in the epic “Tales of Ensign Stål” (Swe. *Fänrik Ståls sägner*), which Runeberg wrote between 1848 and 1860. “Ensign Stål” is considered the greatest Finnish epic poem outside the native Kalevala tradition. The poem describes the events of the Finnish War (1808–1809) between Sweden and Russia. In the war, Sweden ingloriously lost Finland, which then became a Grand Duchy of Russia. The epic, divided in episodes, emphasizes the humanity of all sides in the conflict, while principally lauding the heroism of the Finns. The poem has been important in the shaping of Finnish national identity. The Tales of Ensign Stål were for a long time required reading in schools and was handed out during the Winter War 1939-1940 to improve national moral in times of strife.

## Runeberg and War Veterans

Runeberg was born in 1804 in Jakobstad (Fin. Pietarsaari). He was only 4-5 years old during the Finnish War, but he was raised to manhood in a seemingly hapless country, violently separated from the old kingdom of

Sweden of which Finland had been part of for more than 700 years. The separation was traumatic and young Runeberg absorbed the events and the feelings of native Swedish speaking people that lived around him during his formative years. The abolishment of the Swedish allotment system left soldiers and their families without home and livelihood.



*Ensign Stål, old 20th century postcard.*

As Runeberg reached adulthood, he would continue to show great interest towards tales of the war. He came to know several veterans and used their stories as inspiration for his poem. Some of the veterans he came in contact with had experienced two wars, the War of Gustavus III of 1788-90 as well as the Finnish War of 1808-1809. Runeberg was seated with veterans of the War of 1788-1790 at a dinner in Borgå (Fin. Porvoo) in 1840, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the second Battle of Svensksund. Among the guests was major Stålhammar, a veteran who lost his arm in Vyborg bay and was taken captive by the Russians.

## Veterans taking part in the Finnish War

The poems of Ensign Stål feature several historic characters as well as fictional soldiers such as the title character, "Stål", which is Swedish for steel, a typical soldier name. These were names, often consisting of simple words for traits or traits related to the military or nature, given to Swedish soldiers by their commanders, and many of Runeberg's characters have them: Dufva, Svärd and Hurtig ('pigeon', 'sword' and 'quick') are other examples.

Soldier Hurtig is a character waiting for the battle at Oravais to commence while chatting with his comrades at arms. Old Hurtig is a veteran of the 1788-1790 war and in the poem, Hurtig comments on the unsuccessful nature of the current military campaign which is mostly retreating and re-grouping. Hurtig reminisces the battles of the previous war which were fought with the king himself throwing his lot in with the soldiers. In the current war the soldiers fight alone and not even field marshals will stand by their

soldiers. The old soldier is tired of retreating and decides to make a final stand at the battle of Oravais, resulting in his death by an enemy bullet.

### XII. Old Man Hurtig (excerpt)

*At the bivouac silence ne'er was regning,  
if the old man Hurtig was but there;  
Often sat he till the night was waning,  
War and peace his theme so fair;  
to re-light his pipe he constant turned,  
And forgot again, although it burned.*

*Gustaf Third his man was. "Ah, what quarrels  
Fought he not with Russia's haughty queen!  
Friends, those times for soldiers held more laurels  
Than this life has seen;  
Then the king himself braved smoke and blood,  
Now for these a marshal is too good*



Otto Mauritz Stålhammar, a veteran of the 1788-1790 War. Daguerrotype, 1844. Borgå Museum.

## Honour and dishonour

Victory and honour gained in the previous war with Gustavus III casts a long shadow of shame and dishonour over the later mismanaged Finnish War campaign in Runeberg's poems. The surrender of the Fortress Sveaborg at Helsingfors (Fin. Helsinki) in 1808, is the topic of one poem in Runeberg's epic. In the poem the commander of the fort, Vice-Admiral Karl Olof Cronstedt, is scorned for his betrayal and

surrender of the fort to the Russian General C. Suchtelen by the narrator Ensign Stål. Cronsted had been the valiant hero of the Second Battle of Svensksund in 1790 and in the shameful capitulation he efficiently destroys his own legacy. The old Ensign's condemnation of Cronstedt is so extreme that he will not even mention the name of the betrayer as he recites the tale to the youthful poet Runeberg. Surviving oral traditions from Finland regarding this event are just as condemning, often going as far as claiming that Cronstedt was buried alive inside the wall of Sveaborg as punishment for his crime.

#### **XVII Sveaborg (excerpt)**

*"O life! The man whose heinous sin  
Caused all these tears to run,  
Did once the fairest laurels win  
That ever hero won: -  
For victor at Svensksund was he,  
The Swedish fleet's great victory.*

#### [Brita Hagberg and Lotta Svärd](#)

Runeberg also introduces a female character, Lotta Svärd, a young wife of a soldier that follows her man in to war where the man falls. She also takes part in the Finnish War as a typical sutler, a canteen woman - but by this time her youthfulness has waned but her sense of duty and willingness to serve gains her respect



*Lotta Svärd and her husband.*

and honour. It is likely that Runeberg based the character of Lotta Svärd upon Brita Hagberg from Stockholm who disguised herself as a man to be able to enlist in the Army Fleet in 1788, hoping to join her husband. Her true gender was revealed during the Battle of Vyborg Bay 1790 as she was wounded in the chest and in need of medical treatment. After the war, Brita received a military pension and earned her living by selling fruit in Stockholm. Runeberg apparently discovered Hagberg's story through a poem about her titled; "The fruit seller woman with a medal of bravery", by the female Swedish poet Euphrosyne in 1828. The character of Lotta Svärd later inspired the creation of a Finnish voluntary auxiliary paramilitary

organisation for women with the same name. Formed originally in 1918, it had a large membership undertaking volunteer social work in the 1920s and 1930s. During the Second World War, it mobilized to replace men conscripted into the army. It served in hospitals, at air raid warning positions, and other auxiliary tasks in close cooperation with the army. Lotta Svärd was disbanded in accordance with Soviet Union peace demands.

Many of the events in “Ensign Stål” are presented by Runeberg against the backdrop of the previous, more successful military campaign of Gustavus III. During the previous war the king himself took active part in battles on sea and on land. Gustavus III's son, Gustav IV Adolf, was not as keen to take part in battle as his father and was absent from Finland throughout the Finnish War. The Finns did not lack bravery in battle but treachery by their peers and abandonment by their king made it impossible to prevent the country's invasion against a superior foe. The legacy of the earlier 1788-1790 war with Russia is an evident backdrop for many of the poems in Ensign Stål and to this day resonate in the shaping of a Finnish national identity, - a country that has been forged through conflict and endurance.

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