

# Heikki Kirkinen

\* 22.9.1927 † 9.1.2018



**HEIKKI KIRKINEN**, emeritus professor of history and a major figure in the early development of the university in Joensuu, passed away at the age of 90 on 9th January 2018 in Joensuu after a long illness. He was born at Kuusjärvi in Outokumpu on 22nd September 1927.

After matriculation from Joensuu Lyceum in 1949, Kirkinen quickly gained his first degree from the University of Helsinki in 1952 with general history as his main subject. He then took his doctorate in 1961 with a thesis on the mechanistic concept of humanity that prevailed in France during the reign of Louis XIV. Thus it was natural that, after a few years as a junior research fellow with the Academy of Finland, he should have set out for the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris to spend the years 1966–1970 as a visiting professor of Finnish language, literature and culture. These years in France and the experiences that he gained of the active attitudes of university students and the struggles for campus democracy were to shape his thinking and world view for the years to come.

These influences from the modern world were rapidly manifested in concrete form when, on his return from Paris, Kirki-

nen was appointed to the chair in general history at the recently founded University of Joensuu, first for a limited period from August 1970 onwards and then with full-time from February of the following year. Qualification for this position was crucially influenced by his writings on the history of Karelia, which later established themselves as classics in this field. Kirkinen was indeed the first full professor to be appointed at the new university and thus also became its rector in autumn 1971, a position in which he served for the next ten years.

Kirkinen's term as rector was marked by two major trends. In the first place, having operated on a small scale at first, concentrating mostly on teacher training, the new university gradually diversified and became more scientific. This increase in its range of subjects and expansion of its research interests also meant that it cast off the image of a "pariah university". Its student body had grown tenfold by 1980, to over 3 000, and its teaching staff was more than six times larger than it had been ten years earlier. One factor lying behind this growth was the active and determined work that Kirkinen put in, both in public and behind the scenes, his greatest achievement of all in this respect

being the inauguration of teaching in forestry in autumn 1981 in the face of severe opposition.

The second major trend that marked his term of office as rector was reformation of the university's administration and degree system. Although Kirkinen had learned from his years at the Sorbonne University to support the notion of more extensive university democracy, he was obliged as rector to seek compromises between various points of view, and in the end Joensuu settled for the tripartite administrative model that had found favour at the national level. When it came to degree reform, however, this young, innovative university marched forward with confidence, led by its rector. Not all the ambitious goals of the reform were attained, but the campaign was of considerable significance for the university's scientific reputation and general visibility on a national scale.

One consequence of his term of office as rector was that Kirkinen gained a reputation as an active participant in political discussions on educational and social themes, directing warning gestures and words towards the big universities in the south of the country and towards the civil servants manning the government ministries. His book *Kehitysalue – kehitysmää: laulu kotimaisesta kolonialismista* ("Regional development and developing countries: a ballad of colonialism on the domestic front") published in 1972 was one example of his demands for changes in Finland's regional development policy. In his opinion the opening of new universities was the key to improving educational opportunities for the young people of the outlying districts, a theme that was reiterated in his *Uudistuva koulutus ja alueellinen tasa-arvo*

("Educational reform and regional equality", 1977), which summarized the main tenets of his educational policy. Later, in the 1990s, he returned to questions of regional policy when examining the system of regions as the foundation of Finland's democracy and administration. Following his departure from the position of rector in 1981, Kirkinen had two more stints as a visiting professor in Paris before his retirement in the early 1990s.

Heikki Kirkinen was a versatile researcher who was ready to break down the barriers between academic disciplines. Above all, he emphasized the importance of examining the history of mankind "from very close quarters and from the inside, aiming at an intimate understanding of the development of every ethnic group and culture". And the object that he chose to study in this way was Karelia. Thus his *Karjala idän kulttuuripiirissä. Bysantin ja Venäjän yhteyksistä keskiajan Karjalaan* ("Karelia in the Eastern Cultural Sphere. Medieval Connections with Byzantium and Russia", 1963), *Karjala idän ja lännen välissä I. Venäjän Karjala renessanssijalla (1478-1617)* ("Karelia between East and West I. Russian Karelia during the Renaissance (1478-1617)", 1970) and *Karjala taistelukenttänä. Karjala idän ja lännen välissä II* ("Karelia as a battleground. Karelia between East and West II", 1976) were works of his that revolutionized Karelian studies in Finland, in particular because he set out for the first time to make extensive use of Russian sources and attempted to resolve the questions that arose by viewing them from the perspective of the Karelians themselves. This new approach to Karelian history aroused vehement criticism from older historians and by no means all of his interpretations gained

general acceptance. Kirkinen nevertheless defended his own interpretations tenaciously and took an active part in philosophical discussions concerning the role of history. One consequence of this was his book *Historian rakenteet ja voimat* ("The Structures and Power of History", published in 1987, in which he considered the historical development of human society in the context of the cosmic system and the doctrine of evolution. He also produced a later work *Termitit vai enkelit? - ajatuksia kulttuurievoluutiosta* ("Termites or angels? – thoughts on cultural evolution", 2002) in which he approached the findings of the natural sciences from a humanistic viewpoint.

Professor Kirkinen was elected to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1987.

Kirkinen's personality, combined with the breadth and depth of his learning made him an excellent conversationalist and teacher, and the periods he had spent doing research in France inspired him to introduce all his students from undergraduates to doctoral candidates to the ideas of the annalist school of historians. Both as a researcher and in everyday dis-

cussions he displayed a multidisciplinary approach and a readiness to express well-argued opinions on a vast range of issues, as is evident in his writings. He made good use of his many long car journeys by dictating parts of his forthcoming books and speeches into a tape recorder as he went along, providing an extra workload for the secretary in the History Department's office who had to type the material up afterwards. Nothing seemed to be beyond his sphere of interest, and he had a remarkable knack for arguing on the same level as his interlocutor.

Music and fishing were two hobbies that gave Heikki Kirkinen an opportunity to relax from his busy endeavours for a moment. Being an ardent user of fishing nets he would always be in need of someone to row his boat from time to time, and we, his younger colleagues, will always remember the excellent packed meals that his wife Maire used to prepare for us and the frequently spectacular catches of fish. But the best thing of all about those fishing trips was his companionship and sense of humour, and it is for this reason that his memory will live on in the minds of all who knew him.

*Obituary by Tapio Hämynen,  
Arto Nevala and Harri Siiskonen*