**Beggars and vagrants**

Begging was the only option for those who couldn’t get by on their own work or the charity of relatives. Nowhere near all the disadvantaged could find room in the hospitals and almshouses; they bunked down in outhouses, saunas, barns, in fact anywhere that was warm enough. In the nineteenth century, beggars were a miserable but all too obvious part of the scene. Men, women and children, reduced to abject poverty, were everywhere to be seen, whether inland in Nurmijärvi, along the coast in Siuntio, or in the capital, Helsinki. If there was one thing Aleksis Kivi knew about from personal experience, it was what it meant to be poor. And yet his writing doesn’t wallow in hunger and cold. Nor do his works offer much in the way of social criticism. This was simply how it had always been and most likely would always be.

Roaming around, with no fixed abode, was a crime. Gypsies were held to be second-class citizens at best, and Kivi viewed them with a certain degree of humour. The ‘Rajamäki regiment’, satirized in his novel *Seven Brothers*, was actually a hard-working family: the father sold pitch, castrated animals and played fiddle at village dances, while the mother practised the medical treatment known as cupping, a form of blood-letting, and told people their fortunes. And if they could just summon up the energy, even beggars slogged away at odd jobs. In the nineteenth century it was only the completely incapacitated, ‘the poorest of the poor’, as Kivi called them, who would take alms.

**The great famine years**

A short while before his own life began to fall apart, Aleksis Kivi witnessed the greatest national calamity of all time. In 1867, an unnaturally drawn out winter, combined with early autumn frost, ruined the crops. The sea froze over, government coffers ran low, and imports of grain came to a grinding halt. No fewer than 150,000 Finns died of hunger and disease, almost 8% of the entire population. Compared to national misfortune on this scale, the recessions of the 21st century seem nothing short of luxury!

Siuntio, west of Helsinki, where Kivi was living at the time, was spared the worst of the crop failure, but couldn’t escape rampant disease. From way up north, hordes of beggars made their way down south. Living as he did at the Fanjunkars cottage, located beside a main road, Kivi could claim that he had met the hungry from each and every parish in the land. As for himself, he got by with hunting and fishing, and there was always bread on Charlotta Lönnqvist’s table. However, the poverty all around was grinding. Even Fanjunkars was threatened with foreclosure. Publishers and booksellers became as impoverished as their authors. The famine years meant the market for Kivi’s writing was more hopeless than ever.

**Safe from strife**

Aleksis Kivi lived in a period of peace. As long as anyone could remember, the country had been spared the scourge of war. Kivi belonged to the first generation for whom bloodshed was somewhat remote. To be sure, the Baltic coastline was bombed and set ablaze in 1854 and 1855 during the Crimean War, and some Finns wound up in the Russian army in Poland and the Caucasus, but only in relatively small numbers. The burden of warfare was as nothing compared to the period when Finland was subject to the Swedish crown and an entire generation was swallowed up, leaving the occupied country brutally bereft of its menfolk.

The only works dealing with war were *Olviretki,* a comedy set in Germany, and *Canzio*, a play about Italian princes from the middle ages. *Margareta* dealt with the Finnish War of 1808 to 1809, but without the gunfire and gore. As such, Kivi can’t be classified as a chronicler of wars; his depictions of village brawls and bear hunts are much bloodier.

**Versatile vicars and a chaotic congregation**

In Kivi’s day, there was no such concept as ‘society’. The authorities lorded it over ordinary folk, upholding the law and levying taxes, but offering little in return.

The influence of the parish could be felt everywhere. For better or worse, this meant the Finns of the 19th century had some measure of control over their lives. The clergymen turned their hand to just about anything: taking care of the parish records, teaching the rudiments of reading and writing, and much else besides. And the parish did what it could by way of poor relief. Meanwhile the secular authorities would even have struggled to vaccinate against smallpox without the help of parish clerks.

Religious freedom was unheard of in the 19th century, but religious disputes flared up among Finns all the same. Revivalist movements shook the established church. On the other hand, a great many people couldn’t care less about religion. For many, learning to read – which meant learning by heart – was as painful a business as it was for the seven brothers in Kivi’s novel, who make their escape from church school by running into the woods. On Sundays people went to church, but not to seek salvation. During a drowsy church service they were more likely to be outside smoking and comparing horses. They were more interested in the minister reading out warrants for the arrest of criminals than listening to his regular sermon. From the very outset heavy drinking was part of churchgoing, no matter what the social class.

Taaborinvuori was the place Aleksis tried out sermons of his own invention, preaching alfresco to the more youthful members of the local flock. His parents had ambitions for him to become a man of the cloth, which is most probably why they paid for his schooling in Helsinki. But at some point Aleksis rebelled, declaring “I won’t become a minister – and wear a dog collar. All they do is bark for their bread.”

**The fading might of the estates**

The two estates of the Adlercreutz family, Raala in Nurmijärvi and Sjundby in Siuntio, both had a decisive influence on Kivi’s life and work. His friends and relatives were, at various times, tenants and employees of this aristocratic family. But the arrangement was anything but cruel and oppressive. The Adlercreutz family members were for the most part kind and helpful. There was no hard and fast division between the nobility and the peasantry. Aleksis’ father was from humble enough stock, but hunted with the clergy and lords of the manor all the same.

In a relatively backward country with scarce means to make a living, not even the elite were in a position to amass great wealth. The Finnish aristocracy possessed plenty in comparison to their labourers, but their wealth was nothing compared to that of their seriously rich counterparts abroad. These had built palaces on the strength of colonial bounty and held their own as industrialists. An English earl would hardly have condescended to even a short stay in Raala’s draughty halls.

The nobility lost their ancient rights and privileges in the second half of the nineteenth century. The large-scale agricultural production of the estates dwindled in the face of cheap grain imports from Russia. The future belonged to bold seamen, merchants and self-taught factory-owners who had no need of illustrious ancestors. The Finnish race had long had a tendency to disrespect the nobility, and it’s their decline that can already be heard in the bawling and bellowing of the *Seven Brothers*.

**Landless cottagers**

Land ownership was simple: some people had it, and others did not. This state of affairs was evident from looking at the local church register and the taxation ledgers. As the name suggests, a *talonpoika* owned a house and a strip to farm; the *torppari* or crofter and *mäkitupalainen* or cottar lived as tenants; farm labourers and maids probably couldn’t call anything their own, other than the clothes they stood up in.

But how much land someone owns doesn’t always say much about their living standards. After all, land could be anything from lush pasture to miserable mire. And there’s little doubt that in 19th-century villages there were starving peasants and the landless, who eked out a living with manual labour. Kivi’s father owned a rather large two-storey dwelling, a strip of land and a few cows, but as a tailor he was able to live with his family in comfort.

**The world’s most amusing peasantry**

Unlike in Russia and the Baltic countries, even the most miserable of Finnish peasants was neither serf nor slave. A certain degree of independence bolstered the national temperament, which meant they didn’t bow and scrape before their lords and masters. Or perhaps it could be put down to a combination of genes and the mother tongue. Kivi sensed that compared to the people of Nurmijärvi the Swedish speakers from the coastal region of Siuntio were a race apart, and naturally he favoured the former.

Like all the 19th-century advocates of the Finnish language, known as Fennomans, he was galled by the eugenic fascination of the Swedish men of science, which effectively subordinated Finns. In Kivi’s books, the Finnish-speaking peasants drink, swear and defy the authorities. Still, it is easy to see his confidence that, with raw material like this, blessed in equal measure with virtues, he could put a smile on the motherland’s face.

**Starve-acre crops, cruelty to farm animals**

Farmers struggled along with their traditional farming methods, perhaps not even sensing the winds of change. But Aleksis Kivi was well aware of how slowly an ox dragged a wooden plough. For each grain seed sown, only three were harvested—unless the crop failed entirely, that is.

In their barns, cows lay neck-deep in dung, which was indeed the most valuable asset they had to offer. Back then fertilizers were not chemically manufactured, nor were they shipped from overseas. And there was no such thing as concentrated feed. Up north, the list of ingredients for cattle feed even included human excrement.

During winter the cows got only starvation rations, and as a result produced almost no milk. A few households were able to produce a milk surplus, which was sold in the local marketplace. There were no dairies, and no commercial cheese production. Agathon Meurman, a contemporary politician, once joked that Finnish butter was only fit for export as axle grease.

**A wide range of skilled crafts**

In Aleksis Kivi’s Finland, just a few factories turned out consumer goods. Before mass production, local artisans made a wide range of goods. Each and every hamlet had its own mill, a tailor, a cobbler, a blacksmith, and a carpenter. Larger villages would also have a saddler, a mason, a gravedigger as well as other skilled craftsmen. And each craft had their own professional pride. Kivi, the son of a tailor, said that “Shoemakers are of wolfish stock, but tailors belong to the brotherhood of bears.”

**A worthy yet entertaining judiciary**

The Finnish judicial system was grounded on centuries-old traditions. Aleksis’ father owned a copy of the Swedish Civil Code of 1734, which was still the law of the land. Judges and jurors were fairly honest—at least in comparison with Russia, where bribery was commonplace.

The peasantry did not necessarily appreciate the rule of law and the consistency with which sentences were passed down, and district court sessions often escalated into raucous public gatherings offering free entertainment to anyone who cared to listen. Punishments were a public affair. Those who had committed minor offences were put in the stocks and mocked by the churchgoers. But those who had committed serious crimes were whipped or flogged, and murderers were banished to the frozen wastes of Siberia. Finland had stopped executing convicted felons back in the 1820s. Although crime is a recurring theme in his work, Kivi was never accused of, or at least never convicted of any crime. He clearly had an interest in crime, both as a phenomenon and as a deviant lifestyle. In fact we know he attended court sessions. Seated in the public gallery at the courthouse, he would absorb himself in the cases being tried, but sometimes he just sat there for pure entertainment.

**From footpaths to railways**

Kivi composed his works at a turning point in history. The Saimaa Canal had already revolutionized the economy of the Grand-duchy of Finland by effectively linking the country’s inland waterways to the world’s oceans. During winter, it took four days for a horse-drawn sleigh to get from Helsinki to St. Petersburg, if the going was good. By water, however, it was possible to get almost anywhere. We know little about Kivi’s travels, but we do know he once travelled by steamboat to the old capital Turku.

The road network was expanded through the use of so-called emergency worksites, where villagers would work for a pittance. Footpaths were widened into village roads, and gradually the Finnish terrain no longer felt quite so impenetrable. The first stretch of railway was built between Helsinki and Hämeenlinna. To his delight, Kivi travelled “on a beautiful spring evening in a carriage drawn by steam locomotive through the forests of Nurmijärvi.”

**The boys and girls of Keinumäki**

In Palojoki, there was a lively social scene centred on a place called Keinumäki, or Swing Hill, where villagers danced and sang on summer evenings. Boys wrestled and played an old version of tug of war with a wooden stick. There was a big wooden swing which could take about a dozen people at a time. Every village had a place like this where young people could enjoy to the fullest what little spare time they had. Chances are the dating scene, with all its ups and downs, has changed little between the age of the plough and the PC.

**Summer days tending to the herd**

Barbed wire had not yet been invented, nor would cattle have even survived the short Finnish summer if they had been kept fenced in. During the summer, cows spent their days feeding in pastures where they roamed freely, before coming home to be milked in the evening. Sheep and goats also grazed in the forest. Predators were a constant threat, and there was also the danger of animals sinking into bogs. Since adults did not have time to run after the cattle, especially at sowing and harvest time, child labour was used, and the calls of the young herders could be heard echoing across the valleys. The shepherds had no leisure time to speak of, but at least the work could be pleasant. At any rate they would not have envied the tailor’s apprentices stuck indoors, nor those labouring on the fields.

**A Great Hunter**

“I was a great hunter, setting traps and snares. I was a happy fellow. Now I’m a sad fellow.” According to reliable witnesses, these were some of Kivi’s last words. In the autumn of 1872, two university men paid the writer a visit at his cottage in Tuusula. In his crazed state of mind, Kivi barely recognized them, nor was he any more interested in culture. Instead, his thoughts drifted back to a happy childhood as he muttered the word “crayfishing, crayfishing.” It seemed the child of the forest and the groundbreaking author who ushered in a new cultural age could no longer be contained beneath one and the same skull.

**Burn-beating ravages the landscape**

The Finnish people who lived in the forest were hardly environmentalists. Prior to industrialization, wood had little monetary value. The forest was mostly communal property--it did not belong to any single person. So it seemed unnecessary to conserve it.

A traditional method of cultivation was burn-beating, which involved burning the forest bed, making it temporarily fertile. Burn-beating yielded decent crops, but there was a price to pay. From the hills of Nurmijärvi one could see all the way over the bare patches and cut-down forest to Sipoo near the coast.

Burn-beating was extremely labour-intensive and impoverished the soil. Government authorities and economic experts demanded that it be prohibited. Intriguingly, in the 19th century the Finnish word for ‘rape’ did not mean violence towards women, but towards trees. Burn-beating was finally snuffed out as a result of legislation and the division of common forest land. Kivi witnessed this transition in the area where he lived, as the county authorities were able to enforce the ban, but in the north, where the fields were barren, burn-beating was to continue right up until the 20th century.

**Tinder-Matti – the full life of a forester**

In Kivi’s novel *Seven Brothers*, the brothers befriend a huntsman called Taula-Matti, or Tinder-Matti. He has travelled far and wide, even up to Lapland, to learn his skills and spells. Tinder-Matti lives in the forest near the brothers’ home in Impivaara, earning his living by hunting and gathering, and by selling kindling he makes out of tinder fungus, hence his name. The old man is something of a recluse, although he bears no hard feelings towards the community. In Kivi’s day this way of life was quite possible, despite the pressures from the spread of human settlement and the sawmill industry. So whilst Tinder-Matti may have been a hermit, he was not an outcast. The brothers respect him as a gifted storyteller and for his deep knowledge of nature’s wonders.

**The invisible denizens of the forest**

The forest was home to many supernatural beings, beings whom the average 19th-century Finn considered perfectly natural. Steeped in their traditional folklore, Finns were as yet unaffected by the discoveries of natural science. Plants, animals, springs, caves, boulders and other places were thought to be animated by the spirit of nature.

As a prank, Aleksis Kivi once goaded children into throwing pebbles at a big rock, so a mountain troll would appear. And there were many dangerous but useful monsters lurking about the forest-any of these could be used as free babysitters. Horror stories kept small children close to home—and thus far away from bogs, white water and cliffs.

**Nurmijärvi and the Forest Bandits**

Although only forty kilometres from Helsinki, in those days Nurmijärvi was a small hamlet far removed from the more densely populated capital. Only small patches were cultivated, and it was possible to walk long distances in the forest between parishes without coming across roads or dwellings. Criminals took advantage of this.

In the 1820s, Nurmijärvi was infamous for its forest bandits. One of them, Matti Stenvall, was Kivi’s great-uncle. These thieves represented the most organised crime of their day. Under the tight control of their leaders, large gangs robbed manor houses and churches. Sometimes robbers used a "human key," or torture, to force their victims to reveal where their money was stashed.

The bandits were nothing like Robin Hood; they lacked noble intentions, and would harass both the rich and the poor alike. But this didn’t stop people from romanticizing their way of life: they feasted by the campfire, with no regard for law or morality, free from the village community. The bandits of Nurmijärvi had already been vanquished by the time Aleksis Kivi was born, but the legend lived on, echoes of which can be heard in *Seven Brothers*.