

## Creativity and imagination in *Mannerheim: President, soldier, spy* by Jonathan Clemens

*Mannerheim: President, soldier, spy* presents the life and tales of Carl Mannerheim, the founder of modern Finland. The book authored by Jonathan Clemens is nominally a biography, but the author's creativity makes the reader feel as if the book is not merely describing Mannerheim's life. The author manages to provide a vibrant description of the places Mannerheim visited, a dynamic representation of the roles Mannerheim played, and tops it all off with interesting and stimulating facts that make the reader feel as if this is not a mere biography, but a tale that immerses the reader into a different world. This essay seeks to examine the creative elements used by the author in his literary work, and to critically assess the extent to which creativity might hamper the biographical nature of the book.

Mannerheim was a well-travelled man; his military career led him to the ends of the world. This detail of Mannerheim's life was absolutely fructified by the author, who turned Mannerheim's journeys into genuine works of art. Clemens makes extensive references to the beauty and geographical features of the places Mannerheim grew up in, and visited later on. The author uses powerful language that stimulates the reader's imagination. "The sloping grounds of the house rolled gently down towards the sea ... a long avenue of trees separated the mansion from the nearest road"<sup>1</sup>, we are told, in reference to an otherwise menial story about Mannerheim's childhood and the house he grew up in. This rich description floods the reader with visual imageries of a beautiful, idyllic country house not far from the sea; this encourages the reader to look beyond the biographical scope of the work, and more or less coerces the reader into visualizing the landscape. The book itself contains a number of black-and-white photographs that accompany Clemens' writings. It is hard to establish whether the author intended to use photos or not as a visual aid, but his vivid descriptions make the photos redundant. "The Muzart glacier was a series of monstrous, jagged hills of ice, tumbling down into the desert in geological slow motion ... they risked falling into a crevasse if they slipped off ice"<sup>2</sup>, we are told, alongside a photo showing people riding horses atop a hill. The author makes a fantastic job describing the Muzart glacier that Mannerheim bravely climbed, and manages to tangibly make the reader shiver at the thought of falling through a crevasse and eventually tumbling down, thereby highlighting Mannerheim's experience and courage better than a photo ever could. A photo is not always worth a thousand words, and Clemens is fully aware of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 12, Clemens, Jonathan. *Mannerheim: President, Soldier, Spy*. Haus, 2012. (ISBN 978-1907822575)

<sup>2</sup> Page 118

The author is well-aware of the nature of his work, and actively makes an effort to keep the reader engaged by moving away from the rather linear, less-than-suspenseful nature of ordinary biographies. Whenever one reads a biography, it is fair to assume that a reader is not necessarily familiar with the details of the subject's life, but it is hard to argue that someone's life history can be described as "suspenseful". Thankfully, Clemens manages to keep the reader actively engaged by linking key periods of Mannerheim's life with rather unrelated stories that arouse the reader's interest. "Finns in Russia were developing a reputation as sneaky troublemakers ... subtle agitations from the Finns led to anguish in Russia"<sup>3</sup>, the author informs us, right before telling us that Russians were weary of trusting Finns. Clemens then delves into a thriller-like story about military intrigues in Imperial Russia. Such begins the history of Mannerheim's political mission to Manchuria. This unexpected manner in which the author introduces new facts with an apparently unrelated story breaks the monotony of reading a single-handed account of Mannerheim's life, and manages to creatively persuade the reader to turn the page.

Suspense is heightened by the use of chapters with rather abstract and eye-grabbing titles; the chapters of the book leave plenty to imagination, with chapters having titles such as "The Baptism of Fire"<sup>4</sup>, "The White Devil"<sup>5</sup> and "The Jaws of Peril"<sup>6</sup>. Most readers will find such titles intriguing, especially in the context of each chapter beginning with an ambiguous introduction; this pushes the reader into further lecture. "The Jaws of Peril" mentions, within the first page<sup>7</sup>, the troubles faced by Mannerheim in his personal capacity as a politician, the troubles faced by the Finnish government at large, and the rise of Hitler. The reader simply cannot deduce what "The Jaws of Peril" could be, effectively forcing the reader to keep turning the page. The reader will need to read the whole chapter in order to find out that most of it focused the rise of communism and its subsequent impact on Mannerheim's retirement plans, which is far removed from the jaws of peril suggested in the introductory paragraph.

The work does not aim to be descriptive. At certain times, Clemens lets Mannerheim do the talking, by quoting directly from Mannerheim's memoirs. While undoubtedly Clemens has his own views about the events and on occasion tries to steer the reader into thinking in a like-minded manner, he retains an apparent impartiality. We are told of the time when Mannerheim, as chief commander of the Finnish armed forces, was informed by the Government that the Germans were

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<sup>3</sup> Page 48

<sup>4</sup> Chapter III, page 51

<sup>5</sup> Chapter VIII, page 190

<sup>6</sup> Chapter X, page 236

<sup>7</sup> Page 236

expecting him to appoint a German general in charge of the Finnish Armed Forces. Mannerheim was informed about this “in a meeting that Mannerheim himself considered to be a waste of time”<sup>8</sup>, the author tells. The author does not make any personal remarks about the situation, choosing instead to quote directly from Mannerheim’s memoir, which read “after having created an army out of nothing, they could not expect that I would be a party to orders from a German Military Commission”<sup>9</sup>. The quotation carries on, with Mannerheim himself describing having dramatically stormed out of the meeting and ending the discussion by saying “Goodbye, gentlemen”. The author leaves this excerpt from the memoirs as an independent paragraph. He could have chosen to simply use other words to Mannerheim’s effect, but chose instead to recreate the intensity and drama of the moment by quoting half a page of Mannerheim’s own views on the matter. The structural choice itself – a single isolated paragraph quoting Mannerheim, stuck between other paragraphs describing the German encroachment upon the Finnish state – reminds of the isolated Mannerheim himself, opposing a swarm of politicians too caught up with appeasing Germany. Such intense moments manage to evoke a strong reaction out of the reader, which is something a biography rarely accomplishes.

That being said, the biography’s extensive attention to detail, its incorporation of lateral historical facts and heavy focus on maintaining the reader’s interest (and, perhaps, intensifying it as the story draws nearer to our contemporary times and thus closer to the reader’s own memories) renders the work liable to criticism. *Mannerheim: President, Soldier, Spy* is a biographical work, but at times, the book manages to distract the reader from its original purpose. It certainly is very nice to fantasize about a picturesque country house by the sea, or to think of how one would have reacted had they been in Mannerheim’s shoes, but these fall outside the realm of a biography. It is indeed very hard to find concise information in the book, for everything is surrounded by (admittedly beautiful and interesting) stories that are simply unrelated to Mannerheim himself.

Certain aspects of Mannerheim’s career also feel underdeveloped. “Mannerheim ... suggested that now was the time to seek peace terms from Moscow”<sup>10</sup>, we are told, in the context of Finland reaching peace with the USSR during the Second World War. “Mannerheim’s reasoning was sound”, the author continues, before explaining his own view as to the military and political situation between the two countries throughout World War II. All these aspects are compressed within the last two chapters of the book, which is quite different from the majority of the work, which turns every event into something highly creative and beautifully articulated.

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<sup>8</sup> Page 212

<sup>9</sup> Page 212

<sup>10</sup> Page 256

The last two chapters have a much faster tempo, and do not provide the same stimulating language and attention to detail Clemens treats the reader with in the previous eleven chapters. This is well understandable, for it is hard to wrap the pragmatism and coldness of war into beautifully developed stories with grand adjectives.

That being said, this biography does not aim to be an exhaustive historical inquiry into Mannerheim. The biography delivers what the title promises: an exciting enquiry into the life of a president, a soldier and a spy. The book displays key elements of Mannerheim's life at each stage of his development (and demise), and certainly manages to lure the reader into turning page after page to discover what the author is getting at.