

IN MEMORIAM

ANTS VIRES

DECEMBER 23, 1918 – MARCH 18, 2015

Ants Viires, the grand old man of Estonian ethnology, acquired this title already years ago. He devoted his life to researching Estonian folk culture and folk life, and showed extensive interests in the field, being, undoubtedly, one of the best-known representatives of Estonian ethnology.

Ants Viires had a broad educational background and a wide range of humanitarian interests. He was admitted to the University of Tartu in 1937, and he first focused on language studies. Yet, during the 1940s he turned his attention to ethnography, graduating from the university as an ethnographer only in 1945. This was a period characterised by several changes of power in Estonia: in 1940 the Soviet occupation abolished the Republic of Estonia, in 1941 German occupation replaced Soviet occupation, and in 1944 the other way round. Around this time Viires established contacts and started working at the Estonian National Museum, which, at the time, was a central institution studying ethnology.

During these tumultuous years Ants Viires worked at the Estonian National Museum and also joined the Tartu (State) University postgraduate programme. In 1955 he defended his dissertation on Estonian national woodwork and was awarded a candidate degree in history. This research into one of the most important spheres of vernacular handicraft was published in 1960 and is still a significant landmark in Estonian ethnology.

As of 1956, Ants Viires started work at the Institute of History at the Estonian Academy of Sciences, where he pursued his career for decades, first at the department of archaeology, where he became head of the ethnology group in 1968.

In 1977 the department of archaeology and ethnography became an independent department of ethnography, with Ants Viires as the temporary head of the department. In 1983, he became head of the newly established independent department of ethnography – a position he held until 1996.

Throughout his career Ants Viires actively contributed to journals of linguistics, history, folkloristics, as well as ethnology, and compiled comprehensive encyclopaedic collections of Estonian folk culture, such as *Abriss der estnischen Volkskunde* (1964, in collaboration with academician Harri Moora). He was co-editor and co-compiler with Elle Vunder of the indispensable *Eesti rahvakultuur* (Estonian Folk Culture, updated edition in 2008), and edited the highly acclaimed *Eesti rahvakultuuri leksikon* (Lexicon of



Estonian Folk Culture, 1995, 3rd print in 2007). His most valuable book about Estonian folk culture, *Vana eesti rahvaelu* (Old Estonian Folk Life, 2004, both in Estonian and English), provides contact with the roots of our ancestors, allowing better understanding of our unique nature and culture. It is obviously no exaggeration to say that the 20th-century Estonian ethnology could hardly be imagined without Ants Viires.

The Soviet period established a distinct institutional division between ethnology and folkloristics. After the war the Estonian State Ethnography Museum was divided into two, and the detached part became the Estonian Literary Museum (including folklore archives), whereas material culture remained at the ethnography museum. These two aspects of the same field were also separated on the university level, and points of contacts between them remained superficial. Ants Viires always viewed ethnography and folkloristics as neighbouring disciplines that should not be studied separately. His knowledge of both material and nonmaterial culture enabled him to draw original conclusions and notice things that researchers with less comprehensive knowledge would not see.

Besides being a researcher, Ants Viires had some other spheres of interest. He translated into Estonian several books, such as *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley, and Kurt Welker's *Als die Jahre keine Zahlen tugen*, and *Der vergessene Kontinent*; he also published poetry, and a voluminous philosophical poem titled *Seitsme maa ja seitsme mere taha* (Beyond the Seven Lands and Seven Seas).

Ants Viires's impressive academic achievements were recognised and valued both in and outside Estonia. He was a long-term member of research councils of the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Open Air Museum, and the Institute of History. On an international level we could mention his involvement in the editorial board of one of the most significant European ethnology journals, *Ethnologia Europaea*.

Ants Viires's remarkable scientific achievements have found recognition by several foreign research organisations. He was foreign member of the Finnish Finno-Ugrian Society, the Kalevala Society, the Finnish Archaeological Society, and the Finnish Literature Society, and honorary member of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society. In 1982 he was conferred an honorary doctorate at Helsinki University. He was also foreign member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences and the Swedish Gustav Adolf Academy, and later on an honorary member thereof.

The University of Tartu also elected Viires its honorary member. In 1996 he was awarded the Fourth Class Order of the National Coat of Arms for his remarkable achievements in promoting Estonian ethnology. Ants Viires was also recognised for his great contribution to the scientific life of Estonia by the Open Estonian Foundation, the National Culture Foundation, and the Cultural Endowment of Estonia. He was given Estonian Cultural Award in 2007 for his lifework, and the University of Tartu National Idea Award in 2009.

Ants Viires, a classic of Estonian ethnology, and teacher of several generations of Estonian ethnologists, will be remembered by his academic achievements and his most valuable contribution to Estonian science.

Folklore: EJJ