

The Elsa Stone

BY GUNNAR SCHAANNING KOLLSTRØM



The Elsa Stone in front of Peisestua at Noatun farmstead.

(PHOTO: GUNNAR SCHAANNING KOLLSTRØM)

The Elsa Stone was erected on the island of Vaarlamaasaari in Øvre Pasvik on the Russian side of the Pasvikelva river by the ornithologist Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning in 1908. He erected it in memory of his wife, Elsa Fiina Schaanning (née Rautiola), who died at the age of 21 in 1907, and was survived by her husband and three children.

The Elsa Stone was rediscovered in 1973 and brought over to the Norwegian side of the river, where it was placed in front of the Peisestua cabin at Noatun farmstead.

In 1990, the Elsa Stone, along with the farmstead, six buildings and parts of the cultivated land at Noatun, was given protected status by order of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. A proposal to return the stone to the Russian side was rejected. The Elsa stone is primarily a precious family memorial connected to our ancestors in the area, and it should be accessible for the family.

It stands at Noatun, a private farm owned by Berit Malmo and Gunnar Schaanning Kollstrøm, the fourth generation of Schaannings at Noatun and direct descendants of Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning and Elsa Fiina Rautiola.

Noatun is not open to the public.



Video of the Elsa Stone.

(PHOTO: GUNNAR SCHAANNING KOLLSTRØM)

The hardship years in Finland in the 1860s led to many Finns moving to Norway and the Finnmark region. Nils Rautiola and Sofia Karolina Saurajärvi were Finnish settlers who had moved with their family from Kittilä in Finland in the 1870s and settled on the island of Vaarlamasaari – on Russian territory – where they formed a small Finnish colony.

Rautiola was known as an enterprising man who managed to build up a fine farm, where he was able to harvest between 6 and 7 barrels of grain, 35 barrels of potatoes and 20 barrels of turnips a year, had grazing



Nils Rautiola and his family on Vaarlamasaari.

(PHOTO: ELLISIF WESSEL)

for 4 or 5 cows and 10 to 12 sheep, in addition to what the family could forage from the bountiful nature in the area. Most of the other residents in the area were Sami people.

In 1900, Nils Rautiola and Sofia Karolina Saurajervi had eight children – six daughters and two sons. Elsa Fiina was the second youngest daughter, and she coped well with life in the wilderness.

Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning was 20 years old in 1900, when, together with his friend Johan Koren, he



Elsa Fiina Rautiola

(PHOTO: FROM THE BOOK 'NOATUN – EN ØDEMARKSGÅRD I ØVRE PASVIK (NOATUN – A WILDERNESS FARM IN ØVRE PASVIK))



Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning

(PHOTO: FROM THE BOOK 'NOATUN – EN ØDEMARKSGÅRD I ØVRE PASVIK (NOATUN – A WILDERNESS FARM IN ØVRE PASVIK))

travelled from Oslo to Øvre Pasvik to live as an ornithologist and collector of zoological specimens in the rich natural environment in the area.

Hans Thomas was born in the town of Kragerø and grew up in the Bislett area of Kristiania (now Oslo). His father, Peder Schaanning, was from Porsgrunn. He was educated in Hannover and worked as a senior

engineer for Kristiania (Oslo) local authority. Hans Thomas's mother, Agnes Helene née Salvesen, was from Risør and had also studied engineering in Germany (electrical engineering).

As a child, Hans Thomas developed a keen interest in naturalism and outdoor pursuits, and he knew a great deal about nature, and ornithology in particular.

The spirit of the times around the turn of the last century, before the dissolution of Norway's union with Sweden, was such that polar exploration and research were very much in focus. In Kristiania, Hans Thomas met Johan Koren, who had returned from the Belgica expedition to the South Pole. They both had a strong urge to travel, so the choice between studying at the university and adventurous fieldwork was perhaps not a very difficult one to make. They agreed to travel north.

Elsa Fiina and Hans Thomas met each other in Pasvik in 1900, and we can assume that they had many shared interests as regards nature and how life should be lived. Hans Thomas and Johan moved to Vaarlamasaari, where they built a house in spring 1901. Hans Thomas and Elsa Fiina soon became a couple. In the presence of the Norwegian authorities, represented by local chief of police Bertelsen, who was visiting the area, Hans Thomas asked Nils Rautiola for his daughter's hand, and she accepted his proposal of marriage. Neither of them seems to have regarded it as a problem that they lacked a common language. The formal marriage ceremony took place during a rare visit by a Finnish pastor on 3 April 1902.

They had three children, Torolv (1902), Gunnar (1904) and Bergliot (1906).

In summer 1902, Hans Thomas and Johan travelled to Novaja Semlja, where they planned to stay over the winter as members of Birkeland's Nordlys (Northern Lights) expedition.

While they were away, Elsa Fiina and little Torolv embarked on a strenuous journey by reindeer-drawn sled through the forests of Northern Finland to Torneå, from where they continued by train to Kristiania (Oslo). For Elsa, the journey to visit her mother-in-law in Kristiania was educational – getting to know the family, experiencing the big city, learning about a new way of life, learning the language and other things. She demonstrated good handicraft skills.

The couple were reunited in September 1903, when Hans Thomas returned to Kristiania after spending the winter on Novaja Semlja. They did not return to Pasvik until March 1904. And in June the same year, Gunnar was born on Vaarlamasaari. Bergliot was born in August 1906, and in October the whole family of five travelled to Kristiania again. They did not return until spring 1907, leaving the boys, Torolv and Gunnar, with the family in Kristiania.



Schaanning and Koren, the Northern Lights station, Baristoff-Dome Novaja Semlja, 1903.



*Noatun farmstead under construction. From the point below Peisestua cabin.
FROM THE BOOK 'JÆGERLIV NORDPAA' (A hunter's life in the far north')*

In 1907, Hans and Elsa started building their own farmstead Noatun on the Norwegian side of the Pasvikelva river, a few kilometres north of Vaarlamaasari. .
The name 'Noatun' was borrowed from Njard's house in Norse mythology – where his wife Skade was unable to sleep 'because of the noise made by the birds' and the squealing of swans.



*Noatun farmstead under construction. We see the farmstead with byre and storehouse.
FROM THE BOOK 'JÆGERLIV NORDPAA' (A hunter's life in the far north')*

Tragically, Elsa Fiina suddenly became ill and died after a short and painful illness on 13 August 1907. She did not get to share life at Noatun with her beloved Hans Thomas.

Hans Thomas liked to write, and often wrote poems to express himself.

Poem at Elsa Fiina's deathbed, 13 August 1907:

Hush! What is this rustling I hear
through the trees of the forest?
Is it the distant roar of Hestefossen waterfall?
It sounds too near for that!
Or – is it the beating wings
of a flock of ducks –
flying over the house –
up from the river?

Listen again! But now it sounds
like the tolling of bells!
Full of sadness –
as though for a solemn day!
Quiet! Be still! Now I hear
song as well!
And from the music
a name emerges: LITTLE ELSA!

Like a sigh in a silent night,
the name calls gently!

Suddenly I woke up – but the mild
tones – were merely a dream!
The tolling of the bells – the beating of the wings –
were never heard!
Dark was the forest – the flowing Pasvik –
crystal clear – the river's course!

But – on her deathbed – quiet,
still lies Little Elsa!
Her soul has left her body!
The fire in her eyes is quenched!
Her brow is pale and white!
Made cold – by the sweat of death!
Now the soul seeks peace
in the ethereal world.
And on its way to heaven,
the soul sang out:
What she suffered and had to thole –
my hunter bride!
It was the song's gentle tones

The deep peals of the bell —
The rustling sound – that from the crowns of the
forest
was heard above the cabin's roof!

*H. Tho. L. Sch. Øvre Pasvik 13 /VIII-07 (13 August
1907)*

On the first anniversary of Elsa's death, Hans Thomas erected a memorial stone at Vaarlamasari, outside the house where they had lived. He carved 'ELSA' in memory of their happy time together. And he wrote another poem:



Poem on the anniversary of Elsa's death:

ELSA carved in the stone
(PHOTO: GUNNAR SCHAANNING KOLLSTRØM)

Life is hard for the hunter
who is weighed down by longing and
worry!
Gloomy and confined is the cabin –
and empty – in his restless chase!

Dark and threatening stands the forest!
It no longer pulls him in!
When the prey no longer gives pleasure,
the hunter's pact is broken!

Bare and naked the mountains now stand
against the dawning day!
Even the river and waterfall
are mere empty illusions.

The joy of the hunt is gone, then!
And with it the delights of spring!
Now the autumn is here
with a thousand dissonant sounds!

Now the hunter's horn

and the glad music of the
hunt – resound with disharmony
like thunderous booms and clicks!

The forests, the river and the mountains'
endless expanses
are all gathered in the hillside
under a grass-covered grave!

But lonely and dark stands the cabin,
where evenings once were for song;
Now the hearth only smokes
where once there were flames

and the rifle rusts in the corner!
The quarry has now found peace!
But there is no peace for the hunter in the
forest!
His hunter's dreams lie now in ruins!

H. Tho. L. Sch. Øvre Pasvik 13/VIII 08
(13 August 1908)

Hans Thomas wrote 'Epistle from Noatun' to his mother on 27 November 1911, having sent the children ahead and preparing to leave Noatun for good.

Poem – two (of 14) verses referring to memories of Elsa Fiina

Once I almost held the bird of happiness in my hand!
But it escaped, I lost my grip – and it broke free!
It left behind its tail feather, which I stuck in my hat!
And it brought me some precious days in between the dark nights!

Sometimes I can hear its song! At times, it is very close!
Its sound touches my heart! The bird of happiness is very dear to me!
Perhaps one time it will end in my net – let it not be too late!
The mesh is ready for casting – and its cage stands clean and white!

H. Tho. L. Sch. 27 Nov. 1911

Steinar Wikan, local historian, author and scientist, rediscovered the Elsa Stone on Vaarlamaasaari island on the Russian side of the Pasvikelva river in 1973. In the same year, Norwegian border troops transported it back to Norway, with the Norwegian and Russian authorities' permission and assistance.

A newspaper clipping about the transfer of the Elsa Stone from Vaarlamaasaari in Russia to Noatun in Norway in 1973.

In 1973, the border between Norway and the then Soviet Union was a closed border, and there were no civilian settlements or traffic in the area near the Soviet side of the border. No one had lived on Vaarlamaasaari since the Finnish settlers had to evacuate the island in 1940 after Finland lost the 1939/40 Winter War against the Soviet Union.



Captain Hansen, Major Fjodorovs and Major Hansen beside the memorial stone.
(PHOTO: FINNMARKEN)

During World War II, there was a lot of German activity in the area during their campaign to take Murmansk from 1941 until they capitulated in autumn 1944. They had many troops stationed in the area and there was heavy traffic over the bridge across the Pasvikelva river.

From the early 1970s, Steinar Wikan took a great interest in Schaanning's history in the area.

With support from the municipality's Cultural and History Board and the Norwegian Border Commissioner, he succeeded in obtaining permission to visit and examine the area.

He found the memorial stone where he had expected to.

Later the same year, the stone was transported from Vaarlamaasaari to Noatun farmstead, the place Hans Thomas and Elsa Fiina had been in the process of moving to in order to build a

future together.

Their descendants, who also own and live at Noatun today, are very pleased that the Elsa Stone has now been preserved and made accessible to the family, regardless of the shifting conditions at the border.



Norwegian border troops lift the stone onto a raft for transport to the Norwegian side.
(PHOTO: FINNMARK DAGBLAD)

What has happened since then?

Hans Thomas remarried in 1909 after returning from Noatun following Elsa's death. His new bride was Hedevig Lysholm Scheldrup. They moved back to Noatun the same year, and their son was born there in June 1910, Jørgen Lysholm Scheldrup Schaanning.

Hans Thomas, who started his scientific career as an ornithologist in Pasvik, lived there until 1911, when he moved to Kristiania (Oslo) with his family. His career later took him to Stavanger Museum, where he worked as a curator and pioneered ring-marking of migratory birds. He also founded the Norwegian Ornithological Society, was a writer, and founded the Society's journal and was its editor for many years. He died at the age of 78 in 1956.

Nils Rautiola died on Vaarlamaasaari in around 1918 at the age of 81. Sofia Karolina Seurajervi died on Vaarlamaasaari in around 1928, at the age of 80. Several descendants of the Finnish colony on Vaarlamaasaari had to evacuate when Finland was forced to cede Petsamo to the Soviet Union after losing the 1939/40 Winter War.

Many of their descendants still live in Pasvik.



Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning's family grave in Kragero.
(PHOTO: GUNNAR SCHAANNING KOLLSTRØM)

Johan Koren left Pasvik in 1905 for an adventurous life of travel and polar exploration. The table of contents of the book 'Gutten som Norge glemte' (The Boy Norway Forgot) by Håkon Evjenth, published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1938, gives us some impression of

Johan Koren's travels. He grew up in Hvaler and with his uncle in Fredrikstad. At a young age, he travelled to the Antarctic as a crew member on an expedition to the South Pole on the ship Belgica, before travelling to Pasvik together with Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning. They spent the winter on Nova Semija as part of Birkeland's Northern Lights expedition. After five years together in Pasvik, Koren travelled to the Southern Ocean. After being rescued following a shipwreck off the Crozet Islands, he worked at Ki Down and at Broken Hill in order to raise funds for his journey north to Eastern Siberia. He then travelled to Siberia, was shipwrecked in the Anadyr river, lived among the Chukchee people, spent a winter in Nome, returned to Siberia, then travelled to Alaska, to Siberia again, spent the winter at Kolmaya, was shipwrecked off Cape Serge, returned to Siberia, was a fur trader in Nisjne Kolymysk and travelled to Vladivostok. He died at the age of 39.

Torolv Schaanning

Hans Thomas and Elsa Fiina's eldest child, Torolv, returned to Noatun in 1922. He married Ivara (née Sund, from the island of Skjerpa near Namsos), whom he met while working as a lumberjack in the Namdalen valley. They moved to Noatun and took over the farm his parents had started. Torolv and Ivara cleared and cultivated the fields, and they built the house that is now the farmhouse at Noatun.

They had two children, Hans Lyder Schaanning and Eva Karen Kollstrøm (née Schaanning). Torolv died of tuberculosis in 1939 at the age of 37.

Poem from Hans Thomas to his oldest son Torolv, upon his death.

Torolv – dear boy!

Oldest of our children!

You were strong and good-natured
all your days!

You left home at an early age!

To the far north you travelled!

You met a sudden end!

But – what good does it do to complain?

On the contrary – I want to sing!

Carve a rune for you!

Praise your virtues!

Tenderly honour your memory!

My eyes are on fire!

As I see your warm

boyish smile

and fold my hands!

My thoughts go back –

many years back –

it was autumn in Pasvik

and you were four years old!

And you were tired and hungry,

cold and exhausted

after many weeks' tramping through the forest and
bogs

with your father – on an adventure!

But you stuck it out!

You did not complain!

On the contrary, you hurried along!

Your motto was: Everything will go well!

Keep going – rest later!

You stalwartly followed my tracks

through the forest – far north!

And when the day's march was over
and the campfire lit –

We cooked the game we had shot

and discussed the day's events!

Most often, though, before the last word was
uttered,

we both fell asleep

on our bed of pine needles

while 'Barrabas' guarded us!

Three years later you were seven

and spoke Finnish with the Sami and Kven people

and drove your own reindeer

from Salmijervi's sheltered bay

and Pasvik up to Noatun!

Noatun – the homestead

we cleared together,

a peaceful place in a wilderness

far from people and pathways!

Where the forest and river gave us a living!

Where life acquired meaning!

Where the struggle between life and death

became a romantic hunter's tale!

But - fate played a fickle game

with both you and me!

We were both "made April fools"

and driven away

from forest and moor!

And your youthful years – my boy –

you lost your way!

But – you kept your powder dry:

and stood upright and independent!

Until the day dawned! Your chains fell away!
And you were free
from Orkerød and Sikilsdal – from wage slavery!
With the migrating birds one spring
you again headed north,
and followed our old tracks
to Noatun – your farm!

Your inheritance was the struggle to keep house
and home –
as it had been for me!
But you stuck it out! And you got there!
You did not fail – as I had done!

When destiny came calling, I headed south
away from Noatun – and everything!
You took your inheritance – your heavy burden -
and fell!

But what you sowed, is growing still!
And Noatun has become home to your family!
In future, here, your own son will with time –
reap the interest on your toil –
My dear boy!

Stavanger 20 June 1939, H Tho L Sch.



Torolv Schaanning



Ivara Schaanning (née Sund)

Ivara lived at Noatun from she arrived in summer 1922 until her death in 1985 at the age of 97. Ivara was awarded the King's Medal of Merit in silver on 22 June 1973 because of, as Mayor Arnt Isaksen said at the award ceremony: 'the role Noatun and the Schaanning family have for many years played in protecting the border.' The family had helped to keep the area Norwegian, and the local authority was proud to have such people in its midst. He also mentioned the work Ivara had done of running the farm through changing times for more than 50 years, and how she had shown great hospitality to visiting ornithologists and archaeologists who always used Noatun as their main base during their fieldwork in the area. Torolv and Ivara had two children, Hans Lyder Schaanning and Eva Karen Kollstrøm (née Schaanning).

Gunnar Schaanning

Hans Thomas and Elsa Fiina's second oldest child, Gunnar Schaanning, studied engineering (electrical engineering, like his grandmother).

He lived and worked in Burma and Indonesia for several years. In the 1930s, he visited and helped Torolv and Ivara at Noatun on several occasions. When his brother Torolv fell ill with tuberculosis in 1938, he returned to Noatun to help run the farm, and when his brother died in 1939, he stayed – until his death in 1970.

Gunnar was a resourceful man with extensive knowledge and many skills. He accepted responsibility for running the meteorological observation station at Noatun and was also a highly respected amateur archaeologist. He was very involved in the excavations in the 1950s and 60s, when large archaeological finds were excavated. More than 18,000 individual objects were found, which are now in the custody of Tromsø Museum.

Gunnar Schaanning was made an honorary member of the Sør-Varanger branch of Friends of the Earth Norway, and he was very engaged in, among other things, the establishment of Øvre Pasvik National Park.



Engineer Gunnar Schaanning during his time in Indonesia.



Farmer Gunnar Schaanning during the haymaking season at Noatun

As a boy in the 1960s, I spent part of the summer at Noatun. Gunnar Schaanning was my great uncle, but I knew him as ‘grandfather’. He spoke English to me and let me play an active part in running the farm with him. As an example of what our conversations were about, I can mention one of his anecdotes about his life abroad before he returned to Noatun. Among other things, he told me that he had a red two-seater sports car and a tame bear, which also accompanied him on drives. With stories like that, he obviously grabbed a young boy's full attention.

Bergliot Schmidt (f. Schaanning)

Hans Thomas and Else Fiina's youngest child Bergliot Schmidt (née Schaanning) married Carsten Lunde Schmidt from Horten. They owned and ran a large farm, Falkensten Bruk, near Horten. They had four children and have many descendants. She died in 2004 at the age of 98.



Bergliot Schmidt (née Schaanning)



Carsten Lunde Schmidt

Noatun today.

Today, Noatun is owned and used by Gunnar Schaanning Kollstrøm and Berit Malmo. They are the fourth generation of Schaannings at Noatun, descendants of Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning and Elsa Fiina Schaanning (née Rautiola), at Noatun. Two new generations will follow Berit and Gunnar at Noatun. The present owners have been engaged in restoring Noatun since the Directorate for Cultural Heritage issued its conservation order in 1990 preserving six buildings, the Elsa Stone and parts of the cultivated land at Noatun.

Today – 32 years after the Directorate for Cultural Heritage’s decision – Noatun remains intact as a farm from the early 20th century. And, in accordance with the family’s wishes, the conservation order has been seen in conjunction with the preservation of nature in the nearby area through the establishment of Pasvik Nature Reserve (on both the Norwegian and the Russian side).

Even though we now believe that the main restoration job has been completed, we are under no illusion that either buildings or cultivated land are self-maintaining. Unfortunately, there still seem to be too little public funds available for protecting those parts of the cultural heritage that are privately owned, and this must be compensated for by private engagement and efforts on the owners’ part. Fortunately, we both enjoy being owners and being engaged in conserving the cultural heritage.

About the area.

Today’s Pechenga area was common land for the Skoltesami people until the borders were drawn in 1826, leading to the area being divided between Russia and Norway/Sweden along the Pasvik river.

In 1920, the area became Finnish (the Tartu Treaty), which it remained until the area was annexed by the Soviet Union after the 1939/40 Winter War. From 1941, the Germans occupied the area as part of its Murmansk front until it was reconquered by the Soviet Union in 1944. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia again became Norway’s neighbour on the other side of the Pasvik river. Following the Kirkenes Declaration in 1993 and the establishment of the Barents Cooperation, there was extensive collaboration, among other things on nature conservation in the area.

After Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine started on 24 February 2022, however, all contact with our Russian neighbour has been put on hold, and the future of our contact and cooperation with Russians on the other side of the Pasvik river seems uncertain. There is no doubt that there is a relationship between us since we share both a river and the culture and valuable nature that exist on both sides of the border. That is something that also concerned Hans Thomas and Else Fiina and that will also apply to their future descendants at Noatun.

People lived at Noatun for ten thousand years before our time. In the 1960s, large archaeological finds were made in several cultural layers. They were regarded at the time as the richest archaeological finds in Northern Europe.

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5. ‘Ön Vaarlamasaari i Petsamo. Historia och nutid’, Leif Rantala, 2011
6. ‘Noatun gjennom ti tusen år’, Povl Simonsen, unpublished notes, July 1994.
7. You can read more about the preservation order for the buildings in the architectural guide to Northern Norway and Svalbard.
8. Available (transcribed) documents (in Norwegian) relating to the application and permit (‘Brevveksling om ELSA-stenen 1973 fra Grensekommisærens arkiv’).