



Damianus "Tom" Sukanen (born Tomi Jaanus Alankola)

PREFACE

When I first encountered the *Sontianen* I was driving down Highway #2, south of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, just before sundown, and I caught sight of her, in full silhouette, as I came up over a rise. She was standing upright in a fallow wheat field, flanked by a clutter of nondescript sheds and machinery (the beginnings, I eventually discovered, of an open-field museum that had never quite gotten off the ground), and she was so utterly and splendidly incongruous and absurd, this deep-sea freighter in the middle of the bald prairie, that every story-telling gene in my body immediately stood to attention. A check of the records at the Regina Public Library's Prairie History Room the next morning seemed to confirm my luck. There were fistfuls of newspaper stories on file dating all the way back to 1932 about this strange ship — and about Tom Sukanen, the obstreperous Finnish-Canadian homesteader who had built her and whose outlandish

inventions and ideas had kept his neighbours in a constant state of astonishment and uproar well through the Dirty Thirties. When I shortly thereafter managed to track down a Mr. “Moon” Mullin, nominal caretaker of the *Sontianen*, I seemed to have found another goldmine of Sukanen lore. And finally there was Ms. Brenda Niskala, a Saskatchewan poet of Finnish-Canadian descent, who proved able to provide me with introductions to various former homesteaders who had actually known Tom Sukanen in his lair. For a few weeks of reckless optimism, I actually thought I might have run into a story virtually full blown, every writer’s fondest fantasy, having only to set pen to paper and take dictation.

Such appearances probably always deceive, and this one proved no exception. Cross-checked and cross-examined, the huge file of Sukanen mythology dwindled rapidly. The many newspaper stories turned out to be largely elaborations of a few superficial seed-pieces, which themselves brimmed with inaccuracies. Old-timers’ recollections often proved secondhand and hazy. There had clearly been an attempt, by certain people, to soften and warm Sukanen’s caustic personality until he’d become alarmingly reasonable and even altruistic — a virtual St. Christopher. And a welter of tall tales, clinging to the statistical record of Tom Sukanen’s deeds and misdeeds, had swamped entirely whatever might have been known about the inner man.

All this, fortunately, did no actual damage to the story I was interested in — the man behind this mysterious venture, his times, his rough-hewn genius, his visions as preposterous as his ship standing like a raised finger amid the wheat and the dust, in its own way as unapologetic and absurd a monument to the indomitability of the human spirit as any skyscraper, pyramid, or Taj Mahal. But it did oblige me to

invent what had become erased — the fine-line details, the telling remarks or gestures, the motives, mainsprings, bridges, and dead-ends, all that sub-text and infrastructure which every writer needs as much as story, plot, and dramatic event. These I reconstructed from interviews, hypothesized by gut instinct (though I did stop short of presuming to know Sukanen's inner thoughts), basing my hunches on a growing sense and appreciation of this man whom I had intuitively recognized, and who kept making more and more sense to me as I kept digging and sifting and interviewing. (I might add, however, that I never then or since felt the need to *explain* away anything about Sukanen's obsession — skyscrapers, pyramids, or Taj Mahals have never gained anything by such explanations and are only trivialized by the attempt. What I have tried to do is merely to clarify the forces at work in the man and the decade, leaving the reader in a better position to make whatever judgements he may deem necessary. . . .)

So, when the needs of this saga had finally been met, several years of research and writing later, I found I had written a novel — not (in a narrow, technical sense) a biography. I had used poetic licence wherever necessary. I am, therefore, convinced that this portrait bears a closer resemblance to the real Tom Sukanen than most of his contemporaries, friend or foe, have been prepared to countenance.

The same is not true, and intentionally so, of the book's "witnesses." These are composites, mixed and matched in part to protect their privacy and also to sharpen the issues. Everything these witnesses say was indeed said to me by someone at some point during my interviews, but not necessarily in the language, manner, or context presented here.

— *Andreas Schroeder* [Mission, B.C., 1985]