

The Kalevala is The National Epic of Finland

Elias Lönnrot and his colleagues recorded these poetic songs of characters from myths and ancient tales. Steeped in magic, by turns dreamlike and dramatic, the Kalevala recounts a mythic history of the ancient Finns. Its heroes are the wise shaman, Vainamoinen, the skillful smith, Ilmarinen, and the feisty warrior, Lemminkäinen. Elias Lönnrot was a physician, teacher and the compiler of both Swedish and Finnish dictionaries.

But The Kalevala is not a typical epic of kings, knights and castles – its songs are a portrait of rural peasant life played out on a small pastoral stage of farmers, fishermen, and housewives in the marshes of Eastern Finland, stories of their interactions with one another, the spirit world, the natural world, and with their northern neighbors, the tribe of Pohjola.

Its narratives and wedding lays offer glimpses of an ordinary way of life that soon would vanish. It is an “epic” of individual quests resolved by impossible deeds, folk charms and magic spells, often in seeking wives, either by arrangement, by suit or by force. While much attention is given to the heroes – the women of the Kalevala are fascinating, often tragic characters as well. They don’t always want to be carried off or married – and some of the songs offer advice to new wives – how to not seem lazy and get along with In-Laws – and to husbands – to not be overly harsh and not leave visible marks for the neighbors to talk about! There are instructions for making beer, milking cows, hunting bears and many other ordinary tasks.



There are many fantastic beasts to be fought and a spirit world – the realm of Tuoni – the land of the dead, and the evil spirits of Hiisi. The shamanic witch, Louhi, is as evil and treacherous as anything Disney has produced – though she has lovely daughters which attract plenty of trouble.

The Kalevala transitioned from oral to written much more recently than the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic mythologies, such as Beowulf and the Edda. Because it was orally transmitted until the songs were recorded in the mid 19th Century, the stories themselves are generally distinct from other major cycles of mythology, but now and then a familiar element pops up. Lönnrot gathered and artificially wove together many Finnish oral folk songs to form an epic of several cycles. The first edition (1834) was composed of 32 Songs (Runes) and 12,078 lines. With the collection of more songs in the 1840’s, the final edition had 50 poems and 22,795 lines. The Finnish poetry is not of rhyme or rhythm, but of much alliteration, parallelism and repetition in four beat, eight syllable lines with every second line repeating the thought preceding.

Finland for much of its history was a part of either Sweden or Russia. The Kalevala is credited for supporting the Finnish national awakening that ultimately led to Finland’s independence from Russia in 1917. The annual celebration of Kalevala Day on February 28th is an official flag-raising day in Finland, and simultaneously the Day of Finnish culture.

Since the first edition in 1835, the Kalevala has now been translated into more than 50 languages and has been influential on the works of major authors from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* – It was the Kalevala that inspired him to create his own English epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. The Kalevala’s stories have inspired many artists; and composers, in particular, Johan Sibelius. In more recent years, the Kalevala has even inspired a number of Heavy Metal Bands in the Baltic regions.