



The Songs of The Kalevala submitted by Barry McWilliams

The Kalevala is the national epic of Finland. Elias Lönnrot and his colleagues recorded these poetic folk songs drawn from origin myths and ancient legends in the 1830's and 40's. Steeped in magic, by turns dreamlike and dramatic, the Kalevala recounts a mythic history of some ancient champions pursuing wives and the Sampo—a mill of plenty. Its trio of heroes are the wise shaman Vainamoinen, the skillful smith Ilmarinen, and the feisty warrior Lemminkainen. While the songs were drawn from a mythic tradition and creation stories—the Kalevala isn't actual Finnish mythology.

In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic and Nordic epics such as Beowulf and the Edda, which were recorded in antiquity, the Kalevala's roots are quite recent, and the style is quite different. Albert Lord in his Introduction to the Oxford Classics Edition, makes an attempt to briefly summarize it: *"The Sampo is forged, a rogue screws; there's a wedding, a murder, the blues; a serf bites the dust, the Sampo gets bust, and Finland receives the Good News."* The adaptation by Babette Deutsch which we are using for our telling has rearranged the order.

The Kalevala is not an 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 (Lapland). Its narratives and wedding lays offers detailed glimpses of an ordinary way of life and homely wisdom. The wedding songs offer plenty of advice to brides (such getting along with In-Laws) and their husbands (how not to leave marks when beating their wives) Elias Lönnrot wanted to preserve a simple, but vanishing culture. It is an "epic" of individual quests resolved by impossible deeds, numerous charms and magic spells, often in seeking wives, either by arrangement, by suit or by force.

Lönnrot gathered and pieced together many Finnish oral folk songs to form an epic that traces eight cycles and several journeys. The style of the poetry is not of rhyme or rhythm, but of alliteration, parallelism and much repetition in four beat, eight syllable lines. Every second line often repeats the thoughts of the preceding. The first edition (1835) was composed of 32 Songs (Runes) and 12,078 lines. With the collection of more songs in the 1840's, the final edition (1849) had 50 poems and 22,795 lines. The singers expanded their songs with charms, lyrical material, proverbs, etc.—so the content was ever changing—typical of an oral literature—and Lönnrot did this as well as he wove his "epic."

The way in which the songs were sung is interesting. Two men sang antiphonally, sometimes accompanied by a musician playing the Kantele – a simple five string zither. They would be seated, holding right hands, or touching knees, swaying as they sang – the main singer singing a verse – both finishing it together, then the second repeating the verse and they would both join on the last measure. This enabled the main singer to spontaneously compose the next verses. A woman's song would be accompanied by a group.

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; artists; and composers, such as Sibelius. The Kalevala is credited for supporting the national awakening that ultimately led to Finland's independence from Russia in 1917.

