

This presentation of the Kaleva was first given in the University of Pittsburgh Informal Program where Eino Friberg was invited to give a program on the Kalevala. He was translating it into English (published in 1988 in Finland). Unfortunately, he was not able to come and Dr. Anja Olin-Fahle from Indiana University of Pennsylvania gave this talk at the Program. It was published in the Finnish Nationality Committee's Finnish Experience series #2 in 1986.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KALEVALA TO THE FINNS

by Eino Friberg

As Finns assemble this year to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the *Kalevala's* publication, we commemorate and reflect upon a link that has for all these years held together the future, present. and past of our people in a critical moment. The Finnish tradition has created a unique cultural phenomenon, well-worthy of celebration, driven by this particular collection of folklore from the deep past. Faced with all of the tangible indications of the *Kalevala's* influence, it is our responsibility today to examine carefully what this consists of, how it has developed, in order to understand as best we possibly can what Finnish culture - or even, what human culture - is all about. What I propose to do today is to share some ideas about how to characterize the significance of the contribution the *Kalevala* has made to the Finns.

The *Kalevala* followed, and later itself gave rise to, an enormous labor of folklore collection in Finland. From the time of Agricola onward, scholars such as Juslenius, Porthan, and many others, devoted a great deal of time to collecting Finnish-language folk tradition. The result of so much patient work has been a legacy of archival materials of monumental proportions, detailing the anonymous creations of the Finnish people. The *Kalevala*, as the most famous single representative

of this unparalleled wealth of folklore, symbolizes this devotion to the spontaneous expressions arising from the heart of traditional Finnish culture.

Amidst all this folkloristic material the *Kalevala* stands out as unique, as the representative work of the Finnish national genius. This perception was already being anticipated in 1917, when Kaarle Akseii Gottlund of the Turku student group predicted that a collection and systematization of old traditional songs would become the Finnish equivalent of Homer, or of the Nibelungenlied. The *Kalevala* is indeed a work of similar import for culture history – it represents the emergence of systematic formulation of oral tradition in the medium of writing. But what makes the *Kalevala* really unique in relation to other such systematizing formulations is its special relation to its historical milieu. The difference is clear; other Germanic and Scandinavian folklore collections seem to represent reactions to the imposition of Christianity, and the consequent loss of a past way of life – a fond farewell look over the shoulder before taking a place as one among many peoples in the historical and literate order of Christendom. Lönnrot's contribution, on the other hand, appeared sufficiently late in history so as to essentially coincide with the rising nationalist fervor of the times in Finland. His work is not a simple summary of things past, but very emphatically a proof of an ethnic entity previously underestimated, and an argument for its coming to full fruition. In other words, The *Kalevala* in its historical milieu has, since its inception, been a view of the past to be taken as view of the future, serving just as memory does, to project action steadily into the future.

In this way, the *Kalevala* can be characterized as serving as an ethnic memory of the Finns, at the root of Finnish historical consciousness, but at the same time as having been a vital component in the shaping of Finland, a collective vision of what the nation was to become. In the special configuration of history during which it came to light, the *Kalevala* has demonstrated how inseparable a people's past and future

really are in the course of cultural development. It is easy to see in this history the vital role which a sense of coherent ethnic identity fulfills. We might say that the Finnish people, through the *Kalevala*, actually sang themselves into existence. Let me suggest three constructive functions of the *Kalevala* for Finland: it is the shaper of our language; it is the inspirer of our independence; and it has been the source for the flowering of our art and literature.

The *Kalevala* is the shaper of the Finnish language, comparable to Luther's Bible in Germany, or to the King James version of the Bible in England. Considering how insignificant Finnish was for such a long time, the appearance of Lönnrot's collections is really quite astonishing. Throughout the Middle Ages and into the nineteenth century, Swedish dominated as the official language. When the authority of the Catholic Church was brought to an untimely end by its own internal discord and by Gustavus Vasa, it was only a matter of time until the disappearance of Latin as a language of education and upward mobility would occur; by the middle of the seventeenth century, Latin's retreat had begun, strengthening the position of Swedish, which thus became the key to entrance into any form of professional service to the state or church. Finnish, meanwhile, was relegated to the peasants, whose lives were still embedded in the ways of ancient clan organizations. Of course, speakers of Finnish were not always consigned to simple peasant life – the full range of privileges and burdens of being members of the Swedish people were extended to them, too – but to do so they had to speak Swedish. By the time of the Finnish language movement in the nineteenth century, the upper and middle classes were profoundly isolated from the peasants by the language gap. The same thing has often happened in history, for instance, as the English suppressed the Gaelic in Scotland and Ireland. A real danger exists under such circumstances that the suppressed language will be thoroughly destroyed. In three generations a Finnish-speaking family could be transformed into a Swedish-speaking family. If for example an artisan's

son learned Swedish and became a burgher, and his son in turn went on to advance in a civil or other professional service.

How far the Finnish language still remained in an inferior status is evident in the fact that, ironically, most of the leaders of the Finnish language movement, including Runeberg and Snellman, had to use Swedish while urging the use of Finnish. Lönnrot himself did not deliver a Finnish-language address to Finns in the society's history.

Under such circumstances, the appearance of the *Kalevala's* beautiful verses in print provided a powerful inspiration for the nationalist cause. The melodic prosody and its archaic parallel composition conveyed something immediate and compelling about the resources of the Finnish language, which had been continuously cultivated within the clans of the Finns since antiquity. The *Kalevala* can thus be understood both as a blueprint of, and as a blueprint for, the Finnish language.

The excitement in nineteenth century Finland over the language and lore of the *Kalevala* can only be fully comprehended in the context of the geopolitical circumstances which engendered the project to build an independent nation. Over the centuries, Finland was gradually discovered and invented at the same time. When the circumstances were ripe for change, this movement gathered strength, and culminated in independence in 1917.

A self-reflective interest towards Finnish culture was first taken under the humanistic influence of the Reformation. In the early sixteenth century, Michael Agricola was already publishing the first Finnish folklore, mainly proverbs, ever to appear in print. Agricola sensed that the Finnish proverbs preserved "the accumulated experience of each age." Also, an *ABC Primer* and a prayer book were printed in Finnish. The old pagan songs, on the other hand, were suppressed by the church, on the grounds that they were the howlings of Satan. But in spite of the efforts of the church, the voices of the runo

singers were not stilled, which indicates how widespread the pagan lore really was. This antagonism lasted until the mid-seventeenth century; interest in the old songs once again was expressed, as Finnish chroniclers kept pace with Swedish initiatives to uncover the heroic deeds of the past, paralleling the grand political visions of the times. This was when, through the imaginative efforts of chroniclers such as Daniel Juslenius, it was specifically claimed that the legendary heroes had actually walked the earth. The Swedes and Finns competed to tell the tallest tale about how their peoples had brought civilization to the world. All of this imaginative history was a second-order mythology, indiscriminately drawing on native folklore and on biblical and classical sources.

In the eighteenth century, under the influence of the Enlightenment, a large number of treatises were written to study local conditions, in order to improve the well-being of the state and its subjects. Before the end of the century, Henrik Gabriel Porthan and his students drew together the local accounts, applied philological analyses, and developed a comparative method which was the forerunner of Julius and Kaarle Krohn's. Porthan's research in Dissertatio de poësi Fennica, largely based on collections of invocations, comprises the first controlled approach to Finnish folklore, and it set the state for its nationalistic application through the collection and publication of the *Kalevala* with Herder's romanticist philosophy of culture acting as the catalyst.

Johann Gottfried von Herder had formulated an influential philosophy of history which was based on an organic metaphor for culture. The national character or soul of a people cannot be determined by an alien culture. It must follow its own internal trajectory of growth and decay according to organic laws. Herder claimed that a people's character expressed itself in the form of folk poetry. The philosophy of Herder coincided with the direction of

Porthan research. These ideas converged on Finland slightly before 1808 when Finland began to face an uncertain future under Russian control.

The situation in Finland in the early years under Russia is really quite remarkable for a number of reasons. First, the decision by Alexander I to leave an autonomously functioning Finnish government was a fortunate stimulus for the nationalist efforts. Secondly, we have already remarked how paradoxical the initial phase of self-transformation was, when the founders of the movement to speak and write Finnish formulated their directives to do so in Swedish. Finally, one is struck by the indirectness of the phrasing of an oft-repeated statement which can be taken as a paradigm for the times, to the effect that “We are not Swedes; we can never become Russians; let us therefore be Finns.” This way of reasoning to self-identity by a process of elimination of alternatives seems to be an index of the degree to which the nationalist movement had taken shape under the driving force of political changes, which then required a cultural response to fill in the gap, rather than the other way around.

Turning back upon their own resources, the Turku romantics gathered folklore and assembled their version of the Finnish past, on the assumption that an integrated and transcendent whole would emerge, to be taken as the original mirror of the national soul. When Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* came to light, the rhetoric about this work reflected the pride and hope of the Finns, facing their historical challenge to independence.

Alexander I had told the Finns that as an autonomous territory, Finland was “placed henceforth in the rank of nations.” The necessity to fulfill this promise in fact and not just by proclamation was felt to be of great importance. The path to national identity vis-à-vis these other nations had to be marked out by some positive characteristics. When the *Kalevala* was published, a crucial opportunity presented itself. In March 1836, the chairman of the Finnish Literature Society, J. G. Linsen, credited the *Kalevala* with allowing Finns to say with reason, “I too

have a history!" The *Kalevala* could take its place as a world-class contribution to cultural history. But the historical uses of the *Kalevala* were not restricted to simply taking a place as a landmark of world literature. The romantic rhetoric applied to the poetry ensured a rich harvest of metaphors about the historical freight it carried, which would reflect the soul of the Finnish People. Moreover, the legendary figures of the *Kalevala* once again came alive and walked the earth, as from time to time Finns invoked the glorious deeds of the past as a standard by which to model their own expectations. This re-enactment of a mythical paradigm, under the guise of an historical reading of the myth, is a familiar pattern in human conduct, and can be observed many times in Finnish history since the 1800's. The *Kalevala* provided symbols for reinterpretation as needed; for times of national peace and prosperity, the heroes could take on benign aspect, while for times of wars and duress, they emerged as fierce and warlike. This alternation occurred several times in more than a century of nationalistic interpretations.

In the growing excitement which occurred as Finns acknowledged the integrity of the rich stock of ethnicity heretofore unrealized, *Kalevala* education and yearly *Kalevala* day celebrations were of major importance. Although these ritualizations of nationalism were very consciously arranged propaganda, it would be a mistake to dismiss their real emotional basis. The revelation of a cultural unity which had lain undiscovered and underestimated provided an immediate feeling of joy and promise, and even a sense that justice was at last being done after a period of oppression. It stirred a strong emotion in the peasants, who could recognize that the *Kalevala* was a mirror of their way of life. Lönnrot's personal dedication and genius were a further factor in determining this emotional response. That these feelings were so much in harmony with the political tendencies of the times was also an important consideration. The existence of the *Kalevala* embodied all of these positive emotions, focused and drove them forward, so that

when the opportunity for independence presented itself, the Finnish people were well-prepared to take advantage of it.

As the nationalist sentiment became a pervasive background for Finnish life, and the Finnish-language movement enjoyed increasing success, the seeds sown in the imagination by the ancient folklore came to expression through a new generation of artists. The turn of the century, those years of maximum tension and promise of nationhood, can be looked upon as “the golden age of Finnish spirit,” when the Finnish genius for art and literature burst into bloom. We need mention only such names as Eino Leino, Galen-Kallela, Sibelius, Merikanto, Saarinen, Erkkö, Kyösti, and a long list of others. *Kalevala* themes played a major role in these creative achievements. It thus becomes clear the degree to which Finnish folklore, and the *Kalevala* in particular, was the source of the flowering of Finnish culture.

In this way we see how comprehensive these constructive contributions to Finnish culture have been. The *Kalevala* has been of crucial importance in the progress of discovering and inventing an independent Finland. These contributions to the future of Finland have been possible because the *Kalevala* has presented a compelling view of her past. It is the symbolization of the deep Finnish past which has provided a guide to the modern development of her culture. This has allowed Finland to take its stand among cultures of the world in a deliberately nationalistic and secularistic way; with little indication of Christian influence, which suggests how rare this phenomenon is in the context of the Western world, the *Kalevala* has provided a thorough and traditional picture of cultural organization.

These resonances coming from the past have powerfully shaped the emerging future of Finland. We have said that the *Kalevala* in this way is an ethnic memory for the Finns. As the late President Kennedy has said; “The future arises out the past, and a country’s history is a statement of the values and hopes which, having forged what has gone before, will now forecast what is to come.” These words apply just as well to the *Kalevala* in its relationship with Finnish culture.

Yet the *Kalevala* is not a history; it is a collection of poetic narratives which were created in a time when no history was ripe with destiny. Although on occasion, when it has been needed, the *Kalevala* has been taken as history and its heroes have come alive and walked the earth, in the products of an oral tradition are mistaken reification. Then what historical value does the *Kalevala* bring to us?

Rather than being a presentation of her history, the *Kalevala* is instead at the root of a historical attitude. Our concerns with this poetry should not be phrased in terms of objective chronology and concrete historical reference; who these actors are is largely beside the point. Instead, what one absorbs in reading the *Kalevala* is an attitude, a sense of time which it embodies: the archaic consciousness which it so faithfully reconstitutes for us, the painstaking care and loving concern with which it paints the ethnographic detail of this by-gone age. We have here extraordinary depth in time, though true to its object, without a grid of dates and cross-referenced events which is what history is in the modern sense. Thus the *Kalevala* is an ethnic memory for the Finns, at the root not of our history, but of our historical consciousness. It seems to be the mirror of national soul. All right, but not in the usual sense of a means of reflection of some strange thing called a “soul”, but rather in the sense that it is what that so-called “soul” has provided for us, as a mirror. We may be happy, and look into it to see our peace and prosperity, or we may be spoiling for a fight, and look into it to see our armies and our military heroes, but if we are interested in our roots, we will look into it and see our ancestors, and appreciate the scope and detail of their millennial tradition.

As Kennedy wrote, “Of all the disciplines, the study of the folly and achievements of man is best calculated to foster the critical sense of what is permanent and meaningful amid the mass of superficial and transient questions which make up the day-to-day clamor.” In our reading of these old runos, we are brought face-to-face with the

minutiae, the harmonies, the hard realities, as well as the mysteries and ambitions of our Finnish ancestors.

We gain a valuable perspective on the differences between that world and our own. In studying the course of the *Kalevala* as a published work, and its significance to the Finns, we also are able to better understand the ways purposeful human projects interact with history and produce magnificent results.

Historic continuity with the past, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, “is not a duty; it is only necessity.” Finnish history is not something dead and over. It is always alive, always growing, always unfinished – and every Finn today has his or her own contribution to make the great fabric of tradition and hope which binds all Finns, dead and living and yet to be born, in a common destiny.

To summarize, what is the *Kalevala* to us Finns? It is no ordinary book. It is the preserver of our collective ethnic memory; it is the root of our history; it is the shaper of our language; it is the inspirer of our independence; it is the seed and source of our painting, sculpture, music, and literature; it is the magnet which draws us together from all over the world, as for instance at FinnFest. In fact, it is our ambassador to the world.

Why should we know all this? Twenty-four hundred years ago, Socrates gave the answer: “Know thyself.”