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# The Kalevala: An Epic Poem After Oral Tradition By Elias LÃ¶nnrot (Oxford World's Classics)



The Kalevala

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



## Synopsis

The Kalevala is the great Finnish epic, which like the Iliad and the Odyssey, grew out of a rich oral tradition with prehistoric roots. During the first millennium of our era, speakers of Uralic languages (those outside the Indo-European group) who had settled in the Baltic region of Karelia, that straddles the border of eastern Finland and north-west Russia, developed an oral poetry that was to last into the nineteenth century. This poetry provided the basis of the Kalevala. It was assembled in the 1840s by the Finnish scholar Elias LÃ¶nnrot, who took 'dictation' from the performance of a folk singer, in much the same way as our great collections from the past, from Homeric poems to medieval songs and epics, have probably been set down. Published in 1849, it played a central role in the march towards Finnish independence and inspired some of Sibelius's greatest works. This new and exciting translation by poet Keith Bosley, prize-winning translator of the anthology *Finnish Folk Poetry: Epic*, is the first truly to combine liveliness with accuracy in a way which reflects the richness of the original.

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## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Kalevala is one of the greatest (and yet largely unknown) epic poems of all times. Although relatively young when compared to the works of Homer and so forth, this Finnish epic draws deep into Finland's Shamanic heritage and is indeed based off these old myths and legends. It concerns the adventures of Vainamoinen the wise Shaman, his companion Ilmarinen the smith and the bold, young Lemminkainen. Those who have studied Shamanism will already see a Shamanic aspect in the association between Vainamoinen and Ilmarinen, for in many cultures smiths and Shamans are linked together. There are many more Shamanic archetypes and beliefs found throughout this book, such as a bear sacrifice which is startlingly similar to that observed amongst the Ainu and Lapps of recent times. This book, perhaps the only real direct source of Finnish mythology and religion, explores an oft neglected culture. After all, any school child can tell you of the myths of the Greeks, Romans or Germanic peoples, yet the mythology and heroes of Finland have remained largely unknown. A real pity as this epic is filled with deceit, treachery and heroism which easily could stand beside the works of Homer, Virgil or Valmiki. This translation, perhaps the best available, both for the price and in terms of being generally accessible, is certainly worth owning. Whether you are interested in mythology, history, anthropology, Finland or just like a good story, there is bound to be something in this book which appeals to you.

Elias Lonnrot's noble achievement, "The Kalevala," sings myriad Finnish tales to a reader's heart and mind. The formidable epic poem weaves music, magic, and lusty suprahuman heroes traditional to Finland, and derives from Lonnrot's artistic assembly of oral poetry. In reading this classic, one careers through a unique culture and mythology on horse-drawn sledges and hand-crafted vessels, meeting such fantastical figures as the ever-wiseman -- and ever-bachelor -- Vainamoinen and the brawny mistress of Northland, Louhi. Comprising fifty cantos, "The Kalevala" requires unfettered time, discerning ear, and adventurous spirit to complete. Tongue-tickling alliteration and intraline rhymes help speed the journey. And anyone who has read and enjoyed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" will appreciate Lonnrot's compilation, as Longfellow modeled his work in part on "The Kalevala." Perhaps the farfetched feats and unlikely events intrinsic to this mythological mosaic seem irrelevant to modern materialism and daily grind, but heeding the beck of such diversion will supply one not only with practical wisdom but also with the virtue of its purpose: pleasure, poetry, and historical preservation.

A reviewer proposes, disposes. Back in 2004, had lumped together reviews of paperback editions of two translations of the Finnish "National Epic," KALEVALA (variously interpreted as "Kaleva

District" and "Land of Heroes"), one in prose by Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. (1963), and the other, more recent, a verse translation by Keith Bosley (1989). Naturally, the software would not allow the posting of more than one review by any given reviewer. In response, I did a revised, extended, review covering both versions. That received a good response (120 out of 122 "helpful" votes), but has been left stranded on the Magoun side, ever since, in its wisdom, decided to separate the two. Responding to the challenge, I have rewritten the review to focus on Bosley's translation. To begin with, Magoun's translation, now almost fifty years old, is a solid, reliable prose version, the first by a translator trained in the study of languages and literatures (mainly medieval Germanic -- but the best translation at the time was by a botanist....) It was welcome in academic and other serious-minded circles, and Magoun also translated Lonnrot's first, shorter, published version, as "The Old Kalevala" (1969), which also contained additional documentary material, and a list of proposed corrections to his main translation -- which has been included as Appendix E in more recent printings of "Kalevala," but not incorporated into the main text. These were extremely impressive performances, aimed mainly, as indicated, at the serious student. But many find them very readable, and, as a friend reminded me, with their end-paper maps, appendices, character indexes, etc, they physically resemble editions of Tolkien. There is also a non-coincidental similarity of contents -- Tolkien loved the old W.F. Kirby verse translation, and, typically, followed it up by studying Finnish, an influence which shows up in the Elvish language Quenya, and some of the nomenclature in "The Silmarillion." A great many readers, however, found Magoun's prose renderings of both the "Old" and "New" Kalevala to be uninspiring, and even those of us who value it for its careful rendering of the imagery have to admit it comes nowhere close to Kirby's sprightly rendering. (Tolkien even claimed that Kirby's version of "the invention of beer" was actually better, or at least funnier, than the original!) For those who want both the story and all of the details, but either don't care about, or don't care for, such things as meter and rhyme, Magoun's translation may remain their first choice. For those who know the epic through other translations, it is still worth consulting. The wishes of many readers were eventually answered in the form of Keith Bosley's elegant (and careful) verse rendering, which, although not as student-friendly in layout and contents, seems to be very reliable. "Kalevala," variously translated as "Kaleva District" or "Land of Heroes," is a nineteenth-century compilation, revision, and expansion of narratives, spells and charms, and proverbial wisdom collected (mainly, if not entirely, by Elias Lonnrot), from the Finnish-speaking peasants and fisherman of areas of modern Finland and Russia. It is made up largely, but not entirely, of "runos," narrative songs which even then survived only in isolated, "fringe" areas; ballads with clear connections with other cultures also make an appearance. References to "The Kalevala"

are usually to its second edition (1849), also distinguished as the "New Kalevala" in comparison to its shorter predecessor, the "Old Kalevala" (1835). The material is, for the most part, clearly pagan in origin, with hints of roots in the Viking Age, if not earlier, but processed through centuries of Christianity, Catholic and Lutheran in Finland proper, Russian Orthodox in the Karelia district. Fortunately, Elias Lonnrot, as the main collector, as well as the man responsible for this literary version, was also engaged in laying the foundations of the scientific study of folk traditions, and the collections he made or sponsored formed the basis of a major archive, the publication of which was only recently completed. In the meantime, his popularization had become a part of the world's culture, as well as that of Finland. As one example of its impact: the American poet Longfellow adapted a German translator's adaptation of the Finnish meter for his pseudo-Iroquois epic, "Hiawatha," with the paradoxical result that the original is sometimes described, in English, as being in Hiawatha-meter. The contents are various, but the main themes are the military and romantic adventures and misadventures of a handful of warrior-magicians, quite as quick with an incantation as with a sword. Vainamoinen, "the Eternal Sage," and a kind of demiurge who sings the Finnish homeland into being, is born an old man. His attempts -- always frustrated -- to find a young wife lead to the creation of the mysterious and wonderful "Sampo" by his friend, the smith Ilmarinen, as a kind of bride-price. However, Ilmarinen himself uses it in his own wooing -- and finds the bargain a bad one. These two great heroes share the stage with the irresponsible Lemminkainen, a kind of combined Don Juan and Achilles, and the hapless Kullervo. Kullervo's story -- which you may know as a cantata by Sibelius -- is one of the underpinnings of Tolkien's tale of Turin in "The Silmarillion" and "Unfinished Tales," where it is combined with elements from the "Volsunga Saga." (When the "Silmarillion" first appeared, it seemed obvious that the Quest for the Sampo, and the Sampo's ultimate fate, was a direct source as well as a major inspiration for Tolkien; the publication of his early drafts shows that most of these resemblances emerged over time, in the course of endless reworkings, but they remain enlightening. Other resemblances include the creation of the sun and moon, and attempts to harm them, and the importance of trees.) There have been a number of abridged or retold versions of "The Kalevala" in English, and there were two early complete versions in verse, that by Crawford (nineteenth-century, from a German translation; available on-line), and the 1907 W.F. Kirby translation, directly from Finnish (in -- if you will excuse the expression -- a version of Hiawatha-meter; long available in the Everyman's Library edition, it also is in various formats on-line). Between Magoun's prose translations, and Bosley's (1989) there was another verse translation of the "New Kalevala," by Eino Friberg (1988), which was clearly driven by love for the epic (and which I keep planning to re-read and review....). At first glance,

Magoun's translation seems very different from Bosley's. Only some of the differences are real. It should be said that Magoun, despite translating as prose, marks the verse divisions. He follows some Finnish editions in presenting the verse form as a long line with a pause (caesura), instead of as twice as many short lines. His page count therefore is much shorter, even with abundant supplemental material, but he has omitted nothing. There is no extended introduction; information is postponed to extensive appendices. It is well organized enough to be easy to use to find answers as questions arise, or be profitably consulted years later. Keith Bosley, on the other hand, made an effort to produce a work of literature. This goes beyond translating verse as verse (which he does very well), arranged in short lines (which looks more like poetry to many). Lonnrot's prose summaries of each *\*runo\** (for this purpose, canto) are not translated by Bosley. Magoun used them as "arguments" (in the manner of Milton's prose summaries for each book of "Paradise Lost"). For Bosley, nothing interrupts the flow of narrative and lyric, ritual and spell. The result is extremely engaging, far beyond Magoun's prosy rendition; a distinct plus. There are, however, no glossaries or indexes to otherwise serve as a guide through the complex set of stories. Bosley offers just ten pages of brief (albeit extremely useful) notes. These are followed by a two-page appendix on "Sibelius and the *Kalevala*," which untangles the references -- and some non-references -- to the "Kalevala" in the titles of several of the Finnish composer's works. (A certain amount of garbling took place as his music publisher translated titles into German, and the German was turned into English without checking against the original meaning.) Bosley's Introduction is excellent, and establishes the literary and cultural background of Lonnrot's work and the nature of the folk-poetry he collected, and makes useful observations about the structure of the completed epic. It is far better reading than Magoun's documentation. Of course, taking advantage of this synthesis means careful reading, ideally in advance of the story. The reader should take the time, but *\*should\** is not *\*will.\** Here, Magoun's formidable-looking book is actually more user-friendly. The Magoun translation was available for decades as a hardcover (with endpaper maps), before being issued as an otherwise identical trade paperback. Either form should stand up to reasonable handling. Bosley's translation apparently has been published in paperback only, in two different formats; first as a "World's Classics" mass-market paperback (1989), and then as a larger (but otherwise identical) "Oxford World's Classics" paperback in 1999. It is a very fat volume, over 700 pages long, due to Bosley's decision to treat the verse as short lines. Because of the different proportions of height and width to the binding, the slightly larger format of the OWC edition seems to me physically more stable, likely to stand up better to repeated readings and consultations; but I haven't heard of any problems with copies of the older World's Classics printings. Lonnrot also

published (1840-41) a collection of non-epic folk genres, including much material eventually absorbed into "Kalevala," as "Kanteletar" (roughly, "zither-daughter"). This has been under-represented in translation. Bosley translated a selection as "The Kanteletar," published in "World's Classics" in 1992, and currently out of print. It is an excellent companion to any "Kalevala" translation, but especially (of course) to Bosley's own. With luck, it will be reprinted sometime soon in the "Oxford World's Classics

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