



The Kalevala: The Epic Poem of Finland (Poems of Finland - The Kalevala)

Elias Lonnrot, Various

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The Kalevala

The Epic Poem of Finland

Translated into English By John Martin Crawford

The Kalevala or The Kalewala is a 19th-century work of epic poetry compiled by Elias Lönnrot from Karelian and Finnish oral folklore and mythology.

It is regarded as the national epic of Karelia and Finland and is one of the most significant works of Finnish literature. The Kalevala played an instrumental role in the development of the Finnish national identity, the intensification of Finland's language strife and the growing sense of nationality that ultimately led to Finland's independence from Russia in 1917.

The Kalevala (the Land of Heroes) relates the ever-varying contests between the Finns and the "darksome Laplanders", just as the Iliad relates the contests between the Greeks and the Trojans. Castren is of the opinion that the enmity between the Finns and the Lapps was sung long before the Finns had left their Asiatic birth-place.

A deeper and more esoteric meaning of the Kalevala, however, points to a contest between Light and Darkness, Good and Evil; the Finns representing the Light and the Good, and the Lapps, the Darkness and the Evil. Like the Niebelungs, the heroes of the Finns woo for brides the beautiful maidens of the North; and the similarity is rendered still more striking by their frequent inroads into the country of the Lapps, in order to possess themselves of the envied treasure of Lapland, the mysterious Sampo, evidently the Golden Fleece of the Argonautic expedition. Curiously enough public opinion is often expressed in the runes, in the words of an infant; often too the unexpected is introduced after the manner of the Greek dramas, by a young child, or an old man.

The whole poem is replete with the most fascinating folk-lore about the mysteries of nature, the origin of things, the enigmas of human tears, and, true to the character of a national epic, it represents not only the poetry, but the entire wisdom and accumulated experience of a nation. Among others, there is a profoundly philosophical trait in the poem, indicative of a deep insight into the workings of the human mind, and into the forces of nature. Whenever one of the heroes of the Kalevala wishes to overcome the aggressive power of an evil force, as a wound, a disease, a ferocious beast, or a venomous serpent, he achieves his purpose by chanting the origin of the inimical force. The thought underlying this idea evidently is that all evil could be obviated had we but the knowledge of whence and how it came.

The numerous myths of the poem are likewise full of significance and beauty, and the Kalevala should be read between the lines, in order that the full meaning of this great epic may be comprehended. Even such a hideous impersonation as that of Kullerwoinen, is rich with pointed meaning, showing as it does, the incorrigibility of ingrained evil. This legend, like all others of the poem, has its deep-running stream of esoteric interpretation. The Kalevala, perhaps, more than any other, uses its lines on the surface in

symbolism to point the human mind to the brighter gems of truth beneath.

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