

Markku Nieminen



Birth of the Kalevala Epic and the Kainuu Province

Elias Lönnrot's travels and activities 1831–1853

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The European Roots of the Kalevala Epic

The Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, is one of the classics of world literature. The Kalevala was not born by chance. Its roots laid in the national romantic movement that prevailed in Europe, which was based mainly on the ideas of German philosophers. It was a time of great change. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, with their consequences, had disrupted the old order. A new foundation for life was being sought. The idea of nation-states began to form, under the influence of philosophers.

In the late 1790s, a Weimar philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744 – 1803) proposed an idea that the history of nations can be found in their songs. After his death in the early 19th century, his most important works and lectures were published in the compilation *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (Voices of the Peoples in Songs). Inspired by this idea, students across Europe started collecting old songs. When folk songs were found in Serbia about the battle of Kosovo in 1389, where the Ottomans defeated the Serbs and annexed the country into their empire for centuries, this was seen as proof that Herder's theory was correct. This inspired even more collectors to go among the people in search of songs.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was only one university in Finland, Turku Academy. It was there that the Finnish national awakening began. Finland had been part of Sweden for hundreds of years, until in 1809, after Sweden lost a war, it was annexed to Russia. At the time of Swedish rule, the official language in Finland had been Swedish. Since Finland, as part of Russia, had autonomous status

as a Grand Duchy, it was allowed to keep its former laws and Swedish as the official administrative language.

At the Turku Academy, German idealistic philosophy – Fichte, Schelling, Herder and Hegel – was well known. When their ideas were applied to Finland's changed political situation, there was a national awakening among the educated class - including a desire to elevate the Finnish language alongside Swedish. It was crystallized in the expression: "We are not Swedes. We don't want to become Russians. Let us therefore be Finns!"

Before Elias Lönnrot (1802 – 1884) began his own groundbreaking poetry-collecting journeys, very little runo-song had been recorded in Finland, even though Mikael Agricola (1510 – 1557), the creator of literary Finnish, had already written in the preface to his 1551 book about Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen as figures appearing in folk poems. In the 18th century, an important figure in national culture of the time, University of Turku professor Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739 – 1804), collected and commissioned the collection of folk poetry, using and studying it in his five-part dissertation *De Poesii Fennica* (1766–1778). Unfortunately, this collected material was destroyed in the Great Fire of Turku in 1827. Another major collector of the time was Christfried Ganander (1741 – 1790), whose work *Mythologia Fennica*, containing runo-song, was published in 1789.

After Porthan's efforts, there followed an almost twenty-year pause in the collection of folk poetry, until, following Herder's path, young university students began collecting still-living sung poetry from among the people. The aim was to show that Finland, too, had its own history and antiquity. The spark for this collecting work came from Anders Johan Sjögren (1794 – 1855), who, as a young student, had become acquainted with Herder's writings on folk poetry. He began his folklore collecting work in 1814 and graduated from the University of Turku in 1819. Five years later, he received a travel grant from Tsar Alexander I to study the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia. His first expedition, which began in Viena Karelia, lasted several years (1824–1829). Through his collecting and research work,

Sjögren became a member of the St. Petersburg Academy and was able to support the research of Finnish linguists among the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia.

Before Lönnrot, Finnish folk poetry was also collected by students Abraham Poppius (1793 – 1866) and K. A. Gottlund (1796 – 1875), as well as the district physician Zachris Topelius senior (1781 – 1831), who pointed the way for future poetry collectors to Viena Karelia. That is where Lönnrot set his course and collected the best poetic material for the *Kalevala*. At the time he began his collecting work, there were around 4,000 lines of runo-song recorded in Finland. By the time the *Kalevala* was being compiled, the number of verses had increased tenfold. When Lönnrot began work on the second edition of the *Kalevala*, there were already about 170,000 lines.

When he started the poetry collection, Lönnrot had no intention of turning the material into an epic, even though Gottlund had already speculated in an 1817 newspaper article, that an epic could be compiled from Finnish folk poetry. Lönnrot published his collected material as albums called *Kantele*, until he experienced a personal revelation about the idea of creating an epic after meeting an old runo-singer, Vaassila Kieleväinen, in the village of Vuonninen. According to Lönnrot, Kieleväinen told the heroic deeds of Väinämöinen as one continuous narrative.

The first edition of the *Kalevala* was published in 1835. It became, under the influence of the European national romantic worldview, Finland's national epic – even though most of the educated class at the time did not speak Finnish. The *Kalevala* was seen as proof that Finland had its own antiquity. This is already evident in the title Lönnrot gave the epic: *Kalevala taikka Vanhoja Karjalan runoja Suomen kansan muinosista ajoista* (Kalevala or Old Karelian Poems from the Ancient Times of the Finnish People). When Lönnrot sent the manuscript to be printed, the word *muinosista* (ancient) had originally been *entisistä* (former). By changing the word at the last moment, Lönnrot steered the work toward a mythological rather than a historical approach. In the second, expanded edition of the *Kalevala*, pub-

lished in 1849, the title was shortened to simply *Kalevala*. By then, the work had already become a cornerstone of Finnish culture.

The *Kalevala* was brought to international prominence by the linguist and folklorist Jacob Grimm (1785 – 1863), who in a speech at the Berlin Academy in 1845 elevated the epic to the ranks of world literature. After that, the Swedish-speaking Finnish intelligentsia began studying Finnish, even though the *Kalevala* had already been translated into Swedish by Matias Aleksanteri Castrén (1813 – 1852).

The *Kalevala* laid the groundwork for developing the Finnish language into a civilized language. It was only after its publication that true Finnish-language fiction was born.

Kalevala's influence was not limited to literature. In the 1890s, an art movement called *Karelianism* was born, which extended to fine art and music, as well as to new art forms, such as photography. Overall, the *Kalevala* has become part of the Finnish identity. It can be seen in the names of people, streets, neighborhoods, companies and events – in everything that refers to Finnishness.



Hövelö in Paltaniemi is the place where Elias Lönnrot finalized the manuscript of the Old Kalevala in late 1834 and wrote its foreword, which was completed on February 28, 1835. Lönnrot had purchased Hövelö as his residence in December 1833. He himself moved there only the following summer and sold the house in January the next year, as its location was too far from town for practicing medicine. However, he was allowed to stay in Hövelö until March.

Kalevala and Kainuu

The Kalevala took shape in Kainuu, where Elias Lönnrot — district physician in Kajaani from 1833 to 1853 — compiled it from a vast trove of folk poetry. Most of the runo-songs he used came from the Viena district of Russian Karelia, particularly the villages around Vuokkiniemi. Viena was home to an indigenous oral tradition, shaped by a deep connection to nature, and its dialect closely resembled Finnish. While epic poetry had nearly vanished in Finland, it still thrived in Viena during Lönnrot's time. Through the Kalevala, the Viena dialect became a key contributor to the development of Finnish as a literary language. It was only after the Kalevala's publication that Finnish-language literature began to flourish.

The first edition of the Kalevala — now known as the Old Kalevala — was published in 1835. It was based on material collected primarily by Lönnrot himself, along with a small amount of earlier poetry recorded in the region before his field trips. It was that earlier material that first inspired him to begin collecting runo-songs. A new, expanded edition appeared in 1849. For this version, Lönnrot drew on additional material gathered by other collectors, but the majority still came from his own expeditions. Although the Kalevala is based on traditional oral poetry, it can also be seen as Lönnrot's own creation: he arranged, edited, and combined poems and characters into a single cohesive narrative. Especially in compiling the Old Kalevala, Lönnrot believed he was reconstructing a once-whole ancient epic that had survived only in scattered fragments.

The Kalevala gave the Finnish people an identity. It is the cornerstone of Finnish culture, which soon began to exert a profound influence on the other spheres of artistic endeavor.

Lönnrot provided the archaic Kalevala with a lyrical sister, the Kanteletar. The collection of lyric poems and ballads was published in 1840. Its geographical basis

in poetry is broader than that of the *Kalevala*. In addition to Viena, Lönnrot specifically mentions the parishes of Lieksa, Ilomantsi, Kitee, Tohmajärvi, Sortavala, Jaakkima, and Kurkijoki as places where these songs were found.

Lönnrot's relationship with Kainuu — his home province for over twenty years — has been studied from many angles. However, the time he spent collecting poetry within Kainuu itself, and his travels to the far reaches of the Kajaani district, have received relatively little attention. Yet these expeditions offer a wealth of fascinating detail. Kainuu was — and remains — a distinctive region, not least because, together with the Viena district in Russian Karelia, it served as the concrete birthplace of the *Kalevala*.

Elias Lönnrot was likely the most tireless traveler in Kainuu during his time — not least because his work demanded it. From early 1833 to the end of 1853, he served as the district physician of Kajaani, covering the entire region. His inspection tours and vaccination campaigns took him to nearly every village. Alongside his medical duties — and often during the same journeys — Lönnrot traveled to Karelia to collect poetry and conduct linguistic research. Occasionally, he took extended leaves to travel even further afield, visiting Lapland, the Kola Peninsula, the Arkhangelsk region, the Veps areas, and Estonia.

Lönnrot's travels were highly significant for Finnish culture. Their crowning achievement was the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic which rapidly took its rightful place among the great works of world literature.

It was no accident that Lönnrot set off for Viena in search of poetry, for he had studied folk poetry in earnest while at university. In fact, he wrote his master's thesis on Väinämöinen and began collecting poetry systematically in 1828.

His role model was the district physician Zachris Topelius senior, whose published booklets of folk poetry, based on his own collections, served as an excellent model for the young master and medical student. In the preface to his booklets, Topelius pointed the way for collectors to Viena Karelia, to the parish of

Elias Lönnrot worked as a district doctor in Kajaani for twenty years in the early 19th century. These were the years of Lönnrot's manhood, when he created the Finnish national epic Kalevala. Based on Lönnrot's travelogues, letters and other written documents, this book examines the contribution of the Kainuu province to the creation of Finnish national epic and the conditions in which the poor region lived at that time.

The illustrations are paintings by the Karelian artist Vitali Dobrinin of Kainuu during Lönnrot's time and about 150 years later.



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