

Introduction*

In seeking to understand the work of successive generations of anonymous creative poet-singers, the term ‘folk’ is deceptive. We have before us fragments of the work of men and women who in other parts of Europe could have risen to prominence as poets and authors in the high tradition. Such were the demands of handling the Kalevala metre that only people of special talent could excel in its practice. Very little will ever be known about the personalities of the great poet-singers to whom we owe the surviving stock of material; indeed, frustratingly little is known even of the outstanding nineteenth-century singers. A few attracted particular attention on account of their unusual skills and prodigious memories. But after being feted for short periods of their lives, commemorated by painters and sculptors, they soon slipped back into their own backwoods communities leaving only their poems to posterity. Even less is known about the thousands of informants who provided the bulk of the material housed in the vast archival collections of oral poetry in Finland, Russia and Estonia; ‘singer unknown’ is the recurrent designation in source indexes.

Against this background it is possible to offer no more than certain careful generalisations about the final, nineteenth-century phase of the Kalevala-poetry tradition. Men tended to sing heroic poetry, while women favoured lyric, legends and ballads. Heroic epic survived most powerfully in the northern parts of Archangel Karelia, where the great singers customarily combined stories of the traditional heroes to produce long narrative sequences – a technique adopted by Elias Lönnrot in compiling the [first printed version of *Kalevala* – see endnote]. Such a performance was vividly described by Lönnrot himself in 1834: ‘Frequently, when several singers were present at a festival, a singing contest would be held, and friends and acquaintances would lay bets on who would win. Arhippa Perttunen said that the people of his village often persuaded him to take part in contests and he could not

* Michael H. Branch, ‘Introduction’ to the 1985 Athlone Press edition of Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, translated by W. F. Kirby (London: Everyman, 1907), p. xvii.

remember ever being beaten. 'On these occasions the first contestant sang a poem, after which the other contestant had to sing a poem about the same theme and of about equal length; they continued in this way until one of the singers had exhausted his stock of poems. 'If the singers performed badly,' Lönnrot continued, 'the audience would laugh at their struggles to have the last word. Such a contest is like a squabble between two hens: the one who clucks longer claims to have won.' When the singers were more skilful, the contest would continue until one of them fell asleep from exhaustion.

Further south different social systems led to different emphases. In the Ladoga Karelia region, the tradition was cultivated for the most part by the womenfolk. Social life in the extended Karelian family dominates the surviving poetry, producing a wide variety of work songs, miniature family sagas, and powerful, subjective lyric. The following example, which spread to many parts of the Baltic-Finnish area (and was first published in English in 1802), retains its power to move us even today:

If the one I know came now
the one I've seen were in sight
I'd go a mile to meet him
by boat across the water
upon skis through the backwoods
 lifting up the fence
 unlatching the gate:
I would tear brushwood fences
iron fences I'd bring down.

I would grasp him by the hand
though a snake were in his palm
I'd throw myself on his neck
though death were upon his neck
I'd snatch a kiss from his mouth
though his mouth bled from a wolf
and to his side I would go
though his side were all bloody.

Further south, in Ingria, the efforts of serfdom and other aspects of Russian life are reflected in the themes and tenor of the poems. There, too, Kalevala poetry was almost wholly cultivated by women, but it is characterized by an improvisatory style which draws on traditional stock passages as allusive symbols to convey themes which are often meaningless to anyone not present at the moment of performance:

Where had my bird gone
 my favourite bird?
 'She got iron boots
 a crutch for a third.'
She went in search of the bird
She travelled a little way
 walked a short distance.
 Listened: heard a hum.
Looked: Katti at the roadside.
She was weaving cloth
a girl was holding the reed
the goose there winding.
a girl was holding the reed
the goose there winding.