

Eino Friberg's Genuine Love for the Kalevala



*John Oscar Virtanen
founder of Finlandia House, Portland one of most
active in many fields of endeavor, including busi-
ness, importing, writing, civic and consular pro-
grams.*

In his writing, in his conversation, in his preaching, he'll mention the KALEVALA, or quote from it, either in Finnish or in English. He knows the Kalevala by heart.

Eino Friberg, an 84-year-old American Finn from Belmont, Massachusetts, has translated the Kalevala into modern English, an extraordinary task for a man who is totally blind and who has never seen or experienced the natural wonders of the Finland from which the Kalevala emerged.

"My awareness of the Kalevala came to me in my cradle," Friberg relates. "At the time I was born in 1901, in Merikarvia, Finland, Kalevala was taught in the schools there. The stories and rhythms of the Kalevala excited my imagination. Here in America, when I learned enough English, I told these stories to my playmates."

"Seiso kuin seinä," he'll quote the Kalevala to those from whom he'll expect honest support for his noble efforts to carry out an undertaking which is his untiring determination to bring the Kalevala within the reach

of all Americans in translation.

Eino Friberg's faith in the message of the Kalevala nurtures his belief that many Americans can become eager devotees as well, provided the translation has the authentic flavor of the original Finnish text.

When he started his huge translation project, he was assured at least in his own mind, that the work had an international message, that is culturally important. This encouraged him to count on helpful financial grants from the United States as well as from Finland. UNESCO was in his mind as a publisher that might issue the Kalevala in one of its international cultural editions.

Since beginning the project, he has paid out of his own pocket many thousands of dollars to cover expenses; yet, he is not a rich man.

Although the ten-year project has now been completed, he must sadly admit: "I have had no financial aid from anywhere. I applied to the National Endowment for the Arts and also the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, both in the United

States, but was turned down.

This man, an American Finn, is full of fire and passion; he is a chain talker, and convinced he can bring any of his undertakings to a successful finish. He has never allowed blindness to prevent him from accomplishing what he has set out to do. "I think visually, anyway," he assures his friends.

He has devoted uncounted years of his life to the study of the Kalevala. He had to hire people to read the original Finnish text to him. He consulted an expert with knowledge about its people and the region where the Kalevala was born. He had to learn the meaning of the strange names and words used in the Kalevala. His American wife, Adele, who does not speak Finnish, has read the Finnish text to him with perfect pronunciation. Now she is too ill to spend long hours reading to her husband. He has sat up night after night listening to tapes, which have given him the knowledge and understanding vital to make an effective, authentic interpretation of the Kalevala into the American idiom. If a Nobel prize were to be awarded for creative translation of an epic, he has earned one.

Before Friberg started his work on the Kalevala, he did a number of other translations, and wrote articles in various periodicals in both English and Finnish. He has written several full-length plays: **Beyond Law: Struggles Against Czarist Agents**, **The Year's Desire**, **The Pioneer Cross**, **Puolueita**, all of a historical nature. He has translated from Kivi's "Seven Brothers" for Finnish-American community programs as well as Finnish folk songs and Christmas plays for many occasions.

He wrote a play **When The Heroes Sang**, which is a dramatization of the Lemminkäinen legend, for the 100th anniversary of the Kalevala in 1935.

"Of course, I could not forever rely on some one else's reading the Kalevala to me, so I copied into braille the English translations. The first two English translations were in verse: J. M. Crawford, *The Kalevala: the Epic Poem of Finland* (New York 1888);

William F. Kirby, *Kalevala; the Land of Heroes* (Everyman's Library, 1907). Both are in a monotonous, unvaried trochaic tetrameter in the genteel Victorian style, full of inaccuracies, clichés, inversions, often fancifully far afield from the original. Annotation is negligible and there is no attempt at alliteration, which is so important in Finnish oral poetry; and there is notably little success in making the echo lines of the couplets conform to the context, so that they often become nothing more than dangling appendages.

"Then there is the literal translation by the late Francis P. Magoun, Jr., 'The Kalevala or Poems of the Kalevala District', (Harvard University Press, 1963.) Since I was the first to interest him in the translation of the Kalevala as far back as 1939, may I venture a criticism, though I do so with great reluctance because I hold the author in high respect. Of course a literal translation cannot do justice to the truly poetic element. It makes for cramped English and awkward diction. His commentary is excellent but there is no internal annotation of the lines, which are soul and body of any poem.

"I became convinced that a new translation was necessary. My early thought was to bring the first fully annotated translation of the Kalevala for the 150th Anniversary year of 1985. I became fascinated with certain features of the Kalevala which seemed to have received little attention previously. A translator should remember that the Kalevala is made up of a collection of songs, and is not oral poetry. When, finally, I was able to get a braille copy of the original, I began to compare the translations against the Finnish text, line by line, and discovered many great errors done previously."

"Further, there are many features of the Kalevala that have not been mentioned; nor has the Kalevala been fully annotated for the reader to understand the nature of the verses."

"I want to point out, too, that the Kalevala is quick and lively, not ploddingly slow, as these other translators have made it

sound. There are many imaginative playfulnesses in the original - where mood, rhythm and tempo change to the context, allowing a wide range of variations in mood and theme - tragic, comic, farcical, pastoral, loving, hateful, weird, mysterious, eerie - where the translator must change his own mood and expression in playing each part in succession in order to vivify the change of scene and context.

"First, I have taken into account that the Kalevala is not 'heroic' in the style of *The Iliad*, the *Chanson de Roland* or the like. The actors are not warriors, except incidentally, but singers and magic makers. There is much talk of war, but final contention is ever decided by song and magic. The mightiest minstrel and the wisest wizard always wins - and there is no victory by bloody carving of flesh but by the might of music and magic, for the highest power recognized is the word of wisdom born on the waves of song. The most telling magic is in the origin word, the birth verse, that is, knowing where and whence things arose or were born.

"Second, there is no glorification of warriors, kings and conquerors. Here are only men and women in the demension of men and women. Human joy and human wisdom are what they seek. Though there are episodes of piracy (probably echoes of Viking times) and raids for wives or booty, they are chiefly preoccupied with the planting, fishing, hunting, woodcarving, boat and house building, songfests, the brewing of beer, courting, weddings, and refreshing themselves in the ubiquitous sauna.

"Third, the daily life of the common people is described in the most meticulous detail. These numerous accounts of occupations and recreations are especially rich sources of information for students of early culture and rewarding to any curious reader. Of particular interest in this respect are the *Wedding Lays* (Runo 21-25), which give detailed descriptions of the daily activities and manners of the peasant households.

"Fourth, the women in the Kalevala are no mere accessories to the men but equal

actors. Mistress Louhi outwits and outwatches the men, even old Väinämöinen. It is to her that men come seeking brides and she makes them pay dearly with Herculean tasks. She even steals the sun and the moon and hides away the magic Sampo.

"Next, there is Aino, who is pledged to Väinämöinen by her brother. Her mother is delighted to get such a great singer for a son-in-law; but Aino rebels, will not go to be an old man's darling, and wanders off, singing her song of sorrow. She is drowned and turns into a silver salmon.

"There are many other prominent women: Lemminkäinen's devoted mother and his no less devoted, though troubled wife, Kyllikki, the Maiden of the North, etc., and finally Marjatta, the virgin mother of the one who is to bring the new dispensation.

"Fifth, the five long *Wedding Lays* might be considered one of the early discussions and detailed analyses as well as protests regarding the status of women.

*"Sixth, the Great Affirmation of life,
Runo 1:*

*Guide the traveler to the land,
Child of mankind to the open
To behold the moon in heaven
And to wonder at the dayling,
Get to know the Great Bear's grandeur
Or just to stare up at the stars!*

The simple, humane ethics,

Runo 16:

*Never, you children of mankind,
Never, eternally never,
Put the blame upon the innocent
Nor injure any guiltless being!*

These are but a few of the many significant features of the Kalevala.

Friberg points out that there are, however, a number of problems in the translation of the Kalevala:

1. The demand of the parallel couplets and the shortness of the lines are very restrictive, leaving little room for poetic play to the translator.

2. Alliteration. None of the previous translators have even attempted alliteration,

"I alliterate" Friberg notes, but with considerable caution. Since the Finnish words are so long, often only two or three to a line, and the English words are so short, it is necessary to alliterate two or three English words to a line to get the same effect.

3. Meter. The meter cannot be 'reproduced' since Finnish is a quantitative language and the English is non-quantitative. However, trochaic tetrameter is the nearest equivalent to the Finnish meter, but in order to avoid the monotonous lullaby effect, this meter has to be drastically varied in English, sometimes even using the iambic line."

For Eino Friberg, translation of the Kalevala has been a labor of love. Being blind does create a special situation and involves much more work than scribbling with a pencil. Braille cannot be corrected like a typewritten copy, it must be rewritten each time an error is made or correction is necessary. He has followed a special formula:

- I - I compose it in my head;*
- II - Write it down in braille (by hand, not by machine)*
- III - Dictate it to a long-hand writer;*
- IV - Make corrections;*
- V - Have it typed;*
- VI - Have it rebrailled;*
- VII - Make final correction from the braille;*
- VIII - Have the final copy typed."*

In a work as large as the Kalevala, some errors still are bound to occur. Therefore the manuscript has to be fine-combed before the printing. "We cannot be careless like the previous translators and publishers", Friberg tells his publisher.

While Eino Friberg has produced as authentic a version of the poetry as is possible, his serious question was: which idiom, British English or American English, is closer in style and psychology to the Kalevala? British English is more refined, tighter and more formal, while American English is freer, looser, more spontaneous and vivid, just a couple of generations away its hunters, fishermen, and swashbuckling Lemminkäi-

nen, plus especially, the down-to-earth labors and folkways of the backwoods farmers.

Eino Friberg addresses readers who are unfamiliar with the art of creative translation and are apt to look first for literal accuracy, which is the crudest form of translation and leads only to nitpicking. He maintains that general faithfulness to the original text is, of course, necessary although in the Kalevala there are restrictions.

Dr. Melvin J. Luthy, Professor of Linguistics at the Brigham Young University, Utah, who is an expert on the Kalevala, has this comment to make of Friberg's translation.

"I'm very skeptical of any 'new translations', but I soon became surprisingly pleased with the manuscript... I found that the work was not only skilfully done, but Mr. Friberg had succeeded in preserving much of the authentic flavor of original text. He has done this by providing a poetic translation that captures both the alliteration and the folk language that is so fundamental to the spirit of the Kalevala ... The translator has a very good sense of expressing the Finnish quality in English, and one should not tamper with it very much. The annotations are helpful."

Professor Heikki A. Reenpää, Chairman of the Board of the Otava Publishing Concern, where Friberg's translation will be published, said that "Friberg's translation is characteristically well created in a good, authentic style when compared with the original Finnish text. We are very pleased with it."

The Finnish-born Eino Friberg has been educated in the United States. After he lost his sight through an accidental explosion at the age of seven, he attended the Perkins' Institute for the Blind for only one year and then went to the Watertown Public High School, where he was one of the most brilliant students ever enrolled there.

In two years, he completed the four-year course and never received a mark below A. Then he won a scholarship to Boston University, where he won many other scholar-

ships and literary prizes, particularly the Latin Translation prize, which he received for his translation into English verse of Horace's 18th Ode. After graduation from Boston University, he studied for the ministry, graduating from the New Church Theological School, obtained a Master's degree in philosophy at Harvard, and spent much time in the study of the social sciences.

After completing most of the literary subjects and some of the social subjects, he went to Westminster, where he spent time in reading and writing. Unfortunately, fire destroyed six volumes of writings that he was preparing to publish.

So it was almost with swashbuckling bravado that he squared his broad shoulders to start all over again. In seven days he wrote the play **When The Heroes Sang**, which has received high praise for its literary and dra-

matic merits. "Powerful epic drama ... frankly impressed by its big, vital, element appeal..." one critic wrote.

All along, he aimed at translating the Kalevala. "Kalevala's great significance is not only to Finland but also to the whole world, especially to the world of literature and art. It is one of the great epics of the world, it is the voice of our ancestors, it is the heart of our history, it is the shaper of our language, it is the inspirer and unifier of our independence. it is our ambassador to the world. Furthermore, it is still a pristine source of study and research for scholars of mythology, folklore, the evolution of religion, and anthropology. For the general reader, there are unusual narratives and high lyric inspiration to enjoy." The words come from Friberg's heart. He agrees with President John F. Kennedy, who said: "Art," in this case





Björn Landström has won world fame as an illustrator and writer of books about the sea. For years he entertained the idea of illustrating the Kalevala. This modern illustration will be in Eino Friberg's Kalevala, too.

the Kalevala, "is not a form of propaganda, it is a form of truth..."

Whether it's truth or propaganda, Friberg is also well aware of the problems of having Finnish literature published in the United States commercially. Unknown literary works do not interest publishers, whose only motives in publishing are money and profit.

In 1980, the **Finnish-American Literary Heritage Foundation**, a non-profit organization, was established in Portland, Oregon.

It is America's only organization devoted to promoting Finland's rich literature in English translation. As a tax-exempt organization, it is supported entirely by membership fees, book sales, grants and gifts from other organizations and individuals. Well-to-do American Finns on the Board of Directors have financed the beginning. Suomi-Society and the Ministry of Education have given small grants to support certain projects. Cooperation with the Finnish Literature Society

and, especially, the Otava publishing house will give the Foundation a good opportunity to advance its aims. The membership consists of organizations and individuals now numbering 640 throughout the U.S.A. There are advisory members in U.S.A. and in Finland.

Although more than 600 000 Americans claim Finnish roots, very few can speak or read their ancestral language. As a result, the poetry, novels, histories, plays and other works by Finland's greatest writers and Finnish-American writers have remained unknown to most American readers. The need for such a literary foundation in the United States has been most urgent and the service rendered by the FALHF is changing all that. Working with writers, translators and publishers in both countries, the Foundation is dedicated solely to the translation, publication and distribution of books on Finland and to delivering its classic literature to universities, consulates, embassies, businesses, its own members and the general public through book stores and mail-order sales. The Foundation acts as a non-profit Finnish book club in the United States.

"The Finnish-American Literary Heritage Foundation has acted as my sponsor and agent for the past two years. I am grateful to them for getting **OTAVA** as publisher

of my translated KALEVALA," Eino Friberg avows joyfully.

Although many important events commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the publication of the Kalevala are being held throughout the United States this year, the most important will be the Third FinnFest '85, to be held at Hancock, Michigan, on July 25-28, where thousands of American Finns will gather together. "Gala-Kalevala" is the theme of the event.

The FALHF will be organizing the Finnish Literary Exhibit and Otava's new Kalevala, in Finnish, will be on display there. It's identical to Eino Friberg's Kalevala with the same modern illustrations by Björn Landström.

The Foundation headquarters are located at Portland State University in the Finnish Room, a facility funded, sponsored and supported by Finnish-Americans since 1959. Anyone may join this unique literary group and receive the Foundation's quarterly newsletter.

The newly translated Kalevala may be ordered in advance and inquiries are invited. Write to: FALHF P.O. Box 1838, Portland, Oregon 97207, USA. Anyone may join this unique literary organization and receive the Foundation's quarterly News Letter.