

**POPULAR STUDIES IN
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FOLKLORE, NO. 5: THE
POPULAR POETRY OF THE FINNS**

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Charles J. Billson

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THE POPULAR POETRY OF THE FINNS

THE popular poetry of the Finns has been discovered mainly during the last seventy years. As early indeed as the beginning of the eighteenth century its existence was known to a few scholars, and the first attempt to collect and edit it was made as long ago as 1733. During the next hundred years the work of research was carried on only by a few solitary enthusiasts, and the results were comparatively trivial until the formation of the Finnish Literary Society in the year 1831.

This celebrated and patriotic association granted, in the very first year of its existence, a travelling scholarship to Dr. Lönnrot, who was thus enabled to carry out the great work of his life by visiting the remote corners of Finland and Russian Karelia, and gathering from the lips of peasants a considerable proportion of the buried treasures of Finnish literature.

Through the enterprise of the same Society the discoveries of Lönnrot and other scholars were published, and their publication at once gave considerable impetus to the growing culture of the Finnish people.

Outside Finland the publications of the Finnish Literary Society could appeal only, generally speaking, to the few persons acquainted with the Finnish language. The *Kalevala*, however, the so-called national epic of the Finns, thanks to a number of unusually good translations, has found its way into most countries, and has met with a hearty welcome from all lovers of poetry. In this country it is known through the excellent translation of Dr. Crawford, Consul-General of the United States at St. Petersburg. But this is almost the only attempt that has yet been made (with the exception of Mr. Abercromby's work, mentioned in the Bibliographical Appendix) to render the traditional literature of the Finns accessible to English readers. We do not possess as yet, however, any Finnish-English or English-Finnish dictionary, so that it is perhaps hardly to be expected that much should be done in this direction.

The national literature of Finland is purely oral and popular, the growth of many minds and many centuries: it is regarded by the Finns as the monumental expression of their national life and

is the basis of their culture. There has grown up, indeed, during the last century another Finnish literature of a more cosmopolitan kind, but with this I have nothing to do here. I am concerned now solely with what may not improperly be called the Finnish classics. But this national literature of Finland is so enormously rich, that I can deal only, even most superficially, with a very small portion of it. I must pass by with a bare word of mention all that part of it which consists of prose, such as the vast collections of proverbs, tales, fables, and riddles, which, however important they may be to the anthropologist, are not so generally interesting and characteristic as the Finnish poetry.

The three most representative collections of the popular poetry of the Finns were made by Lönnrot. They are called the *Loitsurunoja*, the *Kanteletar*, and the *Kalevala*. Before, however, I say anything about these collections separately, it will be well to glance at the general character of Finnish poetry, which is quite original.

Finnish verse is remarkable for its singular rigidity of form. Its structure is as classical in its own way as the Latin elegiac. Many critics have been astonished to find such elaborate grace on the lips of men whom we should call uneducated. "How in the world," exclaims one German translator of the *Kalevala*,

“did those illiterate people acquire a style so terse and epigrammatic?” This question has not yet been answered. It can only be said that the Finnish singer is the heir of a long tradition, and that the style of the poems which he repeats has derived its aroma from a poetical culture of very old standing in his race.

All Finnish poems belonging strictly to the national literature are composed in verses of eight syllables, in an unrhymed metre like that of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, who appears indeed to have derived it from Schiefner's German translation of the *Kalevala*. They are distinguished by elaborate systems of alliteration, assonance, and parallelism. The first two of these characteristics are found, of course, in most literatures, though not often in so highly developed a form; and the system of metric parallelism, the “rhyme of the sense,” as it has been called, is familiar to everybody from the Hebrew psalms. In Finnish poetry, as in Hebrew, the second verse of each strophe repeats in other words, or re-presents with other shades of meaning, the thought or image expressed in the first verse. This scheme of versification, which at first sight appears monotonous, ends, as Xavier Marmier remarked, by leaving on the mind an impression of indefinable charm, of deep melody, and rich variations of thought.