

Nobel Prize in Literature 1931



Erik Axel Karlfeldt

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1931 was awarded to Erik Axel Karlfeldt "*The poetry of Erik Axel Karlfeldt*".

If an interested foreigner were to ask one of Erik Axel Karlfeldt's countrymen what we admire most in this poet and on what qualities his national greatness depends, it would at first seem easy to give an answer. People like to talk of what they love. The Swede would say that we celebrate this poet because he represents our character with a style and a genuineness that we should like to be ours, and because he has sung with singular power and exquisite charm of the tradition of our people, of all the precious features which are the basis for our feeling for home and country in the shadow of the pine-covered mountains.

But the Swede would soon check himself, realizing that such a general explanation is insufficient, that in Karlfeldt there are many things, beloved but difficult to define, which a proper appraisal must take into account but which are inaccessible to the foreigner. Hence we can offer no ready-made expression of our conviction of the high rank of Karlfeldt's poetry, for there are elements of mysticism in it, powers and instincts that elude analysis.

We face a similar difficulty on this occasion when we are to briefly sketch the life-work of the great lyrical poet, since it has now been made the object of a great international award. It is the deliberate self-limitation of lyrical poetry, and at the same time its fate, that its most profound qualities and values are indissolubly connected with the character and rhythm of its original language, with the meaning and weight of every single word. Karlfeldt's individuality may be dimly felt in a translation, but only in Swedish can it be fully comprehended. However, if one attempts to find independent comparative criteria, he is forced to admit that even the treasures of the so-called great literatures have only rarely been enriched by such jewels as Karlfeldt has created in a so-called minor language.

If we look back on Karlfeldt's notable career from its début in 1895 and follow it through the works of three decades, steady though limited in size by his austere standards, we see very clearly how this man used his talents with a rare instinct for the fruitful, the solid, and the genuine. He began as a minstrel and a singer of nature, conscious of his ability but still doubtful of his calling. Was there any use for the dreams that thronged his breast? Could they have a meaning for a whole people? Early in his career, the poet looked for a deputy, an alter ego, an independent figure suited to represent his feelings, his sufferings, and his longing as well as his sarcasm. The famous Fridolin was at first a creation of shyness, for the poet was reluctant to appear in his own person and expose the private life of his soul. Fridolin soon became a classic, and he has his place in the rout of Northern Bacchus, rustic cousin of the characters of Bellman, with a firmer gait, but with flowers on his hat from the harvest festival at Pungmakarebo. Karlfeldt's home became more and more an artistic microcosm in which the universe was mirrored in the same manner as Biblical scenes are mirrored in the baroque fantasies of the frescoes in the farmhouses of Dalekarlia. With his sense of humour, which was often reverence in disguise, he kept his being unstained, and he preserved the magic ring of harmony. But his seemingly peaceful development must have contained many struggles and tensions, just enough to create the necessary pressure for the creative spring. Poetry was for Karlfeldt a continuous test of the strength and substance of his being. Thus he gave a powerful finale to his poetry in

Hösthorn (1927) [The Horn of Autumn], his epilogue played on a winter organ, whose pipes reach from earth to heaven but at the same time sound a childhood echo of the small white churches in Dalarna.

The unity of his work is a rarity in our time. If one asks about Karlfeldt's main problem, one word may serve as an answer: self-discipline. His originality grew on the soil of a pagan and luxuriant wilderness, and he would not have been drawn so often to witch motifs and the pitchy brew of Uriel if he had not felt the presence of demons. The muffled tumult of nature under the moon of pagan festivals is one of the visions that he evokes. The contrast between the heavy intoxication of the blood and the pure celestial yearnings of the soul recurs constantly in his poetry. Yet the different elements never destroy each other. He tames them as does an artist by remaining faithful to himself and by giving a personal touch even to the smallest detail.

In Karlfeldt we find scarcely a single expression of poetic self-consciousness. The increasing response to his work would have made such an expression superfluous even if his solid peasant blood had not been a protection against aesthetic arrogance. We find everywhere proof of the integrity of professional honour that is revealed in beautiful and permanent work. In an age in which handmade things have become rare, there is a new and almost moral value in the masterly, chiselled, and resonant language of his verse.

Karlfeldt's poetry possesses precisely this stamp of miraculous perfection. Which of us does not remember such stanzas ringing like bells or vibrating like strings, but above all sung with that peculiar and resounding voice that differs from all others? Perhaps we should remember in this context the beautiful song about the old turner, the village craftsman, who played the fiddle for the people on the banks of the Opplimen and made spinning wheels for them...

In all great poetry there is an interrelation between tradition and experiment, and the principles of renewal and conservation are contained in such poetry. The national tradition survives in Karlfeldt because it is renewed personally and has the character of a conquest dearly bought. We may rejoice that this poet, whose inspiration is drawn

predominantly from a past that is disappearing or has disappeared, is thoroughly unconventional in his means of expression and shows daring innovations, whereas busy modernists often content themselves with following the latest trends and fads. Nor can there be any doubt that, despite his provincial subject matter, the singer of Dalarna is one of the contemporary poets who have most boldly tried the wings of imagination and experimented with the possibilities of poetic form.

Thus the decision to honour the poetry of Erik Axel Karlfeldt with this year's Nobel Prize is intended as an expression of justice by international standards. Death has stepped between the laureate and his reward; under the circumstances the Prize will be given to his family. He has left us, but his work remains. The tragic world of chance is outshone by the imperishable summer realm of poetry. Before our eyes we see the tomb in the dusk of winter. At the same time we hear the great victorious harmonies sung by the happiness of the creative genius; we feel the scents from the Northern pleasure garden that his poetry created for the comfort and joy of all receptive hearts.

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http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1931/press.html