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FOREWORD

Most societies seem to have epic heroes and events that define them as they like to see themselves: Even a young society such as Australia has Ned Kelly, Eureka Stockade, and ANZAC. Others have their Robin Hood, Siegfried, Roland, or Davy Crockett. *Lacplēsis* (Bearslayer) is such a work. Bearslayer is patriotic, brave, strong, tough, loyal, wise, fair, and virtuous, and he loves nature. He embodies the strengths and virtues of the Latvian folk in a legendary age of greatness, before they were subjugated and corrupted by "Strangers".

The poem was important in the growth of Latvian self-awareness. As Jazeps Rudzītis, the eminent Latvian folklorist and literary scholar, put it, "There is no other work in Latvian literature whose story has penetrated mass consciousness as deeply or resounded as richly in literature and art as *Bearslayer*." Thus, it seemed worthwhile to me to make the poem available to people who wish to read it in English, and this volume is the result. It contains the fruits of two years' labour.

In writing *Lacplēsis* Andrejs Pumpurs made an enormous contribution to Latvian literature. Thus, it may seem presumptuous that I have given myself equal prominence with him on the title page. After all, he is the author of the original poem, of which the present text is merely a translation. However, the task of translating a poem is much more than that of taking the words of the source language and replacing them with equivalent words from the target language. In Latvian, in addition to *tulkot* (to translate), there is a second verb *atdzejot*, which means approximately "re-verseify". As I explain in the Technical Notes (p. iii), I have transformed Pumpurs's original Latvian work into an English poem in heroic verse: The result is an *atdzejums*, not "merely" a translation.

The moral support I received from a number of people during the two years I worked on the translation was particularly important to me. I am especially indebted to Edgars Kariks of the Baltic Office of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, who gave constant encouragement and concrete support, and Ojars Kalnins of

the Latvian Institute in Riga, who was extremely positive and supportive from an early stage in the project. These two gave me the courage to keep going. Among others, Rita Berzin read an early fragment and encouraged me to believe I was on the right track, and Jana Felder (née Martinson) responded enthusiastically to a presentation at a conference. Valters Nollendorfs encouraged me to trust my own feeling of what sounded right, and Guntis Smidchens showed interest in the translation from the point of view of a university teacher.

I am greatly indebted to my Latvian teacher in Adelaide, Ilze Ostrovska. Without her I would never have learned enough Latvian to read the original poem. Mirdza Kate Baltais edited the first version of the manuscript and helped me eliminate a very large number of errors, as well as making numerous suggestions for improvements. It is definitely not her fault that there are still errors in the text—quite apart from certain liberties that I have allowed myself (see p.iii). My colleague in Riga, Kaspars Klavin, read the entire manuscript and made a number of sensitive and insightful suggestions for corrections and improvements, for which I am grateful.

My son, Andrew Cropley, discussed the project with me many times, and suggested the addition of a Glossary (see p.164). He also built the Bearslayer website, with which some readers will be familiar (<http://web.aanet.com.au/Bearslayer>). My wife, Alison, was patient and encouraging throughout, as well as providing artwork for the cover.

Adelaide, January 2006 Arthur Cropley

TECHNICAL NOTES

This is a free translation into English heroic verse of *Lacplešis* (Bearslayer) by Andrejs Pumpurs, first published in Latvian in 1888. The translation here is a corrected version of the original, which was published in 2005. *Lacplešis* has been translated into Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish and at least three times into Russian, as well as into Japanese! An English translation was published by Rita Berzin in 1988. This used poetic language, but the text was unrhymed and its metre irregular. It is also very difficult to obtain. Various prose translations of fragments also exist. The present translation is in rhyme and has a strict metre. As far as I know, it is the only existing translation of the entire poem into English verse.

In the interests of telling a good story in an easily understandable way I have omitted or shifted to a slightly different location an occasional line in Pumpurs's text, perhaps a dozen lines in the entire poem. I have also occasionally inserted lines that were not in the original text, again perhaps a dozen in the entire poem. My translation is also very loose in some places—an important priority for me was a poem that flowed well—and I have allowed myself some liberties. I apologize to those who are offended. I have, however, followed the sequence of events exactly as Pumpurs told them, and have retained virtually all Pumpurs's metaphors and similar poetic devices, such as the moon's rays being described as bars of silver, or mist as dripping like blood. I have tried to recapture in the English the moods suggested to me by the original Latvian: rustic joy, horror, tenderness, or despair.

The translation is also free because I wanted to maintain a strict metre as well as to achieve the effect of an English epic poem. The latter goal involved using archaic-sounding words as much as possible, although I preferred words that would be familiar to educated native-speakers of contemporary English, rather than genuinely archaic words. I also employed devices such as inversion of the word order (e.g., "a hero bold") or using adjectives in the place of adverbs (e.g., "the sun set slow"). However, I avoided forms that no longer exist, such as "thou," "thy," or "doth" and the like: I believe that these now sound too artificial to modern readers' ears.

Despite the liberties just described, the organization of the work follows Pumpurs's original division into six cantos of widely differing lengths. However, as aids to following the story I have given the cantos titles, divided them into "scenes", each scene beginning on a new page, and inserted intermediate headings. The scenes and headings are entirely my own invention and, to make it clear that they do not come from Pumpurs, I have put my headings into italics.

Pumpurs used various stanza structures, ranging from four lines to passages of 250 or more lines without interruption. Where Pumpurs used four-, six- or eight-line stanzas, I have done the same. Later, where Pumpurs used very long stanzas, I have returned to an eight-line or four-line format, largely depending on the number of syllables in a line. I have also sometimes inserted four-line stanzas into sections otherwise consisting of eight-line stanzas, in order to mark a turning point in the action.

Pumpurs also used differing metrical forms, the number of syllables in a line ranging from six to eighteen. In my translation I have used the iambus as the basic metrical unit throughout the entire poem. The most common metrical form in my translation is iambic pentameter. However, where Pumpurs used eight-syllable lines I have done the same. In such cases I have also often switched to four-line stanzas, in order to increase the "staccato" effect of the shorter lines. The original Latvian is largely unrhymed. I have translated into rhyming verse, mainly using the rhyme scheme a, b, a, b, c, d, c, d. In the six-line stanzas the rhyme scheme is a, b, a, b, a, b; in the four-line stanzas a, b, a, b.

LATVIAN PROPER NOUNS

With few exceptions, most noticeably Bearslayer's name (Latvian: Lacplesis) and those of the Black Knight (Latvian: Tumais bruninieks) and the Father of Destiny (Latvian: Liktena tevs), I have not translated personal and place names, such as "Perkons" or "Kegums", but have maintained the Latvian spelling. Thus, Laimdota remains Laimdota, not "Laima's Gift", and Koknesis is not translated into "Tree Bearer" or "Wood Carrier". This is because the original Latvian names have a heroic ring about them, whereas English translations run the risk of sounding ridiculous. Since the Latvian gods and spirits will be unfamiliar to most English speakers I have often inserted into the poem explanations of who they are (e.g., "The God of Thunder, Perkons").

NOTES ON PRONUNCIATION

The poem, as I have translated it, is meant to be read aloud, although this is not essential. Because of the strict iambic metre of the translation, every second syllable must be stressed. In most places I have found English words for which this is compatible with everyday pronunciation, at least in the Australian dialect that I speak. However, it raises some problems for the pronunciation of Latvian geographical and personal names. In this poem, all such words start with a stressed syllable, as is usual in spoken Latvian. However, stressing every second syllable may offend against some readers' understanding of correct Latvian usage, I ask for forgiveness in advance. The work is, however, a poem in the English language, and the pronunciation suggested here and in the Glossary is essential for preserving the iambic metre of the English poetry.

The notes on pronunciation that follow are solely for the purposes of reading this poem, and are not meant as a general guide to pronunciation of the Latvian language. The syllable represented phonetically as "-a" should be pronounced as in "bad", and "-ah" as a very long "bad". The syllable represented as "-e" should be pronounced as in "bed", "-o" as in "hot", "-oh" as in "throw", "oo" as in "zoo", "ow" as in "bough", "-u" as in "hut" and "uh" as in "book". Syllables in boldface should be stressed.

(a) All untranslated proper nouns, such as personal or place names, start with a stressed syllable (e.g., Liga = Lee-gu). Where a name has more than two syllables, the first and third are stressed in order to maintain the iambic metre (e.g., Spidala = Spee-du-lu).

(b) The letter "o" is a diphthong ("oo-oh" or "oh-u"). However, as a rule I have adopted a shortened diphthong, to avoid giving the single letter "o" two syllables. Thus, it is usually pronounced "wo". For example, the name of the Messenger of the Gods, "Vaidelots", is pronounced "Vy-du-lwots", "Perkons" is pronounced "Pah-kwons", and so on. Despite what has just been said, Laimdota is pronounced "Laim-dwo-tu", and "Koknesis" is pronounced "Kwok-ness-is", whereas Spidala is always pronounced "Spee-du-lu".

(c) The letter combination "ie" is also a diphthong, and is pronounced "ee e". Thus, the letters "liel" (as in "Lielvarde") are pronounced "Lee-ell".

(d) A final "e" is pronounced. Thus, for instance, "Lielvarde" is pronounced "Lee-ell-var-de".

(e) Although it does not involve pronouncing Latvian words, "Latvia" is pronounced "Lat'vya", "Latvian(s)" "Lat'vyan(s)", and "Destiny" "Dest'ny". Many three-syllable words are pronounced similarly: e.g., "Daug'va" "trav'ler", etc.

GLOSSARY

To assist readers who are not familiar with Latvian geography and mythology, I have prepared a brief glossary of names and places (see p. 164). This includes guidance on how to pronounce the names for the purposes of the present work.

SUMMARY

It is the turn of the 13th century, 800 years ago in Latvia. The Baltic gods have gathered to consult the Father of Destiny about their own fate and that of the Latvian people. Both are under threat from invading German knights, who have been sent by the Pope to christianize the Baltic region, under the command of Bishop Albert. Perkons, the God of Thunder, calls on all the gods to guard and nurture the Latvians, and they promise to do so, each in his or her own way.

As the council is breaking up the Goddess Staburadze reveals that she has rescued a young man from the River Daugava, where he was cast down by two witches. She has taken him to her Crystal Palace beneath the river in the whirlpool of Staburags, from which no human can emerge alive. Perkons reveals that this youth is Bearslayer, who will become a noble warrior under the protection of Perkons, and will strive mightily against the forces of evil.

At the beginning of Canto II the action goes back in time to the Castle of Lielvarde, shortly before the Council of the Gods described in the previous canto. The son of the Lord of Lielvarde reveals mighty strength, killing a bear with his bare hands. This first heroic deed wins him the name "Bearslayer." (This young man is the hero that Perkons revealed to the other gods in Canto I.) The youth is not the true son of the Lord of Lielvarde, but a foundling suckled by a female bear in the forest. (Although it is not directly explained until almost the end of the poem, it is important to know that Bearslayer has bear's ears, and that if these are cut off he will lose his bearlike strength.) Bearslayer was brought to Lielvarde as a baby by Vaidelots, a Messenger of the Gods, to be raised until he reached manhood. After killing the bear he is sent to study for seven years in the Castle of Burtnieks, in order to learn the ancient wisdom of the Latvian race. Accompanied by the good advice of his foster father, he sets off.

On the way to Burtnieks's Castle, Bearslayer visits the castle of the Latvian Lord Aizkrauklis, where he is stunned by the beauty of Aizkrauklis's daughter, Spidala. However, he watches her and discovers that she is a witch. He follows her by hiding in a hollow log

on which she flies to the Devil's Pit, and witnesses evil rites, as well as seeing the false holy man, Kangars, promise to serve the Devil by working against the ancient gods and supporting Christianity, because Christians are easier prey for the Devil. On the journey back to Aizkraukle Bearslayer is cast down into the whirlpool of Staburags in the River Daugava by Spidala and another witch. From here he is rescued by Staburadze, as we already know from Canto I, and taken to her Crystal Palace beneath the whirlpool.

With the help of the beautiful and virtuous maiden, Laimdota, Staburadze nurses Bearslayer back to health. She reveals to him that he has been chosen by the gods to fight against evil, especially Spidala and Kangars, who are plotting in secret. Staburadze gives him a talisman, a magic mirror, and Laimdota gives him a ribbon decorated with an oak-leaf pattern. He leaves the Crystal Palace and is duly turned to stone, as are all mortals, but is restored to life by Perkons. He performs a second heroic deed, saving a boat that is sinking in the raging River Perse by rowing with his bare hands, and is befriended by a powerful youth, Koknesis. Together they ride to Burtnieks, accompanied by the curses of Spidala.

Canto III opens with Spidala hurrying to the hut of Kangars to warn him that Bearslayer was present in the Devil's Pit and saw the shameful deeds. To prevent Bearslayer revealing that he and Spidala are in league with the Devil, Kangars decides to lure the young hero into a trap by provoking a war against the Estonian Giant, Kalapuisis, certain that Bearslayer will rush into battle against the invincible foeman and be killed. As Kangars explains this plot to Spidala a terrible storm arises, and Spidala is unable to return home.

The storm was sent by Perkons to destroy a ship just arriving at the mouth of the River Daugava from Germany, in order to kill the German missionaries it is carrying. Led by the priest, Dietrich, they have come with the intention of forcing the Baltic people to accept Christianity. However, the Livian fisher-folk of the Daugava estuary rescue the passengers from the ship. Thus, they thwart the will of Perkons, who had planned to drown the newcomers, and save the very people who will eventually become their conquerors. The morning after the storm, a fisherman brings Dietrich to Kangars,

and an alliance is forged, since both want to introduce Christianity, although for differing reasons.

Years pass. Bearslayer and Koknesis study hard in the Castle of Burtnieks. Bearslayer has a special reason to seek perfection: Laimdota is the daughter of Burtnieks and has returned home to the castle from Staburadze's Crystal Palace, where she and Bearslayer met. They fall in love, but just as Bearslayer is about to ask for her hand news arrives that Kalapuisis has entered Latvia and is killing and laying waste. Burtnieks offers Laimdota's hand to any warrior who can rid them of Kalapuisis, and Bearslayer rides out to face him: The plot seems to be succeeding!

Bearslayer faces Kalapuisis in single combat, and defeats him. However, just as Bearslayer is about to kill him, Kalapuisis reveals a prophecy told him by his mother that a bear cub from the Daugava, who is of noble rank and equal to Kalapuisis as a warrior, will come and save the Latvians from their conquerors. The two warriors realize that Bearslayer is this bear cub, and that they have a common enemy-the Germans-and make peace, so that they can work together against the invaders.

Successful in the Estonian war, Bearslayer returns to Burtnieks's Castle with the other Latvian warriors, and they are greeted in song by the local maidens. Laimdota places an oak-leaf wreath on Bearslayer's head and sings of his might, promising to make him a true and virtuous wife. Bearslayer replies in song that he will live and die for Laimdota. Amid great joy and feelings of brotherhood the warriors toast Bearslayer, and conclude that the gods personally intervened on his behalf. This divine intervention gives Bearslayer legendary status so that, instead of destroying him, the plot added to his fame.

Once again, time passes while Bearslayer studies at the Castle of Burtnieks. One night he notices in the fortress's undercroft a trapdoor, left half-open to reveal a stone staircase leading below. He goes down and follows a tunnel until he enters a large chamber that he judges to be beneath the centre of the lake. He is in the Sunken Castle that Laimdota had told him about. He discovers Laimdota reading an ancient book. She explains to him that if a mortal remains in the Sunken Castle overnight and survives until morning,

the castle will rise once more into the light of day. Bearslayer resolves to carry out this heroic task and Laimdota leaves him.

Midnight passes and the Sunken Castle grows cold. Bearslayer lights a fire from broken wood lying around. Suddenly seven evil spirits enter the room carrying an open coffin, in which an old man with huge sharp teeth and long nails is lying. He begins to groan horribly and complain that he is cold. Bearslayer cannot bear the sound and hauls the man from the coffin to the fire, but the old man tries to bite off Bearslayer's ears, knowing that without them Bearslayer is weak. Bearslayer fights back and holds the old man in the fire, saying that he will only let him go if the Sunken Castle is raised to the surface.

At this, a whirlwind springs up and the seven evil spirits return, led by Spidala. They attack Bearslayer and he is about to be defeated when he remembers the mirror that Staburadze gave him. He pulls it out and holds it in Spidala's face. A howling fills the air and all the evil spirits turn to dust and are whirled round the room in the whirlwind. The spirit of Viduveds, a wise man of ancient times, appears in human form and greets Bearslayer, saying that the young hero will save the Latvian people. Viduveds's handmaidens make a bed for Bearslayer, and he falls into a deep sleep.

Next morning the people are amazed to see a castle standing on an island in the middle of the lake. Laimdota tells Burtnieks that Bearslayer has spent the night in the castle, and the old man realizes at once that Bearslayer has broken the magic spell and saved the Sunken Castle. Laimdota and Burtnieks enter the castle and wake Bearslayer. He claims Laimdota as his bride, and Burtnieks gives his blessing, saying that the union of the two clans (Burtnieks and Lielvarde) will save the Latvians.

One evening, later, Laimdota reads to Bearslayer from the ancient books found in the Sunken Castle. She reads how the ancient Latvians were led to the Baltic Sea from a land far to the east by Perkons. With the favour of the gods, they settled in a valley, built a castle, and established a golden age on Earth.

However, this made the Devil jealous, and he commanded a whirlwind to suck up a lake and deposit it in the valley. This was done and the valley, including the castle, was drowned. The people

would have died too, but Liga, the Goddess of Song, saved them by using the music of her kokle to open up under the lake a tunnel that led them to safety. The castle is the one Bearslayer raised, and the tunnel the one he used to enter the castle.

On another occasion, Laimdota reads to Bearslayer the story of the creation. In eternal space there was once nothing except a celestial light. In it lived God and a second mighty spirit-the Devil. At that time the Devil still obeyed God, although he was already growing rebellious. God decided to create the Earth and sent the Devil to fetch a handful of slime. The Devil was curious and kept a second handful for himself, hiding it in his mouth. When he brought the slime to God, God commanded the slime to form the Earth, throwing it down. The slime began to grow, and formed the level plains of the Earth. However, the slime in the Devil's mouth also obeyed God and grew until the Devil could no longer hold it in his mouth. He spat it out and it fell to the newly created Earth, forming the mountains.

From His own substance God created the Sun and Moon. He was so pleased with the Earth and Sun He had just created that He also created the first living creatures: the Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of the Sun. The Moon took a gigantic Daughter of the Sun as his wife, and the stars are their thousands of children. The Sons of the Gods divided up the Earth among themselves.

The Devil grew more rebellious and began to defy God. A great rivalry grew up between them, and the Devil tried in vain to outdo God, who, however, always had the upper hand. Eventually, God created humans and made them capable only of good, but the Devil interfered and gave them the power to be evil as well as good. God grew furiously angry at seeing His creation ruined, and banished the Devil to Hell. There the Devil created evil demons and with them rose up from Hell and fought against God and all good spirits. Eventually, the Devil was defeated and driven back to Hell, after Perkons intervened in the fight

Later Laimdota reads from the teachings of the guardian of the Latvian race, in which he listed the tasks of worthy human beings: to seek perfection of the human race, to fight against evil by obeying

the ancient teachings, to make just laws and drive out bad rulers, and to love nature.

All Souls' Eve comes. The people of Burtnieks's Castle celebrate this in the traditional Latvian way. Next morning, however, Laimdota and Koknesis have vanished, and Bearslayer sets off to find them, vowing never to return unless he is successful. Meanwhile, a German ship has arrived at the mouth of the Daugava, and Dietrich and Kangars persuade the local Latvian Lord, Kaupa, to return in it to Rome with Dietrich. Kangars stays behind, but knows that the Germans' friendship is only a trick to gain control of Latvia.

The ship sails. Just then Bearslayer rides up. He knows full well that Kangars and Spidala have kidnapped Laimdota, and demands that they give her back. Spidala tells him that she is on the ship just vanishing over the horizon. Kangars says that she and Koknesis are lovers. Bearslayer does not believe this lie, although he experiences some doubts, and rides off in deep despair. Spidala gloats over his sorrow. She has her revenge, and Bearslayer's life is worse than death.

Bearslayer returns to Lielvarde, his home. He is greeted warmly, but his father sees that something is wrong. Bearslayer tells him all, and his father consoles him with wise words of hope: Perhaps Laimdota loves him still and will yet be saved. Bearslayer spends his days roaming the cliffs above the Daugava brooding, and longing to go with the waters down to the sea to fight against the North Wind and meet the North Wind's Daughter. One day he vanishes, and no-one knows where he has gone.

Canto IV opens with Kaupa in Rome. He is seduced by the wealth and power he sees, doubts the old gods, and decides to embrace Christianity and convert the Latvians. Back in Latvia, the people labour long building a walled city for the Germans, who are now present in large numbers-Riga. Once they have their fortress the Germans begin to plunder everything they can get their hands on, to pillage and to destroy. Full of bitterness, the Latvians realize that they have been tricked.

Meanwhile, in Germany Laimdota is being held captive in a convent. Spidala had tricked her into leaving her father's castle back in Latvia by pretending to be her mother. Laimdota was then seized