

Ancient Gaelic Poetry

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It has long been a custom with German historians of literature to divide all poetry into two large sections, *Kunstdichtung*, or art-poetry, and *Volksdichtung*, or folk-poetry, terms which explain themselves though they are difficult to define, mainly because 'art' and 'folk' do not form a proper contrast. However we may express it, such or some similar distinction and division will be found convenient for grouping the poetry of most nations. In ancient Gaelic literature the poetry of the professional *filidh* or bards, attached to the chiefs and reigning families of the country, differs widely in subject and style from that of the unattached and often anonymous poets. Unfortunately the manuscripts of Ireland and Scotland, though they have handed down innumerable bardic compositions, contain comparatively little of the latter kind, and a better insight into Gaelic popular poetry can be obtained from modern collections, such as Douglas Hyde's *Love-songs of Connaught*, or the same author's *Raftery*, than from the great repositories of Gaelic literature.

I will begin my survey by an account of the oldest bardic poetry. From the earliest times we know the names of many famous bards of ancient Ireland and Scotland. Celebrating the exploits of their chief and his ancestors, they have become the chroniclers of many historical events. It remains, however, for a detailed examination to establish in all cases how far the poems ascribed to a particular bard are authentic.

The style of Gaelic poetry is throughout lyrical rather than epical. Even when facts are dealt with, the lyrical character prevails. The poet alludes to them rather than he narrates them. There is no such thing as a Gaelic or Welsh ballad. [1] The Celtic nations stand almost alone in this that they did not employ poetry for epical narrative. While the great epics of other nations, the Mahabharata and Shahnameh, the Iliad and Æneid, Beowulf and the Nibelungenlied, as well as the Finnish Kalewala, all have metrical form, the great epics of Ireland and Wales, the Táin Bó Cuailnge and the Mabinogion are prose tales. So much indeed was prose the natural vehicle of expression for Gaelic narrative, that when in the 11th and 12th centuries the classical legends of the destruction of Troy or of Alexander, Virgil's *Æneid* or Lucan's *Pharsalia*, or, at a later period, the Arthurian epics of France were done into Gaelic, they were all turned from poetry into prose.

In giving specimens of the various kinds of composition in vogue among the early bards, my choice is restricted by the circumstance that very little of their poetry has as yet been edited or translated.

One of the reasons, indeed, why older Gaelic poetry has hitherto aroused but little interest is to be sought in the circumstance that editors and translators have turned their attention, in the first place, to metrical compositions which loom large, indeed, in our manuscripts, but which cannot be classed as poetry at all. I mean, *eg.*, the festologies, chronological, topo-graphical and historical poems, which were composed for didactic purposes by learned professors at the monastic schools of Ireland. They were copied so busily for the sake of the information which they convey in a convenient form. Meanwhile, the genuine poetry of Ireland was relegated to the margins and blank spaces of vellum manuscripts, or, written on paper, has the more easily perished. There can be no doubt that in this way a large amount of ancient Gaelic poetry has been irretrievably lost. We possess an old metrical treatise, written in the 10th century, in which the initial lines of about 350 poems are quoted, but one or two of which have been preserved in their entirety.

I will begin with a species of composition which the Gaels share with the Norse — the sword and shield songs. Weapons in olden times were looked upon almost as living things possessing a soul, able to move of their own accord, now thirsting for blood and again desiring rest, and by their bright or dull appearance auguring well or ill for their owner. They had names, and were handed down as heirlooms. I do not, however, remember having met with a song about a lance or spear. A famous shield-song is the one composed by MacLiag, the hereditary bard of the O’Kellys towards the end of the 10th century. It begins :

“ Let the shield of Gaela’s king be burnished !
Put figures of chalk upon its frame ! ” [2]

The poet proceeds to mention every other shield hung up in the banqueting hall of Tadg Mor O’Kelly, every one of which had been taken in battle from some celebrated warrior or chief. As these battles are all mentioned, a poem like this has a certain historical interest. The same is the case with a sword-song composed about a.d. 909, by Dallán mac Móire, chief bard to King Cerbhall of Leinster.[3] This bard was the author of several poems still extant, all relating to the affairs of his royal master or the dynasty of Leinster. In a poem consisting of twenty stanzas he enumerates no less than forty battles fought by Cerbhall. For the king was a mighty warrior, who at one time or another was at war with all the neighbouring kings, as well as with the Norse invaders. But he was also proficient in the arts of peace, for if we may trust his eulogist,

“ He was an ollave in legal speech, he was a diligent reader of good memory ; he was a seer, a perfect poet, he was a ready master of music.” [4]

This is the beginning of the song of Cerbhall’s sword :

“ Hail, sword of Cerbhall ! Oft hast thou been in the great
woof of war, oft giving battle, beheading high princes.

Oft hast thou gone a-raiding in the hands of kings, oft hast
thou divided the spoil.

Many a shield hast thou cleft in battle, many a head, many
a chest, many a fair skin.

Forty years without sorrow Enna had thee, who gave thee
(‘twas no niggard’s gift) to his own son, to Dunlang. ”

The poet then enumerates the kings who one after another had inherited the sword, and concludes thus :

“ Who shall henceforth possess thee? or to whom wilt thou
deal ruin? Now that Cerbhall is departed, with whom wilt
thou be bedded ?

Thou shalt not be neglected. Come to Naas, where Finn of
the feasts is — there they will hail thee with ‘ Welcome ! ’ ”

The bards lived entirely upon the exercise of their art, receiving for each poem a fixed price, which was rarely given in money, but in cattle, horses, hounds, cups or chains of gold or silver, mantles, brooches, &c. It is, therefore, not surprising that poems in praise of the generosity of their patrons abound, many of which were evidently composed for the purpose of eliciting a still higher reward. Hardly any of these eulogistic poems have hitherto been published.

The subjects of the bulk of bardic poetry are praise and blame. Indeed, from the beginning these have been the keynotes of Celtic poetry. The Greek writer, Poseidonios, the teacher of Cicero, speaking of the bards of Gaul, says that to extol or to lampoon were their two main functions. To him we owe the following anecdote of the first Celtic poet of whom we hear in history ; a Gaulish bard of the second century B.C. Poseidonios relates that one day when Louernios, king of a Gaulish tribe, the Arverni, gave a grand feast in a specially constructed quadrangular hall, a bard had the misfortune to arrive too late. Seeing the king passing out in his chariot he followed him on foot, and, running alongside the royal car, recited a poem in praise of the king and deplored his own bad luck in having arrived post festum. The king, delighted with the poetry, threw him his purse. The bard then poured out his thanks in the following strain:

“ The track of earth on which thou ridest along brings gold
and benefits to men. ”

This earliest note of Celtic poetry is eminently characteristic. The same scene might have been enacted at any time in mediæval Ireland or Wales.

Satire was largely cultivated by Gaelic bards of all ages. The general name for it is *áir* (now *aor*), but, according to its purpose, there were numerous sub-divisions, from the most lofty satire down to the scurrilous lampoon or pasquinade.

Sometimes it was merely intended to censure or annoy, sometimes to imprecate and curse. In the hands of a skilful poet it was a most terrible weapon, for the people believed in the efficacy of the curse. No calamity almost was dreaded so much as incurring the wrath of a celebrated bard. A man would give his all to avert it. We read, *e.g.*, of Athirne, a poet who lived at Howth, near Dublin, satirising the men of Leinster for having killed his only son. For a whole year he continued to satirise them, and thereby bring fatalities upon them, so that neither corn nor grass nor foliage grew in Leinster in that year. In much later and even modern times, in the Annals and elsewhere, we constantly come upon similar stories of the effect of satire. In 1414, Niall O’Higgin, a famous bard of West Meath, composed a satire upon Sir John Stanley, Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, which caused his death. And the Four Masters who chronicle this event add: “ This was the second ‘ poetical miracle’ performed by the same Niall.” The fame of the Irish bards in this respect reached even England. “ The Irishmen will not stick to affirm,” says an Elizabethan writer, “ that they can rime either man or beast to death.” [5]

The wandering scholar and bard, Mac Conglinne, having a grudge against the monks of Cork, who treated him inhospitably by offering him nothing but a small bowl of porridge, made the following quatrains:

“ Cork, with its sweet bells,
Its soil is bitter sand,
Food there is none in it.
“ Unto doom I would not eat,
Unless famine befel me,
The oaten ration of Cork,
Cork’s oaten ration.”

The effect here depends on the heaping of alliteration and assonance in the last lines : *Cuachán corca Corcaige*. The starving scholar then began to lampoon the abbot of the monastery, who lived in comfort and luxury, making a mock pedigree in due form for him, “ such as ” — the story says — “ had not been invented for any man before, and will not be invented till doom.” [6]

The bitterest, most wicked and diabolical satire ever written in Ireland is one composed by a member of the great bardic family of the O'Dalys, on the astrologer and almanack maker, Dr. Whaley, an Englishman who had come into Ireland in Cromwell's train, and who had been instrumental in hanging a brother of the bard. It has never been translated, but the following account will give some idea of it : [7] The poet first describes the hellish practices of the astrologer, whom he alleges to be in league with the Devil. Since he began with his evil eye to view the moon and the planets, their benign influence had been destroyed ; so that the cornfields, the fruit trees, and the grass had ceased to grow ; the birds had forgotten their songs, except the foul and ominous birds of night, and the young animals were destroyed *in utero*. He then begins to wither this Antichrist of Ireland with awful imprecations, implores that all the plagues of Egypt, the various diseases which waste the world may attack him, and calls down upon his guilty head the curses of God, the angels, the saints and all good men. " I hope to see the day," he ends, " when Dermot" — the Jack Ketch of Dublin of the time — " will make you ride on high, with wooden stirrups and a halter of hemp."

Sometimes, however, those who had become the butts of satire took dire revenge. Six men of the O'Haras, passing by the house of the blind bard, Teigue O'Higgin, brother of the Archbishop of Tuam, in the beginning of the 17th century, helped themselves to a refectation. But Teigue requited the affront with so stinging a lampoon that the six returned, first cut out his tongue and then put him to death. Here is the poem which cost him his life :

" A gang of six they were that came into my house, and of the six I will publish a description : Badly off for milk I was upon the morrow, from the thirst of the six gallow-birds. Long enough before that time it was that (owing to black misery) no mouthful of cow's meat (*i.e.* dairy produce) had found its way into their systems (*lit.*, organs) — those twice three individuals whom we have mentioned. Yet not in hidden wise 'tis best to satirise them whosoe'er they be that merit censure : seeing then that the gang of six I have condemned, it may not be but that I tell it out. The first man that we saw, and the best harnessed of the kerne, was a young fellow whom for his whole get-up a groat would have paid amply, and one that ne'er shirked either drink or play. The second (as I made out) that marched at the regiment's head — a lean chap whom his very marrow had forsaken — I will not suffer to escape unreckoned. The third poor loon's equipment consisted in an old spear and in a soft gapped axe (himself and his family axe in a set-to indeed!) alas for battle-armament so sorry! Arsenal of the fourth that all flux-smitten came along with them : four shafts (*i.e.*, javelins) slung saltier-wise athwart his rump, (shafts) that from target had never chipped a splinter. Following hard upon the other four here comes me on the fifth rogue now : with skimpy shirt (a pledge not valid for four pence) and, as I deemed, no better was his mantle. Unless it were the wild mean of the woods here at the heels of the other five — attenuated varlet of a glassen species — how paltry, when one had inspected him, his value was ! Since then to live on in this life of theirs is but equivalent to their being dead (for they exist not that for all existence have but such) of God that shed His blood I pray that no man ever kill this gang of six." [8]

The bards were frequently the tutors and advisers of young princes, or took that role upon themselves. Many exhortatory poems addressed by them to their charges upon momentous occasions, such as the taking over of the chieftainship, have been preserved. Here is an example from the 16th century, addressed to the Earl of Clanricard's son :

" My son, well wear thine arms : thy natural right it is to shield thy patrimonial due. O arm, not niggardly endowed with strength, good luck in battle wait on thy first martial suit ! In a good hour and propitiousty, O son of him that rules Ailill's rath — thou whose fame all champions envy — this thine equipment thou hast now assumed. Well wear, O Earl's son,

thy compact and close and glittering mail in which no doorway may be found — thy well-knit flashing armature. The banded youth of peace (*i.e.*, thy friendly and allied coevals) shall raise victory's cry ; but in hostile quarters shall be squalls of crows and croak of wheeling ravenbirds, respondent to thy trenchant glinting weapon.” [9]

In later times, under the English dominion, the bards often stirred up whole tribes to rebellion, whence they became so obnoxious to the government that severe laws were passed against them and those who entertained them. The poet Spencer also recommended the checking of these war-like bards who fired the minds of the young with rebellion. It is interesting to have the great English poet's opinion on the poetical value of these bardic compositions. In his *View of the State of Ireland*, Eudoxus is made to say:

“ But tell me, I pray you, have they any art in their compositions ? or be they anything witty or well savoured as poems should be ? ”

And Irengsus answers him :

“ Yea truly, I have caused divers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them, and surely they savoured of sweet wit and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry ; [10] yet were they sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their natural device which gave good grace and comeliness unto them.”

Here is a poem of this kind addressed to the Irish in general, by the poet Angus mac Daighre O'Daly :

“ God be with you, ye warriors of the Gael ! let not subjugation be heard reported of you, for infamy ye have never merited in time of battle nor of war. By you, O generous and weapon-glittering company ! for sake of your own natural soil be a valiant struggle made : for homesteads of the Gadelian island's fertile field. If, O gallant band of hardy enterprise, ye would fain enforce your claim to Ireland, never shun desperate deed nor contest, nor great and frequent battles. Better to be on the cold hills' summits, keeping a watch that is brief-slumbered and alert, and seeking chance of bicker with the foreign horde that have the land of your forefathers.

“ Ireland ! it is this : that God hath not seen fit to have you help each one the other ; else, to the force from London's baleful quarters victory over you all together had never appertained. Torment it is to me that in the very tribal gathering foreigners proscribe them that are Ireland's royal chiefs, in whose own ancestral territory is vouchsafed them now no designation other than the lowly ‘ wood-kern's’ name. They (and this is but a little part of the iniquity wrought on Ireland's men) are in the rugged glens, while the plain country of this that is Crimthann's region belongs to a rabid gang of strangers. All the treacherous designs that are entertained against them — generous war-accustomed champions that they are — and the number of enemies vigilant to slay them : these be the things that make me to have troubled sleep. When Leinster's heroes — primest of the good men of this land of braves — have victory over the foreigners of Conn's fold (*i.e.*, the English intruders into Ireland) my mind is cheery, blithe, indeed. Again, when these English — that with purpose to work universal ruin of the Gael are come over the billowy sea — achieve success over our free men, I am all gloom. The children of Ragnall — God be their shelter — are a complement of blue-bladed warriors sufficient to encounter fight ; yet it is the extremity to which in this glen of theirs they are reduced that affects my mind with debility. God be with them in their lying down and rising up — men of strength that they are, most vigorous in the mêlée — God be with them in their standing up and in their lying down, and in the time of delivering the battle.” [11]

I must now leave the bards to turn to another great section of ancient Gaelic literature, religious poetry. Under this heading I include poems both of a literary and popular character dealing with all the varied aspects of religious life. They range from single quatrains to lengthy compositions. Many of the latter, however, do not concern us here, as they contain hardly anything but strings of names. Such are, *e.g.*, the great rhymed Festologies or Martyrologies of Angus the Culdee (9th century) and of Gorman (12th century). These, as I have said before, can hardly class as literature, though they are by no means devoid of art, showing a high degree of metrical skill and technical finish.

The *Saltair na Rann*, or “Psalter of the Quatrains,” was composed by an unknown poet towards the end of the 10th century. Its title is meant to indicate that, like the Psalter, it consists of 150 poems. These contain a sketch of Biblical history from the creation to the resurrection, followed by ten poems on the last judgment. The whole has been edited by Whitley Stokes, but no translation has yet been made, though it merits one, as you may judge from the following lines on the miracles following the crucifixion :

“ Darkness sprang over every plain :
Earth’s dead arose.
Dear God’s elements were afraid
When the veil of the Temple was rent.

“ Every creature wailed,
Heaven and earth trembled,
The sea rushed over its bounds,
Hearts of black rock split.”

But the religious poetry of the Gael that will most appeal to the modern reader are the smaller lyrics, which are either anonymous or have been ascribed to particular saints. The fact that so many of them are fathered upon nearly every famous saint from Patrick onwards, serves to show the friendly attitude of the native clergy towards vernacular poetry. These poems give us a fascinating insight into the religious life of the early Church. We see the hermit in his lonely cell, the monk at his devotions or at his work in the garden or field, or again, engaged in writing and copying manuscripts, as in the following quatrains, which are among the oldest in Gaelic speech. They are found on the margin of the St. Gall manuscript :

“ A hedge of trees surrounds me,
A blackbird’s lay sings to me ;
Above my lined booklet
The trilling birds chant to me.
“ In a gray mantle from the top of bushes
The cuckoo sings :
May the Lord protect me from doom !
Well do I write under the greenwood.”

In another Gaelic manuscript, now preserved in the monastery of St. Paul’s, in Carinthia, we find a quaint poem about the friendship existing between a learned monk and his pet white cat. “ In it the monk describes how he and his cat sit together, himself puzzling out some literary or historical problem, the cat thinking of hunting mice, and how the taste of each is difficult and requires much patience.” [12]

Here is a quatrain put in the mouth of a monk going from his cell to nocturns :

“ Sweet little bell
That is struck [13] in the night of wind,

I liefer go to a tryst with thee
Than to a tryst with a foolish woman.”

Or we hear the hermit who with some chosen companions has left one of the great monasteries, with its hundreds or thousands of monks, in order to live in the solitude of woods or mountains, or by the sea, or on a lonely island.

“ I wish, O Son of the living God, O Ancient, Eternal King,
for a hidden little hut in the wilderness, that it may be my
dwelling.

An all-grey lithe little lark to be by its side, a clear pool to
wash away sins through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Quite near, a beautiful wood around it on every side, to
nurture many-voiced birds, hiding it with its shelter.

A southern aspect for warmth, a little brook across its floor,
a choice land with many gracious gifts such as be good for every
plant.

A few men of sense — we will tell their number — humble and
obedient, to pray to the King :

Four times three, three times four, fit for every need, twice
six in the church, both north and south.

Six pairs besides myself, praying for ever the King who
makes the sun shine.

A pleasant church and with the linen altar-cloth, a dwelling
for God from Heaven ; then, shining candles above the pure
white scriptures.

One house for all to go to for the care of the body, without
ribaldry, without boasting, without thought of evil.

Raiment and food enough for me from the King of fair
fame, and I to be sitting for a while praying God in every
place.” [14]

Another hermit’s song of a more ascetic turn begins :

“ All alone in my little cell without a single soul in my
company ! Beloved pilgrimage before going to the tryst with
Death ! ” [15]

The dangers and errors of the Viking period cannot be better illustrated than by the following quatrain, probably written in a monastery somewhere on the east coast of Ireland in the 9th century :

“ Bitter is the wind to-night,
It tosses the ocean’s white hair :
I do not fear the fierce warriors of Norway
Coursing on the Irish sea to-night.”

The art of writing is made the subject of a pretty poem ascribed to Colum Cille, himself an indefatigable scribe. It begins :

“ Across the plain of great shining books
My little dripping pen stretches :
On the page it squirts its draught of ink
Of the green-skinned holly.”

On pampered and dissolute living :

“ A sleek body and a long stout side — ’twill not be long
before the body will be rotting, and the devil will have the soul.

It is blindness, it is madness, it is a bargain without sense,
for the pleasure of one brief hour to dwell in everlasting pain. ”

Here are two quatrains on the crucifixion :

“ At the cry of the first bird
They began to crucify Thee, O cheek like a swan !
’Twere not right ever to cease lamenting —
’Twas like the parting of day from night. ”

“ Ah ! though sore the suffering
Put upon the body of Mary’s Son,
Sorer to Him was the grief
That was on her for His sake.”

Pilgrimages to Rome were common among the Irish, especially after the subjugation of the Celtic Church by that of Rome. Here is a quatrain evidently composed in Rome by a disappointed pilgrim, who in the 8th or 9th century experienced something like what Luther felt on the same spot centuries later :

“ To go to Rome
Is much of trouble, little of profit.
The King whom thou seekest here,
Unless thou bring Him with thee, thou dost not find.

The hymn of St. Quiricus was considered so effective for the forgiveness of sins that some one composed the following quatrain on it :

“ If the dour demon sang Quiricus’ hymn to Judas, who is
worst under Heaven, his sins would be forgiven.”

Epitaphs and laments abound. Many of them have been preserved in the *Annals*. Here is one on a great scholar :

“ Dead is Lon of Kilgarad — great is the evil ! To Erin with
her many homesteads it is ruin of learning and of schools.”

We find poems half in Latin, half in Irish, such as the following, composed by a poet of the 11th century, Maelisu by name :

“ Deus meus, adiuva me !
Give me Thy love, O Son of God !

Give me Thy love, O Son of God !
Deus meus, adiuva me !

“ In meum cor ut sanum sit
Put quickly, glorious King, Thy love !
Put quickly, glorious King, Thy love
In meum cor ut sanum sit !

Many quatrains inculcate hospitality, a virtue prized no less by the Christian than by the Pagan Gael.

“ O King of stars !
Whether my house be dark or bright,
Never shall it be closed against any one,
Lest Christ close His house against me.”

Or again :

“ If there be a guest in your house
And you conceal anything from him,
'Tis not the guest that will be without it,
But Jesus, the Son of Mary.”

With an imaginative and fanciful people like the Gael, the legends that have sprung up around their saints, the sayings and poems attributed to them are innumerable. How far any of these are genuine or based on actual fact it is of course difficult to ascertain, and perhaps idle to enquire. Once that the character of the saint had impressed itself upon the imagination of the people, it became a theme which was played upon again and again. His generosity, his modesty and humility, or his humour, his ready wit and repartee, his austerity and violence speak to us from these poems and stories, and reveal to us the humanity of these early clerics.

The character of the man is always well brought out, a fact which sometimes enables us to attribute anonymous sayings or poetry to a well-known saint. Thus the numerous stories about S. Moling all show to us a personage whom we may characterise as the most humorous and witty of Irish saints. To him the following quatrain is attributed :

“ When I am among my seniors I am a proof that sport
is forbidden. When I am among the mad young folk, they
think that I am the junior. ”

I now pass on to another group of lyrical poems in which the Gaelic muse may vie with that of any other nation — the poems having nature for their theme. Indeed, the Celtic nature-poems — I say Celtic because they are also found from the earliest times among the Welsh — occupy a unique position in the world's literature. The feeling for nature in all its aspects and moods has but slowly developed among most nations. At the beginning of the modern era it was almost extinct, and was only gradually revived in the 18th century. As an example of the medieval and early modern feeling towards nature, I may remind you that down to the 18th century Switzerland was looked upon as an accursed country, created by the devil rather than by the hand of God, while the Lowlands of Holland, with their lovely level expanse, their gardens, avenues, groves and ponds were regarded as one of the most beautiful countries. To love unadulterated nature, to seek it out in its grandest and in its tiniest phenomena was given to no race so early as to the Celt. Many hundreds of Welsh and Gaelic poems from the earliest times down to the present are there to testify to this fact. It was one of the aspects of Celtic poetry that Matthew Arnold loved and noted in his essay. It has since been elaborated by several writers, notably by Professor Lewis Jones in an article upon the poems of the

Welsh bard Dafydd ap Gwilym, the contemporary of Chaucer. [16] I need not therefore dwell upon it here, but only draw your attention to this, that nowhere in these poems do we get an elaborate detailed description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures and images which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skilful touches.

It is interesting and important to observe that quite a number of these old nature-poems are ascribed to Finn, the son of Cumhall. In the oldest setting of the so-called Ossianic tales, the poets of the *Fianna* were Finn himself and Fergus Finnbheul, not Ossin. How, in later and comparatively recent times, Ossin has ousted his father from this position has been shown by Professor Windisch in his article on Ossianic poetry. [17]

When Finn had learnt the art of poetry from Finnéces, an old bard who lived upon the banks of the River Boyne, he composed the following song ‘ to prove his poetry : ’

- “ May-day, season surpassing !
Splendid is colour then.
Blackbirds sing a full lay
If there be but a slender shaft of day.
- “ The dust-coloured cuckoo calls aloud :
Welcome, splendid summer !
The bitterness of bad weather is past,
The boughs of the wood are a thicket.
- “ Summer cuts the river down,
The swift herd of horses seeks the pool,
The long hair of the heather is outspread,
The soft, white wild-cotton blows.
- “ Panic startles the heart of the deer.
The smooth sea runs apace,
Season when ocean sinks asleep,
Blossom covers the world.
- “ Bees with puny strength carry
A goodly burden, the harvest of blossoms ;
Up the mountain-side kine take with them mud,
The ant makes a rich meal.
- “ The harp of the forest sounds music,
The sail gathers — perfect peace !
Colour has settled on every height.
Haze on the lake of full waters.
- “ The corncrake, a strenuous bard, discourses.
The lofty, cold waterfall sings
A welcome to the warm pool,
The talk of the rushes is come.
- “ The peat-bog is as the raven’s coat,
The loud cuckoo bids welcome,
The speckled fish leaps,
Strong is the bound of the swift warrior.
- “ Man flourishes, the maiden buds
In her fair, strong pride.

Perfect each forest from top to ground.
Perfect each great stately plain.

“ A flock of birds settles
In the midst of meadows,
The green field rustles.
Wherein is a brawling white stream.

“ A wild longing is on you to race horses,
The ranked host is ranged around :
A bright shaft has been shot into the land,
So that the water-flag is gold beneath it.

“ A timorous, tiny, persistent little fellow
Sings at the top of his voice,
The lark sings clear tidings :
Surpassing May-day of delicate colours ! ” [18]

“ King and Hermit” I call a colloquy between Guaire of Aidne, a well-known king of the 7th century, and his brother Marban, who has become a hermit. The king remonstrates with him for leading a retired and frugal life when all the pleasures of the royal court might be his. The hermit answers, not in an austere or ascetic spirit, but extolling the delights of his forest dwelling above those of the king’s palace itself :

“ I have a shieling in the wood,
None knows it save my God :
An ash tree on the hither side, a hazelbush beyond :
A huge old tree encompasses it.

“ Two heath-clad doorposts for support,
And a lintel of honeysuckle ;
The forest round its narrowness sheds
Its mast upon fat swine.

“ The music of the little bright red-breasted men,
A lovely movement !
The strain of the thrush, familiar cuckoos
Above my house.

“ The voice of the wind against the branchy wood
Upon the deep-blue sky,
Falls of the river, the note of the swan,
Delightful music !

“ A clutch of eggs, honey, delicious mast,
God has sent it.
Sweet apples, red whortle berries,
Berries of the heath.

“ Without an hour of fighting, without the din of strife
In my house.
Grateful to the Prince who giveth every good
To me in my shieling. ” [19]

A poem of a very different kind is the Song of the Cailleach Bhéirre, or the Old Woman of Beare, a well-known district in the S.W. of Ireland. It is the lament of an old *hetaira*, who

contrasts the privations and sufferings of her old age with the pleasures of her youth, when she had been the delight of kings. It reminds one strongly of Francois Villon's *Belle Heaulmière*, and is not the only instance in which the genius of French literature has been anticipated by that of Ireland. As usual, the poem is prefaced by an introduction, as follows :

“ The Old Woman of Beare, Digdi was her name. The reason why she was called the Old Woman of Beare was that she had fifty foster-children in Beare. She had seven periods of youth one after another, so that every man who had lived with her came to die of old age, so that her grandsons and her great-grandsons were tribes and races. For a hundred years she wore the veil which Cummine had blessed upon her head. Thereupon old age and infirmity came to her. ”

In the poem she draws her imagery from the flood-tide and ebb-tide of the wide Atlantic, on whose shores she had lived and loved and suffered.

“ The wave of the great sea talks aloud,
Winter has arisen.
What the flood-wave brings to thee
The ebbing wave carries out of thy land.”

The glorious kings, on whose plains she once rode about in swift chariots with noble steeds, have all departed :

“ 'Tis long since storms have reached
Their gravestones that are old and decayed.”

And as for herself :

“ I had my day with kings,
Drinking mead and wine :
To-day I drink whey-water,
Among shrivelled old hags.

“ My arms when they are seen
Are bony and thin :
Once they would fondle,
They would be round glorious kings.

“ The maidens rejoice
When May-day comes to them.
For me sorrow is meeter,
For I am wretched, I am an old hag.

“ Amen, woe is me !
Every acorn has to drop.
After feasting by shining candles
To be in the darkness of a prayer-house ! ” [20]

Of ancient love-poetry comparatively little has come down to us. What we have are mostly laments for departed lovers, such as the dirge variously ascribed to Geilgéis, daughter of Mac Lugdach, [21] or to Créde, daughter of Crimthann ; [22] or another Créde's lament, of which I have attempted a translation in *Eriu*, vol. II., p. 15. With them we may class the lament of Liadain for her lost lover, Curithir, whom her caprice has driven across the sea :

“ Joyless
The bargain I have made :
The heart of him I loved I wrung.

“ A short while I was
In the company of Curithir,
Sweet was my intimacy with him.

“ The music of the forest
Would sing to me when with Curithir,
Together with the voice of the purple sea.” [23]

He who would have further examples of Gaelic love-poetry must turn to modern collections, among which the *Love-Songs of Connaught*, collected and translated by Douglas Hyde, occupy the foremost place. Here, too, there is a note of sadness in all the poems ; disappointed love, vain regrets and longings are the themes most played upon. Like the nature-poems, these songs are full of fine and rare images often succeeding each other line for line.

“ My heart is as black as a sloe,
Or as a black coal burnt in a forge,
As the sole of a shoe upon white halls,
And there is great sadness over my laugh.

“ My heart is bruised, broken
Like ice upon the top of water.
As it were a cluster of nuts after crushing. ”

Lastly, I must not forget to mention that the Gaelic bards were at all times ready and skilful improvisers. Many instances of their improvisations are handed down. See, *e.g.*, the witty response made by S. Moling to the demand of a party of brigands to sing quatrains to them. [24]

I will conclude by quoting the wonderful answer made by Raftery, a blind bard of the last century, to some one who heard him playing at a dance. [25] This man asked aloud : ‘ Who is the musician ?’ and the blind fiddler answered him :

“ I am Raftery the poet,
Full of hope and love,
With eyes that have no light,
With gentleness that has no misery.

“ Going west upon my pilgrimage,
Guided by the light of my heart,
Feeble and tired,
To the end of my road.

“ Behold me now,
With my face to a wall,
A-playing music
To empty pockets.”

- [1] A Gaelic poem in genuine ballad style stands at once suspected of being a rendering of a Germanic original. See, for an example of such a borrowing, the ‘ Irish folk-ballad’ published by Douglas Hyde in *Eriu* II. p 77.
- [2] *Sciath rígh Gáela glantar hí ! craeba cailce for a cliu !* MS. Egerton, 90, fo. 18a.
- [3] See my edition and translation in *Revue Celtique* vol. xx. p. 7.
- [4] Ba ollom bérla Féine, ba léignid léire mebra,
Ba fáith, ba fili forba, ba súi solma na senma,
— *Book of Leinster*, p 201b. 42.
- [5] See John O’Donovan, *The Tribes of Ireland*, p. 28.
- [6] See my edition of the *Vision of Mac Conglinne*, p. 32.
- [7] See John O’Donovan, *l.c.*
- [8] This version, like the following two, is taken from Standish Hayes O’Grady’s Catalogue of the Irish MSS. in the British Museum.
- [9] See O’Grady’s Catalogue, p. 376.
- [10] Not knowing the originals Spencer could hardly be a judge of this.
- [11] See O’Grady’s Catalogue, p. 505.
- [12] George Moore, *The Lake*, p. 162.
- [13] The tongueless Irish bells were struck, not rung.
- [14] See the original in *Eriu* I., p. 40.
- [15] *Eriu* II., p. 55.
- [16] ‘ The Celt and the Poetry of Nature,’ in the *Transactions of the Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion*, Session 1892-93, p. 46ff.
- [17] *Revue Celtique*, vol. V., p. 70 ff.
- [18] See my *Four Songs of Summer and Winter*, p. 9 ff.
- [19] See ‘ King and Hermit,’ a colloquy between King Guaire of Aidne and his brother Marban, being an Irish poem of the 10th century, edited and translated by Kuno Meyer. London : David Nutt. 1901.
- [20] See my edition and translation in *Otia Merseiana*, vol. I., p. 122 ff.
- [21] See my edition of *Cath Finntrágha*, or the Battle of Ventry, p. 54.
- [22] See Whitley Stokes’ edition of the ‘ Acallamh na Senórach,’ *Irische Texte*, vol. IV., p. 24.
- [23] See *Liadain* and *Curithir*, an Irish love-story of the 9th century, edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, London, 1902.
- [24] *Revue Celtique*, vol. XIV., p. 190.
- [25] See Douglas Hyde’s *Songs ascribed to Raftery*, Dublin, 1903, p. 41.

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