

Ossianic or Fenian poems

William Hamilton Drummond

Ancient Irish minstrelsy

(1852)

Of the Irish poems usually known by the name of Ossianic or Fenian, there are still extant many of great poetical beauty and interest, amply deserving of being introduced, in an English dress, to the general reader.

In Spenser's "View of the State of Ireland," Eudoxus inquires whether the Irish bards "have any art in the composition of their songs, or bee they any thing wittie or well savoured as poemes should be?" Irenseus replies, "Yea truely, 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; yet were they sprinkled with some pretty flowres of their naturall device, which gave good grace and comelinesse unto them, which it is great pittie to see abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which with good usage would serve to adorne and beautifie vertue." [1]

It is pretty evident that Spenser is here speaking of Bards who were his contemporaries, and who "abused their gift and art of song to the gracing of wickedness and vice;" and not to the ancient bards, or to those compositions which celebrated the heroic achievements of Finn and his warriors, and which were generally ascribed to Ossian. Had he caused some of these to be translated to him, he would probably have found in them some "goodly ornaments of poetry," not surpassed in beauty and grandeur by those of the classic pages of Greece and Rome, though, as a whole, challenging no comparison with the great works of the classic Muse. Many of them belong rather to that species of minor epic, the ballad poetry of England, which records such facts as Chevy Chase and the Battle of Otterburn, and containing passages which must have moved the heart and sounded in the ears of their auditors as "The Old Song of Piercie and Douglas moved the heart and sounded like a trumpet" in the ears of Sir Philip Sidney.

Notwithstanding the "savour of sweet wit and good invention, and the sprinkling of pretty flowres," which so admirable a judge as Spenser attributed to the songs of the Irish bards, they lay long neglected, and to English readers not known even to exist. After the lapse of ages the fame of Macpherson's Ossian excited the wonder of our Irish bards and senachies. They heard with astonishment indescribable, that their own long well-known countryman, Fin Mac Cumhal, who held his chief place of residence at Almhuin—the Hill of Allen in Leinster—the general of the Fenians—renowned for his martial achievements—the glory of their green isle—was no longer theirs, but discovered by the new revelations of a wonder-working magician, to be no son of Erin, but a Caledonian king named Fingal—the king of woody Morven—a kingdom of which they had never before heard even the name. Strong feelings of indignation succeeded the first emotions of surprise. They claimed Finn and his son Ossian as their own, and in no measured terms expressed their resentment at the piratical attempt to rob them of their martial and minstrel fame. Those who were acquainted with Irish history, though but partially, soon saw through the imposture. Various writers exposed it; and had the Royal Irish Academy, or our Gaelic and Archaeological Societies then been in existence, they would at once have extinguished the pretensions of Macpherson, and demonstrated the fallacy of Blair's criticisms, and the nothingness of the most ingenious arguments that could be advanced to raise and support an edifice which had no solid foundation.

The confident style in which Macpherson expressed himself on every subject connected with his Ossian had the effect of mystifying and deceiving the public. It would naturally be concluded that one who had brought to light such literary treasures, must have had a thorough knowledge of their true history—that he must have known, at least, the Gaelic language in the various stages of its purity and corruption—that he was familiar with its manuscript characters and abbreviations. Notwithstanding we have the authority of a distinguished librarian of the Bodleian library, as testified by Dr. Charles O'Connor, for affirming, that when certain ancient Irish manuscript verses were placed in Macpherson's hand, with a request to read and interpret them, he confessed that he could do neither. [2]

Now it was surely incumbent on an author who was obliged to make this confession, to speak with modesty of himself and with caution of others. But to enhance the value of his own fictions, he deemed it necessary to depreciate the compositions of Irish bards and historians. Ireland was to be destroyed that his new creation of Morven might continue in existence. In a note to "Temora," he says, "The Irish compositions concerning Fingal invariably speak of him as a giant," (vol. II. p. 126). "Of these Hibernian poems," he adds, "there are now many in my hands," and after giving "one instance of the extravagant fictions of the Irish bards," he continues thus :—"puerile and even despicable as these fictions are, yet Keating and O'Flaherty have no better authority than the poems which contain them, for all that they write concerning Fian-Mac-Comnal and the pretended militia of Ireland." Notwithstanding these strong assertions, he says, "Fingal is celebrated by the Irish historians for his wisdom in making laws, his poetical genius, and his foreknowledge of events. O'Flaherty goes so far as to say that Fingal's laws were extant in his own time." (Note to Carthon, p. 64)

If Macpherson had read Keating, whom he treats so unjustly, he would have found him positively contradicting Hector Boetius for asserting in his History of Scotland, that Finn was of gigantic size, fifteen cubits high, and that by the ancient records of Ireland, whose authority he (Keating) says, he holds sacred, Finn did not exceed the common proportion of the men of his time, and there were many soldiers in the militia of Ireland that had a more robust constitution of body, and were of a more extraordinary stature. His uncommon stature, therefore, and gigantic strength, are mere fictions designed to abuse the world, and to destroy the credit of those historians who treat upon the affairs of the old Irish government.— pp. 294, 295.

It is rather unjust to our Irish historians to charge them with the very abuse which they take so much pains to expose and condemn. As for the bards, they are treated with equal discourtesy. "I have rejected them all," says he, "in my compositions," and then he boasts that he has in his hands all that remain of the lays of the bards ;" but that "unluckily for the antiquities of Ireland, they appear to be the work of a very modern period—they are *entirely* written in the romantic taste which prevailed two ages ago. Giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, palfreys, witches, and magicians, form the whole circle of the poet's inventions. The celebrated Fion could scarcely move from one hillock to another without encountering a giant, or being entangled in the circles of a magician. Witches on broomsticks were continually hovering round him, like crows ; and he had freed enchanted virgins in every valley in Ireland." (p. 203.) He says that Finn in those poems is attacked by kings "as tall as the mainmast of a first-rate"—that Finn is not inferior to them in height, and that his heroes had this and other extraordinary properties. "*In weight also the sons of strangers yielded to the celebrated Toniosal*; and for hardness of skull, and perhaps thickness too, the valiant Oscar stood unrivalled and alone, and the brave Cuchullin was of so diminutive a size as to be taken for a child of two years of age, by the gigantic Swaran."

That there are many extravagant and wildly romantic tales among, or connected more or less with, the early minstrel songs of Ireland, is not questioned ; but an honest and candid writer, who had no selfish motive to bias his judgment, would have distinguished between the true and the false—the historical record and the fabulous invention.

Had Macpherson been just to his own fame, he would have told honestly where, and when, and how, he became possessed of the Gaelic compositions from which he constructed his system, and not rashly presumed on the ignorance of Irish writers, or their inability to detect and expose his impositions. But so little solicitous was he to avoid detection or inquiry, that he threw down the gauntlet of defiance and challenged hostility. His falsifications of Irish history, and his frequent vilification of the songs of Irish bards, as a foil to his Ossian, concocted as it was from the scattered remains, the *disjecta membra*, of the very bards he depreciated, were too much to be patiently endured, and accordingly he was assailed not only by Irish writers, jealous of the literary and poetic celebrity of their country, but by such Scottish and English historians and critics as Malcolm Laing, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, who saw through the imposition at a glance, and refused to take assertion for proof, and fabulous invention for genuine history.

That Macpherson was a man of genius and taste is not doubted. He knew, and had a relish for, the beautiful and sublime. He had an ear for euphonious cadence, and could appreciate the beauty and power of the picturesque language of Erin, as the names of his heroes and heroines, and of the scenes of their adventures, amply demonstrate. To the felicitous use he made of these qualifications, may be justly attributed no small share of the popularity which his Ossian obtained on its first appearance. To him we are, in some measure, indebted for having, though undesignedly, drawn the attention of scholars to our long neglected manuscripts, concealed in the archives of private students, or collected, as they are, in such encyclopaedical volumes as the books of Lecan and Ballymote, and the other various works of our annalists and historians. The *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*, edited by Dr. Charles O'Connor, at the expense of the Duke of Buckingham—the magnificent volumes of the *Four Masters*, translated by Dr. John O'Donovan, and published with the original Irish—various learned and elaborate essays on Irish literature and antiquities in the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy—the topographical historical, and antiquarian investigations of the scientific men employed in the “Ordnance Survey” of Ireland—the establishment of professorships of Irish in the Queen's Colleges—the learned labours of the Gaelic and Archæological Societies, and the translation of the Brehon laws now in progress—all indicate that there has been, and is, a growing desire to rescue from oblivion the ancient literary remains and historical records of Ireland. Every genuine patriot must rejoice to promote, in whatever way he can, the true glory and prosperity of his country—to see her literary and scientific, as well as her industrial resources, explored, and rendered ancillary not only to the present enjoyment, but the future fame of her poets, historians, legislators, and men of science.

The characters in these poems are generally marked with just discrimination, either by their mental or personal qualities. Finn is the *beau ideal* of an Irish hero and prince, unconquered in the field, magnanimous, courteous, hospitable, ever ready to espouse the cause of the weak, to avenge and redress the wrongs of the injured, to reward the songs of the bards. He is also gifted with a knowledge of futurity, and is skilled in oneiromancy, and in the virtues of medicine. He is gentle and forbearing—to females, tender and polite—to his relatives and friends, kind and affectionate.

Gaul, the son of Morni, is an intrepid and successful warrior. It has been remarked that he more resembles Ajax than any other of the Homeric heroes. When the Fenians have suffered defeat from the enemy, and are in danger of being totally overcome, Gaul generally appears

in the critical emergency ; and, by his superior might and valour, restores the battle and overcomes the foe. Of the other heroes, one is distinguished by his speed, as Caoilte ;—one, as Fergus, by his eloquence and address ;—another, as Dermuid, by his admiration of the fair, and who, like the Trojan Paris, carried away the wife of his general, and gave rise to many traditions, still extant, of his adventures when he absconded with his Helen.

There is one remarkable personage in these lays, who has not received the attention which he merits : This is Conan Maol, or Conan the bald, as generally translated. He has been compared to the Thersites of Homer, to whom, indeed, he bears some resemblance, but he is much more versatile and entertaining, being a strange compound of absurdity, cunning, buffoonery, cruelty, and cowardice, with the occasional semblance of valour, boastful as Falstaff, and sometimes, as he is described in Irish prose romances, as fond of a banquet as was that celebrated worthy of a cup of sack and sugar, and showing, by his actions and sayings, some affinity to the clown of pantomime, and of amphitheatrical equestrian entertainments. He might claim kindred with Sir Kay, “ the most foul-mouthed of Arthur’s knights, whose tongue appears to have been somewhat readier than his sword.” Macpherson introduces him in the sixth book of his Fingal, demanding the arms of Cuchullin. He names him as one “of small renown ;” and subjoins in a note, “ He is mentioned in several other poems, and always appears with the same character. The poet passes him over in silence till now, and his behaviour here deserves no better usage.” The ancient bards seem to have thought differently. Such a character was in high estimation among them, not as a hero, but, to them, as one of the *dramatis personæ* to the author of a farce or comedy. He afforded them an eligible opportunity of introducing some witty, farcical or satirical speeches and actions, to break the monotony of their songs and recitations, to relieve the attention, and give entertainment to their auditors. Their little interludes, of which Conan is the principal actor, with the succession of smiles to tears—of the pathetic and sublime to the risible and ludicrous, are essentially Irish. But Macpherson never ventures to smile. He never lays aside the buskin for the sock—nor can he for a moment come down from his epic stilts.

Many of the Fenian poems commence with a dialogue between Ossian and St. Patrick, a name studiously suppressed by Macpherson, in which the old warrior-bard treats the psalm-singing saint not only with no courtesy, but with insolence and threats. He highly extols the Fenian heroes, and the poems which celebrate their praises, as infinitely preferable to the melancholy chants to which he is sometimes doomed to listen. The saint, as becomes him, responds with meekness, and compliments the bard by requesting him to repeat a tale of the times of old, with which request the bard readily complies.

These poems, like some of our ancient English ballads, often assume a dramatic character, without the formal announcement of the speaker’s name. The transitions are abrupt, the descriptions brief and suggestive. Walker remarks that “ it is probable they were recited at the convivial feasts of the chiefs, and in the public conventions, by several bards, each bard assuming and supporting a character in the piece.” In the Report of the Highland Society, a letter from the Rev. Donald Macleod states that “ the Highlanders, at their festivals, and other public meetings, *acted* the poems of Ossian. Rude and simple as their manner of acting was, yet any brave or generous action, any injury or distress, exhibited in the representation, had a surprising effect towards raising in them corresponding passions and sentiments.”

In some parts of Ireland where Irish is still spoken, the custom of singing and reciting old lays is not yet altogether obsolete. A learned Irish scholar, who has often been present at convivial meetings, where music formed part of the entertainment, has informed the author, that the effect produced by it on the auditors is beyond expression animated. Inspired by “ thoughts that breathe and words that burn,” and by sounds as stirring as those of old Timotheus, whose

“ breathing flute
And sounding lyre,
Could swell the soul to rage, or kindle soft desire,”

their hearts beat in concord to the varying strain ; they are melted to pity or fired to heroic ardour. They “ applaud with a furious joy,” and seem ready to take the field and “ fight their battles o’er again.” The first collection of poems translated from the Irish, which has fallen under the author’s observation, is that of Miss Brooke, entitled “ Reliques of Irish Poetry,” and published in 1788. [3] Prior to this, indeed, in the summer of 1784, Dr. Young, fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, in an excursion to Scotland, took particular pains to discover what poems, supposed to be Ossian’s, were to be found in the Highlands. Of these he made a small collection, and published them with a few explanatory notes, and a translation into English, in the first volume of the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy. He also obtained some fragments of poems, but in Erse so corrupted as almost to defy interpretation. In his paper on the subject he informs us that Mr. Smith, who published a volume of poems attributed to Ossian and other Highland bards, confesses that Macpherson compiled his publication from those parts of Highland songs which he most approved, combining them into such forms as, according to his ideas, were most excellent, retaining the old names and leading events.” To this let it be added, that he did not confine himself to the remains of the Celtic bards, but borrowed freely from the Hebrew Scriptures, and from Greek and Roman poets, whatever he deemed most suitable to his purpose. As for genuine Irish manuscripts, he probably obtained all that were then to be found. [4]

In January, 1807, was held the first general meeting of the Gaelic Society of Dublin, having for its objects to “ promote the study of Iris literature, and to publish every fragment existing in the Gaelic language,”—a truly noble and patriotic design, which, “ if pursued with spirit and perseverance, will redound much to the honour of Ireland.” In furtherance of this design, the first volume of the Transactions of the Society appeared in 1808, containing “ interesting observations on the Gaelic language, several tracts in Irish, accompanied with translations into Latin and English, and some considerations on the poems ascribed to Ossian,”

Though the efforts of the Society were entitled to liberal support, the encouragement received was too languid to enable them to persevere, and it gradually declined till it ceased to exist. Happily, however, the Irish Archæological Society was founded in 1840, for “ The Printing of the Genealogical, Ecclesiastical, Bardic, Topographical, and Historical Remains of Ireland.” The Society wisely availed themselves of the aid of the most competent Irish scholars which Ireland can boast, and nobly have they fulfilled the design of their institution by publishing, in Irish and English, many of the most ancient and interesting compositions extant, on the several topics mentioned, illustrated by numerous learned notes and comments.

Great is the honour due to the memory of the Duke of Buckingham, under whose patronage and at whose expense the four costly volumes of *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*, edited by Dr. Charles O’Connor, were presented to the world in the years 1814—1826. Well might the spirited example of the Saxon noble have put to shame the coldness and apathy of our Celtic nobility, who could see the remains of the ancient histories and literature of their country sinking into oblivion, without stretching forth a hand or expressing a wish to rescue them from the gulf.

The example, however, was not without due effect—as has been strikingly testified by the publication of the “ Annals of the Four Masters,” in five magnificent quartos, translated by Dr. John O’Donovan, and published by Hodges and Smith of Dublin in 1848—1851. The

intrinsic excellence and costly style of this publication may be regarded as forming a new era in the history of Irish literature.

To this may be added O'Geraghty's edition of the same work, from the year 1171, to its conclusion in 1616, translated by Owen Connellan, Esq., Professor of Irish in Queen's College, Cork ; and published under the auspices of Sir William Betham—that eminent antiquary “ to whom Irishmen are so much indebted for his liberal and enlightened encouragement and love of Irish literature.” To students of Irish history and antiquities this is indeed a most valuable work, for, independent of the Annals, the notes will be found to contain (as expressed in the preface), “ a great mass of materials, and much interesting and important information, not hitherto published, together with collections from various sources, rare books and manuscripts ; the whole forming a compendium of Irish history, from the earliest ages to the English Invasion, with continued illustrations to the end of the annals in the 17th century.”

Though Miss Brooke's volume of “ Reliques” was well received by the public, no similar collection followed till 1831, when two handsome volumes were published by James Hardiman, Esq. M.R.I. A., entitled “ Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland, in the original Irish, with Poetical Translations.” Though it may be lamented that this work does not comprehend the Ossianic minstrelsy, it contains much that the friends of Irish literature deem highly valuable, enriched as it is with the poems of Carolan and “ Jacobitic Relics,” numerous specimens of elegiac, bacchanalian, and amatory songs ; and vindicating the exclusive right of Erin to certain favourite musical airs, which she claims as her own against all rival pretensions, though some such have been advanced.

“ In 1843, Mr. John O'Daly, when living in Kilkenny, published a collection of Irish Jacobite songs, which he got metrically translated by the late Edward Walsh, and which extended to 120 pages 8vo. On his removal to Dublin in 1845, he prepared a very useful little work entitled “ Self- instruction in Irish, which he published in 1846, and of which a second edition appeared in 1848, and is now exhausted.”

“ In 1849, he edited a collection of Irish songs peculiar to Munster, which he got translated by the ill-fated genius Clarence Mangan, in which he gave the original airs. This edition sold off in the short space of twelve months. A second and enlarged edition appeared in 1850, which also is nearly exhausted.” To this may be added, by the same spirited editor, “The Tribes of Ireland, a Satire, by Aengus O'Daly, versified from the Irish by James Clarence Mangan, and an Introduction to the History of Satire in Ireland, by John O'Donovan, LL.D. and M.R.I.A.”

“ Conor Mac Sweeny published several numbers of Irish songs without translations. Of these very few came before the public, as the editor destroyed the entire edition on account of a few errors which occurred in the press.”

In 1845 was published the fifth edition of “The Ballad Poetry of Ireland,” edited by Charles Gavan Duffy, consisting, as expressed in the preface to the volume, “ neither of the old bardic songs of the country, nor of the street ballads common in the mouths of the people, but of another class chastened and elevated by modern art, but equally indigenous and equally marked with a distinct native character.”

In 1846, Mr. Henry R. Montgomery, a native of Belfast, published a small volume of “ Specimens of the Early Native Poetry of Ireland, in English Metrical Translations,” by various translators, and accompanied with Historical and Biographical notices.

Many pieces of ancient Irish minstrelsy have appeared from time to time, in magazines and various periodicals, in connection with romantic tales, historical and antiquarian records, and especially in the various volumes of the Celtic and Irish Archæological Societies.

For the translations here presented to the reader, the author bespeaks indulgence. Every written language has peculiarities and beauties of its own, which few or none to whom it is not vernacular, can duly understand or appreciate. Some idioms cannot, and others ought not to be, verbally translated. When the author commenced the task of versifying these lays, his intention was to be as literal as possible ; but though fully sensible of the importance of fidelity to the sense of the original, and of guarding against the danger of diluting it by amplification, or rendering it dry by brevity, he soon found that by rigid adherence to the very letter of the original, the translation would seem bald and often obscure and feeble. He then supposed that some occasional indulgence might be granted to the translator of these Lays, to amplify a thought or description. If such indulgence be allowed to the translation of works whose authorship has never been questioned, it may well be extended to the translation of works whose authors' names are lost in the stream of time, and whose language has become so obsolete as to require the aid of glossaries to be understood.

As to the varied style of versification into which these lays are now translated, the author deems it more favourable to the spirit of the original, the chief requisite of translation, than that of a continuous sameness of stanza, like that adopted by Miss Brooke, and in which much of our English ballad poetry is composed. Long poems in quatrains, consisting of alternate eight and six syllable lines, are soon felt to be exceedingly monotonous ; and they scarcely allow that force and variety of expression which the varying topics of the subject require. He has, therefore, preferred a more varied style, and thrown most of the poems into sections or paragraphs of different lengths. It would have been an easy task to have clothed them in greater pomp of diction, and translated them into English hroics, rather than into lyric verse. But the reader will be pleased to remember, that the originals were composed to be sung to the music of the harp, the tones of which the skilful harper would vary according to the nature of the subject, “ from grave to gay, from lively to severe.”

When Sir Philip Sydney tells us how he was moved by the old song of Percy and Douglas, though “ sung by some blind crowder—and apparelled in the dust and cobweb (*the old rude simple style*) of that uncivil age,” he asks, “ what would it work trimmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar ?” To which question, we may with some confidence reply, that in such trimming it would be caricatured, and might excite emotions more akin to the ludicrous than the sublime. The strong impassioned thoughts of the Irish bards and warriors, are best expressed in the simplest laconic style, and, like female beauty, are when “ unadorned adorned the most.”

Whether any of the Lays in the following collection, or in any other, are the genuine compositions of Ossian, who flourished in the third century, may well be doubted, but it is not unreasonable to conclude, from his universally acknowledged poetic genius, that he composed many poems, which were long remembered, but which, in the lapse of years, were corrupted and mutilated, till only a few fragments were left. These seem to have become the common property of succeeding bards, each of whom, in his recitations, amplified, curtailed, or interpolated them as he thought proper. When in singing or reciting them, he felt a lapse of memory, he would supply the want, like an improvisatore, by some unpremeditated strains, or the introduction of favourite passages from other poems, and when, like Scott's “ Last Minstrel,”

“ In varying cadence soft or strong,
He swept the sounding chords along,

Each blank in faithless memory void,
The poet's glowing thought supplied."

This is in perfect accordance with Macpherson's declaration that "the Highland senachies never missed to make their comments on, and additions to the works of Ossian;" and again, that "the bards who were always ready to supply what they thought deficient in the poems of Ossian, have inserted a great many incidents between the second and third Duan of Cathloda." No one ever indulged in such liberties more licentiously than Macpherson himself.

If, in a few instances, the author has given expression to a thought, or heightened a description by colourings of his own, he flatters himself that nothing of the kind has escaped him inconsistent, or out of keeping, with the sense and spirit of the ancient Irish.

Sir Walter Scott, speaking of imitations of the ancient ballad, and of that "learned and amiable prelate Dr. Percy," says that he was "remarkable for his power of restoring the ancient ballad, by throwing in touches of poetry so adapted to its tone and tenor, as to assimilate with its original structure, and impress every one who considered the subject, as being coeval with the rest of the piece. It must be owned, that such freedoms, when assumed by a professed antiquary, addressing himself to antiquaries, and for the sake of illustrating literary antiquities, are subject to great and licentious abuse; and herein the severity of Ritson was to a certain extent justified. But when the license is avowed, and practised without the intention to deceive, it cannot be objected to but by scrupulous pedantry."

In conclusion, it may not be irrelevant to remind the reader that these Lays are not to be considered as idle inventions or sports of imagination, but as records of interesting matter in the history of Ireland; for instance, of the battle of Gavra, and the invasion of the Scandinavian king Magnus. Here the archæologist and historian may find something to gratify their taste, and guide to curious investigation. Instances are not wanting to show that a bardish song has sometimes led to a rare discovery, as to that of the pieces of gold found near Ballyshannon by the Bishop of Derry, whose curiosity was excited by the song of an Irish harper, in all probability by the following lines in the Lay of Moira Borb, which record the death of a princely warrior, and describe the locality where he was interred:—

In earth, beside the loud cascade.
The son of Sora's king we laid;
And on each finger placed a ring
Of gold, by mandate of our king;
Such honours to the brave we give,
And bid their memory ever live. — p. 42,

These Lays bear internal evidence that they are not the growth of an ignorant and barbarous age. They show that the people of Ireland had made no inconsiderable progress in civilization and refinement, and in the useful and ornamental arts—as in vocal and instrumental music—in the fabrication of arms, in the chasing of gems, in works of gold and silver, and in blazonry. The beautiful brooches, rings, torques, golden crescents, and other precious ornaments, which, with various implements of bronze, still continue to be found in the earth, and many of which may be seen in the cabinets of the curious, are so exquisitely wrought and finished as to excite the emulation of modern artificers. The nobles and warriors were in manner courteous, frank, hospitable, "jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel." Their bearing to persecuted damsels, with their promptitude and bravery in espousing the cause and avenging the wrongs of the weak and oppressed, was equalled only by that of the knights of romance. They expressed a generous praise of the valour of their enemies,

and lamented their untimely fate when they fell in battle. Of female beauty they felt the indomitable power, and evinced an enthusiastic admiration.

As reliques of the minstrelsy which once flourished in Ireland, these Lays have a claim to as much attention as any other objects of antiquity—as much, at least, as is paid to broken columns, illegible inscriptions, and cenotaphs abroad—or dilapidated round-towers, fractured urns, trilithons, and ogham epitaphs at home.

[1] In this description there seems to be some inconsistency. If the poems savoured of “sweet wit and good invention,” and were sprinkled with some pretty flowres “which gave good grace and comeliness unto them,” what were the “goodly ornaments of poetry,” in which they betrayed a lack of skill? Warton, in his “Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser,” remarks, that this illustrious poet’s residence in Ireland furnished him with the name *Una*, or Oonah, the lady that accompanied the Red-crosse Knight. It might be worthy of inquiry, whether Spenser has wreathed any of the “pretty flowres,” of which he speaks, into his own poetic garland.

[2] “Extat idem Carmen in alio Codice Bodleiano Rawl. 487, fol., &c., cujus se nec verbum quidem intellexisse imo nec legere potuisse propter abbreviationes.”—Macphersonus, percontante clarissimo Bibliothecario, confessus est, — se nec verbum quidem Carminum istorum intellexisse.”—Dr. O’Connor’s *Rer. Hib. Scriptores*, vol. I., pp. cxxiii — ci.

Dr. Young says that Macpherson “once was of opinion that the beauty of Erse writing consisted in its ‘not being bristled over with unnecessary quiescent consonants, like the Irish.’ But the learned Colonel Vallancey, to whom the Celtic literature of this country owes so much, showed him how thoroughly he was mistaken in this matter.”

[3] The earliest known translation of an Irish poem into English verse, is Michael Kearney’s version of John O’Dugan’s chronological poem on the kings of Eibhear, translated A.D. 1635, ‘to preserve that antient Rhyme from the overwhelming floods of oblivion which already devoured most part of Nationall Memorayes.’”—8vo, J. O’Daly, Dublin, 1847.

“About the same period as Miss Brooke’s, an unfortunate neglected genius named Wilson, edited a small 12mo volume of Ossianic poems, with a few songs in the Irish language, but in the Roman character, which is now very scarce.”—Id.

[4] Sir James Macdonald, of the Isle of Skye, in a letter to Dr. Blair, says, “These islands never were possessed of any curious manuscripts, as far as I can learn, except a few which Clanranald had, and which are all in Macpherson’s possession. The few bards that are left among us, repeat only detached pieces of these poems.”—Appendix to the Report of the Highland Society, p. 4.

Mr. Pope, minister of Rea, in Caithness, ascribes the loss of many of Ossian’s poems “partly to our clergy, who were declared enemies to these poems; so that the rising generation scarcely knew any thing material of them.” The same gentleman gives some curious instances of the gnat corruption which the original language has suffered in the Highlands.

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