

Early Irish Poetry

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Verse was used in recording Law, History, Genealogy/ Lists of Kings and Feast Days. The texts were suitable for memorization. The Filid, who trained for at least 12 years, were the great national poets, and enjoyed special privileges. Some of the historical sagas are lovely poems.

The bards were an inferior class to the filid, and emerged after the Norman Invasion, which caused the decline of the old order of filid. Bards were often attached as court poets to noble houses, where they created poems in honor of family members. The bards also created Occasional poems of joy, grief, piety and pride. These poems, not written for mere instruction, were often quite lyrical. Most of the early lyric poetry was anonymous, or ascribed to fictitious authors.

The earliest surviving poetry, (from the 6th century) consists merely of alliterative groups Rhyme began to appear at the end of the 6th century, but without fixed numbers of stresses of syllables.

Then, in the 7th century, regular rhythm began to appear, often combined with rhyme, and a lyrical note entered Irish poetry. (In sagas and historical passages a rhythmical line without rhyme was used /-/-/--, a form that was conducive to memorization).

Around the 8th century syllabic count became dominant (possibly in imitation of Latin) In Syllabic poetry there is no regular ictus, and word accent is used only for alliteration and rhyme. This type of poetry survived into the 17th century.

Nature was the content of most of the early lyrical poetry- seeking out. watching and loving nature. The scene is never elaborate or sustained, but a succession of images. They avoid the obvious - the half said thing is dearest.

The earliest poetry survives, for the most part, in fragments. The surviving longer poems are from the 10th to the 12th centuries.

One of the few poems to survive in its entirety, is 'Amra Choluim Chille', written upon the death of the saint in 597. It was written by Dallán Forgaill, the Rith ollamh or 'high poet' of Ireland. Its form is 'reicne dechubaid', 2 or 3 alliterative words followed by a word which does not alliterate²

Ní díscal duae Néill
Ní ochtat óen maige mór maig.
Mór deilm ndeulaing ris ré asneid Colum cen bith cen chill.

The rampart of Niall is not silent. The great sorrow is not the lamentation of a single plain. A great cry hard to endure is the story when you tell that Colum is without life, without a church.

From the 7th or 8th Century

Fégaid úaib,
Sair fothuaid
In muir múaid
Milach

*To the northeast
Over the mighty seas
Alive*

Adbá rón,
rebach rán
Ro gab lán
Lín ath

*The home of seals
Sporting in splendor
Its tide
Is full.*

I have always loved poetry, and in the late 1980s I came across a poem by Aogán Ó Rathaille that is called “Brightness of Brightness” in English. There was an annotation accompanying the poem, and in it the translator noted that reading the poem in English was nowhere near as enjoyable as reading it in the original. He explained that, in Irish, *Gile na Gile* was especially beautiful, because the vowel sounds in the opening, kept repeating through the poem. I went to the library, but all I could find on Irish Poetry was a small book which mentioned which sounds in Irish Poetry “rhymed” with each other. I couldn’t imagine what in the world they were talking about: “bh” rhymes with “mh” rhymes with “dh”? How could you ever pronounce such strange sounds?

In the summer of 1993, I attended a feis, and met Jerry Kelly, who was handing out brochures about the school, and, full of trepidation (I was pretty old to be learning a new language), I showed up for the Beginner’s Class, which at that time was Chapters 1-10 in “Progress in Irish”. I think I was the only one in class who had never heard a word in Irish before and I was certain that I was going to make a fool of myself. Happily though, I had Rita Bowden for my teacher, and she was the soul of kindness and patience. After two years of attendance I started getting lazy, and came to class only sporadically. When I did come, I sat with Jerry’s class, and I learned a lot about Genealogy and Mythology and I decided to really make an effort. I was disappointed with my next class, because that teacher (who is no longer with us) had little interest in Grammar, which is important to me because I am a poet. I mentioned to Mary Rollo that I didn’t want to go to this class, but didn’t want to backtrack. She was a year ahead of me and attended Ray’s class, and suggested that I jump ahead instead of backwards. So I wound up skipping Lessons 33 on, and jumped into the next-to-the-last semester. Ray also has a love of Grammar and I was hooked. I learned the declensions of adjectives before I learned the declension of nouns. (I did go back subsequently, and do the whole book.)

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