

Bards

Of The

Gael And Gall

Examples Of The

Poetic Literature Of Erinn.

Done Into English After The Metres And Modes Of The Gael

George Sigerson, M.D., F.R.U.I.

1897

The Fionn Period

•

DAWN OF SUMMER [1]

First Lay of Fionn Mac Cumal

Soft Summer's first day !
How radiant the sky !
Merles lilt their full lay, —
Would Laiga were nigh !
Clear call the cuckoos,
Glad welcomes still greet
Sweet Summer's bright hues !
By branchy wood's brim
Swift steeds seek the stream,
Its gleam swallows skim ;
Floweth fine heather's hair,
Bloweth frail bog-down fair ;
Flee-eth frown of evil sign,
Planets beam bright benign,
Soft sigh the sleepy seas,
Flowers flourish o'er the leas.

•

WINTER'S APPROACH [2]

Fionn Mac Cumal

List my lay : oxen roar,
Winter chides, Summer's o'er,
Sinks the sun, cold winds rise,
Moans assail, ocean cries.

Ferns flush red, change hides all,
Clanging now, gray geese call,
Wild wings cringe, cold with rime,
Drear, most drear, ice-frost time.

•

A WARRIOR'S DUTIES

Fionn Mac Cumal [3]

Thou, Mac Lugach, shalt discern
What the warrior-order learn :
Keep in hall a courteous mood
Though in brunt of battle rude.

Blame thy spouse not, without thought,
Never beat thy hound for naught ;
Never strive with senseless loon —
Wouldst thou war with a buffoon ?

Gird at none of goodly fame,
Share not in the brawler's shame ;
Keep apart thy path, again,
From or mad or evil men.

Two thirds of thy softness show
Women, babes that creep below,
Bards that varied verse evoke —
Nor be fierce with common folk.

Be not first to seek thy sleep
Where awake thy fellows keep ;
Rules respect, false friendship shun,
Nor revered be ev'ry one.

Speak not thou mere words of might,
Say not thou'lt not yield what's right —
For a shame is mighty speech
When the deed is out of reach.

Never thou thy chief forsake
Till red earth thy life shall take ;
Nor for gem nor gold reward
Fail in warrant to thy ward.

Never to the chieftain's ear
Blame his household too severe,
It suits no true man's estate
Faulting low folk to the great.

Thou'lt bear no glozing story,
Not thine the carper's glory,
Thine, conduct clear and knightly,
Hence men shall serve thee brightly.

Never long the ale horn hold,
Never once deride the old ;
What is worthy that maintain,
Make not of misfortune pain.

Food to foodless ne'er refuse,
Nor for friend a niggard choose ;
Never on the great intrude,
Nor give cause for censure rude.

Guard thy garments, guard thine arms
Through the heat of battle harms ;
Ne'er to frowning fortune bow,
Steadfast, stern, and soft be thou.

THINGS DELIGHTFUL

Oisín [4]

Sweet is a voice in the land of gold,
Sweet is the calling of wild birds bold,
Sweet is the shriek of the heron hoar,
Sweet fall of the billows of Bundatore.

Sweet is the sound of the blowing breeze,
Sweet is the blackbird's song in the trees,
Lovely the sheen of the shining sun,
Sweet is the thrush over Casacon.

Sweet shouts the eagle of Assaroe,
Where the gray seas of Mac Morna flow,
Sweet calls the cuckoo the valleys o'er,
Sweet, through the silence, the corrie's roar.

Fionn, my father, is chieftain old
Of seven battalions of Fianna bold ;
When he sets free all the deerhounds fleet
To rise and to follow with him is sweet.

THE COLD NIGHT OF INNISFAIL [5]

Cold, cold,
Chill, this night, is Lurc's wide wold ;
Foodless now the gaunt deer goes,
High o'er hills the snows are rolled.

Cold to death
Sweeps the broad'ning tempest's breath ;
Round the fords the whirlpools roar,
Rills through ridges pour in wrath.

Each loch now a sea doth make,
And a great lake is each pond ;
No steed wins the ford of Ross,
No foot dares to cross beyond.

Fishes Innisfail must flee,
Since there's neither sea nor strand ;
Bells are dumb, no herons call
Land is none in all the Land.

In their Cuan cove no hound
Yet has found repose or rest ;
Nor may wren of Leiter Lone
Shelter in its own round nest. [6]

On the small bird-comrades beat
Icy darts and sleety winds ;
Not one nook in Cuan's grove,
As 'twould love, the blackbird finds.

Cheerful is our cauldron here,
Cold and drear is Leiter Lone ;
Staff in hand, what toil to go,
Climbing snow where tempests moan.

Even the ancient eagle chief
Shakes in grief 'neath Rigi's [7] peak ;
Pierced with pain, the bitter breeze
Soon may freeze with ice her beak.

From soft down for snows to part,
Hearken heart ! — 'twere madly bold ;
Ice-heaps cumber every ford,
Hence each word I cry is cold.

•

THE FAIR FORT OF CRÉDÉ

Cael, son of Crimtann

Pleasant is her fortress fair,
Men and maids and boys are there,
Druids and the Sons of Song,
Cupmen, doormen, skilled and strong.

Men for steed, and men for stall,
Men to rule the roast in hall ;
Supreme o'er all sits Cr  d  
Bright, beauteous, gold-haired lady.

Dear to me that pleasant dun,
With soft down to sit upon ;
Were the will in Cr  d  's breast,
Happy here would be my quest.

Full fair the porch, where splendid
Blue wings and yellow blended :
Round the fountain is a wall
Of crystal and carmogal.

Bowl of juice of berry glints,
Whence her eyebrows black she tints ;
Clear vats of ale are flowing,
Rich cups and goblets glowing.

Lime-white is her fortress wall,
Rugs and rushes deck her hall,
Silks are seen and mantles blue,
Gold and horns of glossy hue.

Her bow'r by lakelet beameth,
There gold with silver gleameth,
Wings, brown and crimson, cover
Blent bright, its roof all over.

Pillars twain of green stand there,
By the portal, passing fair ;
Spoil of silver, famed of yore,
Forms the beam above the door.

On thy left is Cr  d  's chair,
Ever fairer and more fair ;
By dainty bed 'tis shining,
Alpine gold round it twining.

O'er this chair, like a bower,
Cr  d  's couch seems to tower ;
Orient-built by Tuil's device
With pure gold and gems of price.

Yet a bed beams on thy right
Built of gold and silver white ;
From rods of light bronze, looping,
Fall fox-glove curtains drooping.

In that home, the household bright
Seem all destined to delight ;
Never mantle dim or bare
'Neath the clusters of their hair.

Wounded men sink to slumbers,
Whilst blood their bodies cumber,
When they hear birds of Faery
Sing o'er her bower airy.

If she grant me grace at all —
She, for whom the cuckoos call, [8]
Then I, for thanks, will give her
More lays to live for ever.

•

THE DIRGE OF CAEL [9]

By Créde, His Spouse

Moans the bay —
Billows gray round Ventry roar,
Drowned is Cael Mac Crimtann brave,
'Tis for him sob wave and shore.

Heron hoar
'Mid the moor of Dromatren,
Found the fox her young attack,
Bleeding, drove him back again.

Sore the sigh
Sobs the stag from Drumlis nigh ;
Dead the hind of high Drumsailin,
Hence the sad stag's wailing cry.

Wild the wail
From the thrush of Drumkeen's dale ;
Not less sad the blackbird's song,
Mourning long in Letir's vale.

Woe is me !
Dead my Cael is fair and free :
Oft my arms would ward his sleep,
Now it is the deep, dark sea.

Woe, the roar
Rolling round from sea and shore ;
Since he fought the foreign foe,
Mine the woe for Cael no more.

Sad the sound,
From the beach and billows round ;
I have seen my time this day :
Change in form and face is found.

Ever raining
Fall the plaining waves above ;
I have hope of joy no more,
Since 'tis o'er our bond of love.

Dead, the swan
Mourns his mate on waters wan,
Great the grief that makes me know
Share of woe with dying swan.

Drowned was Cael Mac Crimtann brave,
Now I've nought of life my own :
Heroes fell below his glaive,
His high shield has ceased to moan.

•

WHERE IS THE SWEETEST MUSIC ? [10]

Noble news of Song and Valour

Bear I Balor's fort within,
Little heed I who may hearken,
If my song be heard of Finn !

Men were gay in golden Allin [11]
Hill and hall in, far and wide ;
Feast was spread and music flowing
And we saw our Finn preside.

Ossian staunch, and Diarmid stately
Sate by Luay, greatly strong,
And their friends, at feast and foray :
Ancient Conan, Oscar young.

“ Speak, ye champion chiefs, rejoicing,”
Rang the voice of Finn around,
“ Tell me each, in answer meetest,
Where is sweetest music found ? ”

“ There's one music fit for faming :
Give me gaming,” Conan cried, —
Strong his hand for crash of combat.
But his head was sense denied.

“ Song of Swords for war, unsheathing,” —
With quick breathing came the word,
“ Throng of blows when falling fleetest,”-
Seemed the sweetest Oscar heard.

“ There is music more endearing,”
Dark-eyed Diarmid did declare ;
“ Naught comes nigh the voice’s cadence-
When the maiden’s soft and fair.”

“ Sweeter song at dawning dewy — ”
Said Mac Luay, sharp of spear,
“ When the bounding dogs are crying,
And we race the flying deer.”

“ This is Song, and this is Music ” —
Spoke our lofty Leader old,
“ Blowing breeze ’mid moving banners
And an Army ’neath their gold.”

“ Then I fear no bardic passion,
Ossian !” said our Captain strong,
“ With my faithful Fianna round me —
These to me are Harp and Song ! ”

•

OSSIANIC : AGE OF LAMENTATIONS AFTER THE FIANNA [12]

Oisín

Long, this night, the clouds delay,
And long to me was yesternight,
Long was the dreary day, this day,
Long, yesterday, the light.

Each day that comes to me is long —
Not thus our wont to be of old,
With never music, harp nor song,
Nor clang of battles bold.

No wooing soft, nor feats of might,
Nor cheer of chase, nor ancient lore,
Nor banquet gay, nor gallant fight —
All things beloved of yore.

No marching now with martial fire —
Alas, the tears that make me blind —
Far other was my heart’s desire
A-hunting stag and hind.

Long this night the clouds delay —
No striving now as champions strove,
No run of hounds with mellow bay,
Nor leap in lakes we love.

No hero now where heroes hurled —
Long this night the clouds delay —
No man like me in all the world,
Alone with grief, and gray.

Long this night the clouds delay —
I raise their grave-carn, stone on stone,
For Fionn and Fianna passed away —
I, Ossian, left alone.

•

THE BLACKBIRD OF DARICARN [13]

Sweet thy song, in Dari grove,
No sweeter song from east to west,
No music like thy voice of love —
And thou beneath thy nest !

A strain the softest ever heard,
No more shall come its like to men.
O Patrick ! list the wondrous bird —
Thou'lt chant thy hymn again.

If thou, as I, but knew the tale
It sings to all the ancient isle,
Thy tears would rise, and thou wouldst fail
To mind thy God awhile.

In Norroway beyond the wave,
Its forest glades and streams among
That bird was found by Fionn the brave,
And still we hear its song.

'Tis Daricarn yon western wood —
The Fianna huntsmen loved it best,
And there, on stately oak and good,
Lost Fionn placed its nest.

The tuneful tumult of that bird,
The belling deer on ferny steep —
This welcome in the dawn he heard,
These soothed at eve his sleep.

Dear to him the wind-loved heath,
The whirr of wings, the rustling brake,
Dear the murmuring glens beneath,
And sob of Droma's lake.

The cry of hounds at early morn,
The pattering o'er the pebbly creek,
The cuckoo's call, the sounding horn,
The swooping eagle's shriek.

The mountain, not the cell, they sought,
Great Fionn and the Fianna fleet ;
Than tinkle of the bells, they thought
The blackbird's song more sweet !

•

THE HOUSEHOLD OF FINN

Oisin [14]

I've seen the House of Finn,
No housefolk they of humble fame,
Last night — a Vision thin —
The Hero's household came.

I've seen the House of Art
Where towered apart his brown, bright son,
Not one like worth could win —
I've seen the House of Finn.

None sees what I have seen,
Finn wield the wondrous sword of Luin,
What woe, that sight — unseen !
I've seen the House of Finn.

The tale could never cease
Of woes that rend my heart within,
Then let me Thou have peace —
I've seen the House of Finn !

•

PLEASANT ARANN [15]

Arann ! — in deer delighting !
Ocean smiles o'er her shoulders ;
Men have feasts there, and righting,
Blue darts redden 'mid boulders.

Hinds make merry her mountains,
O'er moss-berries they've morriced ;
Rills flow cool from her fountains,
Nuts fill her brown oak forest.

Hounds are there of high powers,
Fruits are bending the bramble ;
Homes are bough-woven bowers,
Deer in the deep wood ramble.

Red her rock-crop for reaping,
Faultless grass grow her valleys ;
Over smooth wood-lawns leaping,
Fawns dance, dappled, in alleys.

Sleek her swine in the musters,
Truly nothing comes nigh her ;
Fair, through the hazel clusters,
Sailing of long ships by her.

Pleasant, when winter's dying —
With trout 'neath banks not barren,
Fleet gulls, answering, flying —
Pleasant all times is Arann !

•

SOLACE IN WINTER [16]

Cailté

Chill the winter, cold the wind,
Up the stag springs, stark of mind :
Fierce and bare the mountain fells —
But the brave stag boldly bells.

He will not set side to rest
On Sliav Carna's snowy breast ;
Echta's stag, also rousing,
Hears wail of wolves carousing.

Cailté I, and Diarmid Donn,
Oft, with Oscar apt to run,
When piercing night was paling,
Heard rousing wolves a-wailing.

Sound may sleep the russet stag,
With his hide hid in the crag ;
Him, hidden, nothing aileth
When piercing night prevaieth.

I am aged now and gray,
Few of men I meet this day ;
But I hurled the javelin bold
Of a morning, icy cold.

Thanks unto the King of Heaven,
And the Virgin's son be given :
Many men have I made still,
Who this night are very chill.

•

LAYS OF FINN AND THE FIANNA : OSSIANIC POEMS

Appendix

A long and acrid contest has been waged between some of the Gael of Erin and of Alba in relation to this poetry. The cause of the war lay in the strategy of Macpherson, who, in order to exalt the Ossianic poetry which he professed to translate, depreciated certain later Irish Ossianic lays. He also, indeed, bore ardent testimony to the beauty of Irish love poetry, and the skill of the Irish bards ; but this was passed over. When it was ascertained that Macpherson had no original for his pretended translation, the reaction against him made men forget that the poor Highland tutor, who could combine Gaelic fragments into a work so remarkable as his "Ossian," must have been a man of genius.

O'Curry cannot assign any certain date to the poems attributed to Fionn (or Finn) and Oisín (or Ossian). He remarks, however, that some of these compositions are contained in the "Book of Leinster," which was compiled in the early part of the twelfth century, "and certainly from much more ancient books."

Mr. W. F. Skene, in his introduction to the Dean of Lismore's Book, states that the oldest poem of this character in MSS. preserved in the Highlands is found prior to the year 1500. Mr. Skene thinks that Ossianic poetry passed through three stages: 1st. There were pure poems common to Ireland and Scotland (and some to the Isle of Man and to Wales); 2nd. Some of the archaic forgotten verses were replaced by a prose narrative; 3rd. "The third class of Ossianic poems belongs principally to that period when, during the sway of the Lords of the Isles, Irish influence was so much felt on the language and literature of the Highlands, and when the Highland bards and Seannachies were trained in bardic schools presided over by Irish bards of eminence."

Though I believe, with Mr. Skene, that in many cases a later prose romance enshrines archaic poems, I also believe that, in some cases, as in "The Fate of the Children of Usnach," there was another order of composition. Here we had the story presented in dramatic form, with ancient lays introduced to be sung, just as some of Shakespeare's dramas include older English ballads.

The most impressive fact in connection with these ancient poems is their immense vitality. Thus Hector Mac Lean, the Bard of Islay, in a preface to the "Ultonian Hero-Ballads" [17] says : "These ballads have for many centuries been sung and rehearsed in the Highlands. There have been many who could sing 'Fraoch' till very lately in Islay. A few years ago Angus Mac Eachern often sang and rehearsed 'Conlaoch,' and many other old Gaelic poems, but there are few left now in Islay who can sing old Gaelic ballads or rehearse old Gaelic poems."

"In Ireland," O'Curry writes, "I have heard my father sing these Ossianic poems, and remember distinctly the air and the manner of their singing." Previous to this there had been a teacher, named O'Brien, "who spent much of his time in my father's house," O'Curry adds,

“ and who was the best singer of Oisín’s poems that his contemporaries had ever heard. He had a rich and powerful voice ; and often, on a calm summer day, he would go with a party into a boat on the lower Shannon, at my native place, where the river is eight miles wide ; and having rowed to the middle of the river, they used to lie on their oars ... on which occasions O’Brien was always prepared to sing his choicest pieces, among which were no greater favourites than Oisín’s poems. So powerful was the singer’s voice that it often reached the shores at either side of the boat, in Clare and Kerry, and often called the labouring men and women from the neighbouring fields at both sides down to the water’s edge to enjoy the strains of the music.”

How noble and astonishing would such statements seem if they related to the peasantry of other countries. If the Venetian boatmen were heard singing Dante from their gondolas, the Norman peasants the Romance of Roland, the Spanish the lays of the Cid Campeador, the German the Nibelungenlied, the Norse the Eddas if the English peasants assembled to sing the verse of Chaucer, Layamon’s “ Brut,” or the “ Battle of Brunanburh,” there would be just and general praise, with wise and generous encouragement. A different policy directed the extinction of the intellectual inheritance of the Gael, because pigmy prejudice ruled where large intelligence would have guided.

•

DIRGE FOR GAEL, BY CRÉDÉ, OR GELGEIS.

When the great battle of Ventry Harbour, famed in Irish romance, was over Créde and other gentle and simple women of Erin went over the shoreward region seeking the bodies of their husbands on the field of slaughter. Whilst still searching, Créde observed a heron risking her own life to defend her two younglings against a fierce fox. “ No wonder I should love my gentle comrade,” she said, “ when a bird is in such anguish over its birds.” Then she heard the stag on the mountain over the bay, belling lamentably from pass to pass, for his dead hind. They had dwelt in the forest nine years together, and now, for nineteen days, he had touched neither grass nor water, mourning her loss. “ No shame for me to find death through grief for Gael,” said Créde, “ when the stag is shortening his life for a hind.” Then she met Fergus on the battle-field, and asked had he tidings of Gael for her. “ I have,” answered Fergus, “ for he and the chief of the household of the King of the World (the invader) have drowned each other.” “ Little the need for me to bewail Gael and the Clanna Baiscné, for the birds and the billows do strongly bewail them.” She sang his death-song, and when it was ended, the soul of Créde parted from her body for grief of Gael, the son of Crimtann. Her grave was made over Ventry, a stone was raised above her tomb, and her funeral games were celebrated.

This account of the poem is summarized from the translation given by Professor Kuno Meyer, 1 who states that the Bodleian manuscript from which it was taken dates from the fourteenth century, and was written out for the Lady Saiv O’Maillé.

One episode in the romance is peculiarly chivalric and pathetic. When the news spread that Erin had been invaded, the aged king of Ulster lamented his inability to march against them. His only son, Goll, a boy of thirteen, offered to go, but was forbidden on account of his years, and confined. He, however, could not bear to remain aloof, and, taking arms from Emania, he and his twelve foster-brothers escaped to the battle-field. The twelve youths fell in the fight, and Goll, seized with grief and battle-fury, slew the hostile champion, but lost his senses. His madness has been taken as the theme of a powerful poem by Mr. W. B. Yeats.

- [1] The original, with translation by Dr. O'Donovan, appeared in "The Boyish Exploits of Find Mac Cumall," published in the "Proceedings of the Ossianic Society," Vol. IV. Find = Finn and Fionn.
- [2] The original is quoted in tract on the Amra of Columbcille, edited by Professor O'Beirne Crowe, 1871.
- [3] "Silva Gadelica." Mac Lugach was Finn's grandson. When born he was laid in Finn's bosom, then Finn laid the babe in his wife's bosom, who nurtured him till his twelfth year had closed, and the age of arms had come. She equipped him, and sent him to Finn, who gave him a very gentle welcome. The lad plighted service and fealty, striking his hand in Finn's. He was with the Fianna for a year, but he was so indolent that but nine of his pupils had been taught to kill deer or boar, and, worse still, he beat his hounds and his servitors. Then the Fianna, at Ross in Killarney, made their complaint to Finn, and bade him choose between Mac Lugach and them. Finn admonished his grandson in this poem, and by its counsels Mac Lugach guided his life thereafter.
- [4] The original appeared in the Dean of Lismore's Book
- [5] Whilst Diarmid and Gráinne were hiding from Finn in the cave of Howth, this lay was composed to induce them to remain there, by their servant. Whilst they were deliberating whether or not to fly from their cave of refuge (which Professor Kuno Meyer thinks to be that on the north side of the Hill of Howth), she went to watch and report. She met Finn ; he professed to admire her, and then she betrayed the lovers. She dipped her cloak in the sea, and, on her return, spread it across the door, chanting this lay of a terrible tempest. But Grainne touched the cloak with her tongue, found it salt, and discovered the treachery in time. The rime and measure are given. This ancient poem was published in the "Revue Celtique," Vol. XL, by Professor Kuno Meyer, with translation.
- [6] The wren builds the warmest nest.
- [7] Glen Rigi is the Vale of Newry.
- [8] This is a subtle compliment. The cuckoos call for the approach of summer, hence Créde's presence is like the coming of young summer.
- [9] The rimes and metre of the original are given. For its curious history, see Appendix.
- [10] Dean of Lismore's Book.
- [11] The Fortress of Finn, Commander of the Fianna.
- [12] Dean of Lismore's Book.
- [13] "Transactions of Gaelic Society."
- [14] Dean of Lismore's Book.
- [15] By Cailte. From "Silva Gadelica," edited with translations by Standish Hayes O'Grady. London : Williams and Norgate.

[16] “Silva Gadelica.” Colloquy with the Ancients.

[17] “Ultonian Hero-Ballads : collected in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland,” by Hector Mac Lean. Glasgow : Sinclair, 1892. The Mac Leans claim descent from the Irish Fitzgeralds, as the Mac Leods from the last Norse king of Man.

Bards of the Gael and Gall : examples of the poetic literature of Erinn, done into English after the metres and modes of the Gael (1897)

Author : Sigerson, George, 1839-1925

Publisher : London : T. Fisher Unwin

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : americana; cdl

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/bardsofgaelgalle00sigeiala>

Edited and uploaded to www.augty.org

June 9 2010