

Oral Traditions at World's End

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On Current British Mythology and Oral Traditions.

By

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I have been asked by Col. Lane Fox to read you a paper half-an-hour long about *Traditions*.

My chief difficulty was to chose a branch of this vast subject upon which to perch and prate for the specified time ; but after due consideration I have settled upon my own particular branch, about which I really know something, and leave the rest of this tree of knowledge to your learned Society to cultivate as you think best.

Let me then tell you, as shortly as I can, how it happens that I know something about Traditions of any kind.

I was “ raised ” in the highlands of Scotland, and as soon as I was out of the hands of nursemaids I was handed over to the care of a piper. His name was the same as mine—John Campbell—and from him I learned a good many useful arts. I learned to be hardy and healthy, and I learned Gaelic ; I learned to swim, and to take care of myself, and to talk to everybody who chose to talk to me. My kilted nurse and I were always walking about in foul weather or fair, and every man, woman, and child in the place had something to say to us. Thus, I made early acquaintance with a blind fiddler, who could recite stories. I worked with the carpenters ; I played shinny with all the boys about the farm ; and so I got to know a good deal about the ways of Highlanders by growing up as a Highlander myself.

As times went on, Dr. MacLeod, of Campsie, whose name is well known, suggested to me, then a lanky boy, the gathering of Highland lore.

In 1847 I had begun to gather a few traditions, and these I have still. In 1859, on the publication of the translation of Popular Tales from the Norse, the author of that excellent work, who has now come to rule over Civil-Service erudition, suggested that I might do for Scotland that which others had done elsewhere ; and acting under his counsel, upon my own knowledge, I set to work in earnest, in January 1859, to gather the popular tales of the West Highlands. [The book was laid on the table.]

The fourth volume was published within two years of the first start : I have manuscripts enough to make four volumes more, and I know where to find traditions enough of this kind alone to fill a small library. All that I need is a short-hand writer who knows Gaelic, and I will undertake to find stuff enough in a summer tour in Scotland to surfeit the greatest glutton that ever devoured popular lore.

When my own work was done, my chief, the Duke of Argyll, at my suggestion continued the collection of traditions, but of a different kind. I have his collection in manuscript, made

chiefly by one man. He was a woodman, and is a precise, accurate, old fellow, of the most matter-of-fact disposition. He goes wandering about the country, and he writes down exactly what he hears as popular traditional history of real people and real events. I have this collection; one bound volume is on the table. I have about as much more unbound, and the collector is now wandering and working away in the Highlands amongst men of his own class. I hear from him occasionally. Thus I have acquired considerable knowledge of Tradition as it actually exists amongst one set of people—the Highlanders of Scotland.

Whilst engaged on this work I was led to read everything about my subject that came within my reach in all the languages of which I know anything ; and, further, I learned to know the kind of man who contains a store of knowledge, and how to get it out of him.

I will give you one example, to show that traditions abound even here at your very doors, and that any one who chooses may pick up a harvest by gleaning after me.

In March 1861, I was driving to my office in a “ hansom,” when I happened to see a knife-grinder near the Knightsbridge Barracks, who seemed to be a field worth cultivation ; so I stopped my cab and jumped out.

The knife-grinder was somewhat startled, but he was speedily-convinced that I was not a disguised policeman, and he soon understood what I wanted, and that something was to be got out of me. He said that he was not good at telling stories himself, but he had a brother who was exceedingly good, I made an appointment, gave my card and a shilling, promised half-a-crown, and drove off to my office.

Thence I wrote to my friend, who is now Civil-Service Commissioner, and next day, March 9, 1861, we held a meeting at No. 7 Milbank Street, in the office of the Lighthouse Commission, to which learned body I then acted as Secretary. All my guests came. I had tobacco and long clay pipes, beer, and bread and cheese, and a good fire ; but it took some time to thaw the ice between us. I knew well enough that my men would be shy and awkward in a room ; but as we could not hold our colloquy in the open street, we did the best we could.

William and Soloman Johns, tinkers and gypsies, were not at ease off their own beat. First one told a ghost-story which was devoid of interest or point : that would not do at all. So I told the story of a tinker and a cutler, which I had learned from a London tinker some time before : that thawed the ice and raised my harvest. The key-note made harmony and a concert; it opened my “ book in breeches,” and from that moment we read him freely for some hours.

He told us seven long rigmarol popular tales, of which I wrote the names and some references only.

(1) A story about a lad and some dancing pigs. It is like “ Hacon Grizzlebeard” in Norse, the “ Mouse and the Bee” in Gaelic, and a whole series of stories and ballads which can be traced back to Dunbar and 1488, or thereabouts, in Scotland.

(2) He told a long story which turned upon the subterranean world, in which are castles of copper, silver, and gold, full of magic and mystery, princesses and adventurers ; in all of which the principal character was an Irishman with a black-thorn stick, which thrashed people of its own accord. I knew every single incident ; we all knew the stick, for it is in Grimm. It is well known in India ; see “ Old Deccan Days,” by Miss Frene, p. 141.

(3) Next came the story of the five hunchbacks, which I did not then know. Last year, in looking through a curious library of rare books in Cheshire, I hit upon my story in Italian.

The history of the three hunchbacks is the first in *Novelle de Messer Anton Francesco Doni*, edi. 1815. The book from which this is taken is in the Index of prohibited books, printed in Rome. The story was printed in 1544-45-52.

A queen has a daughter, and swears not to give her a husband till a lizard which the daughter throws on her back is as big as the child. The nurse nourishes the lizard, which grows as big as a "civet." Then the queen kills the beast, takes out its liver, and offers her daughter and half the kingdom to the man who can divine what liver it is. The nurse sends a hunchback to tell the secret to a prince suitor ; but the hunchback tells it for himself, and wins the lady, who hates him. The bride entertains three hunchbacks who dance and play, and by mishap she smothers them in hiding them in a chest. She and her nurse send for a porter, who takes the dead hunchbacks one by one in similar sacks to the river. He peeps into a sack and finds a "gobbo." Returning from the river he meets the bridegroom gobbo and takes him to the river and drowns him, thinking that the same hunchback had returned to be carried a fourth time. The widow marries the Duke of Milan, to whom she had sent the message at first.

In all essential points this story was told me by the London knifegrinder, who said that he could not read. The "facchino" was made an Irish "porter;" the queen an eastern potentate ; the lizard and the liver were not there; but the smothering of the hunchbacks and the death of the "gobbo" by mistake were told exactly.

There was enough of difference to make it quite certain that my knife-grinder did not borrow from Doni's Italian ; enough resemblance to make it certain that Doni and the knife-grinder, the Italian and the English gypsy, more than 300 years apart, had got the same story to tell, each in his own fashion.

There is a version of this story in a book illustrated by Cruickshank, but it differs from the oral version.

(4) He told us a long story about a strap, a hut, a cane, a Jew, and a sailor ; which we recognised in stories known to us in Gaelic, in Norse, and in the Italian of Straparold.

(5) A story called the Art of Doctoring, which none of us had ever heard before, and neither will care to hear again. It had the very rare feature of coarseness.

(6) A long story about a poor student who travelled with a black man. They dug up a dead woman, got into a church, made a fire there to roast a sheep, and terrified the parson and clerk. We knew all the incidents in "Goosey Grizzle" in Norse, and in Gaelic stories now told in the Highlands, especially a joke in which one asked if the sheep were fat, which the listening parson understood to be a prelude to his own roasting by "the black man."

(7) Then came a story about another poor student and a parson, and a man with a cat, which was exceeding uncanny. This we did not know ; and I have never heard it since.

By this time we had had enough. The beer was dry, and the "baccy" done ; so I gave the men half-a-crown apiece, and I have never set eyes upon them since. I have met many of their class elsewhere, and from them I have often heard popular tales.

Having said this much to gain your confidence by giving you mine, I may now begin to talk of current British Tradition, as one who knows something about his subject.

British Myths.

It is now an established fact that certain classes of traditional stories always bear a general resemblance one to another when faithfully collected from people who tell, repeat, or recite them ; and that fact is variously explained.

Some hold that nursery tales and more remote elaborate stories, which are the novels and romances of untaught men and women, are separate creations of the human mind, which have been invented over and over again in all quarters of the globe. In like manner it was anciently held that a child who had never heard human speech would nevertheless speak the “ primeval language” at a certain age, and it was even maintained that the experiment, when tried, resulted in Hebrew. But that theory exploded ; and every deaf mute who has the faculty of speech in abeyance, proves the fallacy by his dumb eloquence till he is taught to articulate.

Others strive to trace myths through books to some one author ; but this explanation will not now suffice to account for all the facts known.

The “ primitive language” nowhere exists ; for languages alter, grow, and decay : they are “ traditional,” and so are myths.

“ Continuity” which explains so much, best explains the development and diversity of modern speech ; and Continuity of the same kind best accounts for the strange resemblance which certainly exists in popular tales of different races and nations. As whole families and races of men resemble each other, as whole tribes of languages, by their affinities, indicate a common ancestral speech, so whole collections of childish stories and wild myths are related to each other in various degrees, because, like the people who tell them, and like their words, they all came from distant sources or from one source. Ethnologists, philologists, mythologists, and their disciples now generally believe in a common origin for many European languages and myths, and in continuous successive migrations of so-called Aryan tribes, who set out from Central Asia and spread like waves from a pebble tossed into a pool. Those who followed the setting sun early are now found in the British Isles, still speaking the modern forms of their ancient speech, mingled with older races whom they found in possession, and with younger Aryans who followed and drove them to the great sea, which was a mystery to all at first. If this be true of races, tongues, and myths, then genuine British traditions orally preserved in Celtic languages probably are old Aryan myths, mingled, it may be, with pre-Aryan myths, and with newer versions of old Aryan myths brought from the starting-point by successive waves of emigrants from Central Asia, of whom the Gypsies are the last. Fragments of bone, chips of flint, obsolete weapons, slang, and nonsense all have scientific value for men who know how to use them. Like them, British traditions ought to interest anthropologists who seek to reconstruct “ primeval history” from relics of all kinds.

Few of the educated know how very abundant genuine oral British traditions still are. I can say this from experience.

(1) Amongst gentfolk, the mass of nursery lore is now taken from books ; but almost every family has some traditional story, which goes on from generation to generation, from mother to child. Of these, many were traditions before simple tales were thought worthy of print and gay bindings ; but of these, many are now printed in collections published of late years.

(2) Amongst well-to-do people who have ceased to be children, story-books and stories are alike despised as a rule.

(3) Settled people, who have work to do, generally know nothing about stories.

(4) Certain classes of wandering, idle vagabonds—tinkers, knife-grinders, broom-sellers, vagrants, nomads in this land of civilization—often have great collections of genuine oral traditions, which they repeat for the entertainment of working people at idle times. Such men are to be found in all parts of England, in the country, in London, and in the great towns. It is supposed that two hundred thousand vagrants now wander in the British Isles ; and most vagrants of my acquaintance can recite tales, and delight in them.

(5) Wherever an Irish colony exists, there Irish traditions may be gathered in abundance. As a wave returns when it has reached the shore, so waves of human thought return with returning men eastwards, while the wave itself rolls on westwards over the sea.

(6) Wherever a cluster of Scotch Highlanders have got together anywhere, there also a skilful collector may reap a harvest.

(7) In the lowlands of Scotland a great deal that never was in a book is still to be gleaned, but chiefly in nurseries or amongst wanderers.

(8) Old castles and old dwellings have traditions attached to them ; and old people who live about these places know and preserve traditions as family relics, which are in fact common to similar places all over Europe.

(9) In Wales some traditions are preserved ; but I know little about them.

(10) In Ireland and in the Isle of Man traditional stories abound. That I know.

(11) These are all accessible to English collectors ; for they are told in English. Mr. Robert Hunt has published a book of Cornish tales. Miss Dempster is about to publish a collection of Sutherland tales. An Irishman, Mr. Denney, has published a set of Irish tales.

(12) In the Highlands of Scotland, and in Ireland, where Gaelic is the language of the people, a stranger might suppose that nothing could be gleaned. The richer classes, the gentry, clergy, sheep-farmers, factors, and such like know little or nothing of popular lore. But in these districts any body who can speak Gaelic, and who can make himself pleasant and companionable with cottars and workmen, will find that oral tradition supplies the place of literature, and that whole volumes of all sorts of queer lore could be written from the dictation of men who never learned to read, and who speak only Gaelic, be it the Scotch or Irish dialect. Though familiar from childhood with the people of the West Highlands, my collectors were quite unprepared for the abundance of the harvest, and I was, and still am, somewhat puzzled how to deal with my sheaves, when my gleaners had garnered a lot and I saw how much remained unreaped.

In these distant islands, where men live slowly, and live long, probably because they do not live fast,—in queer rude hovels built of turf and boulders, where men of fourscore years have spent the most of their quiet lives,—in these quiet still pools in the current of life, old thoughts accumulate like gold-dust in a Sutherland burn, and there they are preserved. There on winter nights children, with wondering eyes and mouths agape, sit in the ruddy light of the peat-fire, under the grey canopy of smoke, and listen breathless to these weird old myths. They cease to be ragged, bare-legged lads and lasses, with shock heads of dark or flaxen hair,

unkempt and unshorn; they hear how the bold herd fought the dragon, and won the princess and the kingdom, and their spirits are up and doing like him. Potatoes and milk, wooden noggins and good horn-spoons cease to exist ; while the golden basin and the giant's stores are spread before them by the eloquent voice and gesture of some grey wrinkled old man. And when the story ends, and the fire burns low, and they coil themselves up to rest in their cribs, lads and lasses dream on, and so they dream till they grow up, and grow old, and the old tale becomes a part of their quiet lives. The child's dream of romance is the bright spot in a dull round of hardship and toil, and the man never forgets it while he lives.

Those who know the inner life of a Highland hut, and the power of association, eloquence, and imagination in Celtic minds, cease to marvel at the abundance of oral tradition which is still preserved at the end of the Aryan journey in the British Isles.

The volumes on the table are the gatherings of two years ; they contain my museum, my collection of rubbish, my prehistoric history.

And now I will strive to give you some notion of the contents, and a sample or two to indicate my classification.

Oral History.

A real incident must happen before it can be described ; if described, the event must become a prose narrative. Such narratives of real events are continually growing up, and, as daily gossip grows old, it becomes a kind of personal oral history.

Because human memory is subject to decay, and is only capable of retaining a limited quantity, minor incidents drop out, and the most conspicuous incidents approach each other, and get worn by use as time goes on. So the incidents of last year and last century, and it may be incidents which happened before written history began, get strung together like some old necklace of coins. The string of incidents becomes a " story," as coins, beads, bones, and jewels may become a " bracelet" and adorn an arm.

Let me give you shortly a sample of popular oral history, to show what I mean. In 1863 John Dewan Forster sent me a story which he got from Mrs. George Cameron, of Paisley, a native of Glendarual, in Argyllshire, where the scene of the story is laid.

The black knight of Loch Awe had three sons by his first wife, of whom the eldest was " Cailean Mor" (Great Colin, from whom the Argylls take their patronymic). By a second marriage he had a son called Duncan the Cross, who was fostered at Baile Ghuirgean, now Poltalloch.

When the boys were men the Maccallum clan, wishing their foster brother to be heir to the Black Knights, waylaid Colin, who was returning from some expedition alone, armed with helmet and coat of mail. Colin fled to a barn, which he defended with his sword. They fired the roof. He stood the heat till his metal armour began to burn him, and then he broke through the back-wall of the barn, and jumped into a pool in a river, where he slipped off his armour, swam over, and so escaped. The pool is called the pool of the " luircach" to this day,—that is, the pool of the patched shirt of mail ; in Latin *lorica*.

In this story there is no date ; but we have the name of a real man, and a dress of a certain period, and no end of family histories from which to extract dates.

From one manuscript history I find that “Colin the Great” was slain in a fight with Mac Dougal of Lorn, at the Red Ford, between Loch Awe and Loch Skamadil, and that his tombstone is in Kilchrennan churchyard, on Loch Awe side.

He witnessed a charter of Malcolm, Earl of Lennox, in 1281 ; and the present Duke, as 28th Baron of Lochawe, has set up a monument to this ancestor. I find the same thing in an old family history taken from Cawelore Castle, which ends in 1770 ; and Colin the Great was at the battle of Largs, fought 1263. So here are,—1st, a conspicuous name ; 2ndly, an incident ; 3rdly, a locality ; and 4thly, a dress,—strung into a “story” with a date added by means of the man’s signature to a deed 1281. But between 1770 and 1863, between my two written versions of this narrative, the date had altered 150 years, and the name had changed.

The story is told in the genealogy of 1770 of the fourth “Mac Callan Mor,” who was styled for his eccentricities “Queer Colin,” and who died 1426. The burners are named Clan Calluin Ariskodnish in 1770 ; in 1863 they are called Clann Challum Bhaile Ghuirgean.

As for the main incident, it is in the Icelandic saga the story of ‘Burnt Njall,’ vol. ii. p. 179 :—“Kari ran [out of the burning house] till he came to a stream, and then he threw himself down into it, and so quenched the fire on him.”

Now the first settlers in Iceland were Irishmen and priests. The colonists about the end of the ninth century were Scandinavians, many of whom went from the Hebrides, and with the Hebrides communication was always kept up.

“Colin Mor” was at the battle of Largs, which was fought in 1263, between Scots and Scandinavians ; but the burning of Njal was in 1012,—250 years earlier.

I have stood by the river into which “Kari ran to quench the fire” in Iceland ; and the pool in which somebody else cooled his armour is in Corwal. All is vague and old.

To get at the origin of this tale, there remain but the incidents which are necessary to each other, and these are the heavy dress, the armour, which had first to be cooled, and then thrown off to admit of swimming.

That dress is commonly sculptured on stones in Iona and elsewhere. The upshot of the whole thing is that this “story of the burning” may be as old as 1012, when Njal’s house was burned in Iceland, or as late as 1426, when the writer of the family history put Colin the Queer into Linne Na Luireach, in Corwal. It has a date within about 414 years.

To use my illustration once more ; here is a story which is made up of true or probable incidents arranged in order, like a chaplet of beads, or a necklace of coins. We know that it was ranged in this same fashion a hundred years ago, and that it has changed but little in a hundred years ; we know that it must be as old as the last use of body armour and helmets ; but, for aught we know, the event narrated may have happened to some one of the first wearers of shirts of mail anywhere.

The bit of family history may be true of some one member of the family, but it cannot be true of *Colin the Great* and of *Colin the Queer*. We must be content with tradition as it is : it is a very pretty ornament and a great aid for history. It is wonderfully true and accurate in one sense ; but history cannot be taken from tradition alone, as it now exists. This is a fair sample of one kind of tradition which is very abundant.

Oral history as it now exists is something quite different from written history. Current stories are “ anecdotes ;” family traditions about individuals, their acts and deeds, their adventures at battles which were fought, their private adventures at home and abroad. Popular oral history is ancient gossip, not history. The popular view of great events, looked at from below, is microscopic, and accurate for details, but hazy and vague, distorted and mythical, for all that is beyond and above “ the people.” “ The people,” and their traditions, know as little of the upper classes and their inner life, as the upper classes generally know of the inner life of the people and of the popular mind, when they begin to talk or write about them.

The speakers who held forth in Hyde Park, in May 1867, talked utter nonsense when they spoke of other classes; and their hearers seemed to know less than they did, even in these days of newspapers. The Highland people who followed chiefs to battle in 1745, and earlier, knew less of politics ; but they knew accurately what happened to their own relatives at Culloden, or after it, and their descendants remember and tell stories which have been told over winter fires ever since, on the same spot where the first narrator told his tale fresh from the event. Tradition, so far as I have gone, seems to have no power of preserving history entire. I have never found a trace of Bannockburu.

But the popular mind, especially in an old country where people vegetate, has an almost unlimited power of retaining fragments of history, which, like fragments of glass in a kaleidoscope, take strange forms, and become myths.

I find that personal anecdotes are common property, and that one anecdote gets localized in many places. It often occurs that a story told in Argyllshire of the chief Mac Calain Mor, is elsewhere told of some other chief. Thus for example, a story which is told in Argyll of the founder of the family of Ardkinglas, is told in Moray of the founder of the Cawdor family ; but the main incidents in that story were told to me in Shropshire by a broom-seller. The scene was laid by him in the south of England, and the hero of the tale had no name at all. The story is in the Red Book, a Welsh MS. about 360 years old.

In this case real events probably get jumbled up with an Aryan myth, which here turns upon the discovery of a treasure hid under a tree.

Take one more sample : an incident recorded in a manuscript of the reign of James the Sixth, as part of the story of a real battle which was fought in the Western Isles, is now told in Eastern Ross, and is there localized, and made mythical and magical. It is a story of a dwarf who was despised by a giant before the fight, and who slew the giant with an arrow in battle. The dwarf had become a fairy in Ross.

Popular history is thus devoid of geography and dates and accuracy, where it can be brought to book ; but it is singularly accurate in minute details. An incident, as told in the reign of James the Sixth, is so told in this reign as to be certainly recognized for the same account of an event. But when and where the real giant met the real dwarf is not to be learned with certainty from oral tradition.

In these few samples of one large class of traditions I have tried to show how a legend sprouts from a fact. The story is put into words, and narrated at the place where the event happened. It is accurately told at the place at first, and becomes a “ local tradition” there. As time passes, even local narrators become uncertain about dates and persons. When the locality is changed, uncertainty extends to local incidents, to geography, to dates, and to persons. Finally, after long time and far travel, nothing remains to the wandering tradition but incidents in a certain order.

The narrative becomes a thing like thistle-down, which may settle anywhere and grow ; the flying seed will always become a thistle, but the plant may be stunted or luxuriant, according to climate and soil. In the course of ages varieties may increase, so as to puzzle those who try to classify weapons, men, and legends.

Vagrant Traditions.

I will next produce a sample of a local tradition changed into a flying rumour, a personal narrative become impersonal, personal property given to humanity in common.

I take a story which has never been published, so far as I know, and which was sent me in Gaelic by John Dewar in December 1802.

This is the outline of it :—There was a man, at some time or other, who was well off, and had many children.

This at once disposes of dates and geography, and personalty.

When the family grew up the man gave a well-stocked farm to each of his children. This subdivision of land by tenants is the dress and decoration put on by the class who now tell this tale ; but it will be seen that the backbone of the thing might equally well support a farmer's body clad in any legal dress that happens to fit the knowledge of the narrator and his audience.

When the man was old, his wife died, and he divided all that he had amongst his children, and lived with them tm'n about in their houses.

This points to the old Highland cluster of houses, and to the farm worked by several families in common. In this the man acted King Lear, and, as Shakspeare's plays are widely known, a natural but mistaken inference would be that in Shakspeare's mind was the origin of this story. This sequel is not the sequel of the play ; this is comedy, not tragedy.

Like Lear's children, this man's sons and daughters got tired of him and ungrateful, and tried to get rid of him when he came to stay with them. At last an old friend found him sitting tearful by the wayside, and, hearing the cause of his distress, took him home ; there he gave him a bowl of gold, and a lesson which the old man learned and acted.

When all the ungrateful sons and daughters had gone to a preaching, the old man went to a green knoll, where his grand-children were at play, and, pretending to hide, he turned up a flat hearthstone in an old stance, and went out of sight.

He spread out his gold on a big stone in the sunlight, and he muttered "Ye are mouldy, ye are hoary, ye will be better for the sun."

The grandchildren came sneaking over the knoll, and, when they had seen and heard all that they were intended to see and hear, they came running up with " Grandfather, what have you got there ?"

" That which concerns you not, touch it not !" said the grandfather ; and he swept his gold into a bag, and took it home to his old friend.

The grandchildren told what they had seen, and thenceforth the children strove who should be kindest to the rich old grandfather.

Still acting on the counsel of his sagacious old chum, he got a stout little black chest made, and carried it always with him. When any one questioned him as to the contents, his answer always was, "That will be known when the chest is opened."

When he died, he was buried with great honour and ceremony, and then the chest was opened by the expectant heirs. In it were found broken potsherds, and bits of slate (to chink pleasantly, I suppose), and a long-handled, white, wooden mallet, with this legend on its head : —

So am faroiche fiorm,
Thabhair gnoc anusa cheann,
Do n' fhear nach gleidh maoui da' fein,
Ach bheir a cliuid go leir d'a chlann.

Translation.

Here is the fair mall,
To give a knock on the skull,
To the man who keeps no gear for himself,
But gives his all to his bairns.

This is a fair sample of a very large class of traditional wisdom now current in Scotland. The story must have been invented after agriculture and fixed habitations, after laws of property and inheritance ; but it may be as old as the lake-dwellings of Switzerland, or Egyptian civilization, or Adam, whose sons tilled the earth.

In this class I would place the works of Doni, Straparola, Boccaccio, and early prose writers of "novels." With the class I would place modern novels, which are but luxuriant elongated specimens of the same mental growths. These are tales of the human understanding, and belong to a certain stage in progress and civilization.

Compositions, Ballads, &c.

It will be observed that my last specimen differed from the rest by having a bit of composition at the end. A great many current traditions carry with them a pithy sentence, which becomes a proverb, or a bit of jingling rhyme, which is a kind of artificial memory. This helps to keep the incidents on their string, and preserve the unity of a story. I venture to say that all who have heard even my translation will remember the last story all the better for this bit of composition. We may, then, conclude that poetry is a good vehicle for preserving facts. If Homer, or others in his name, had not turned Trojan "local history" and "flying Greek rumours" into verse, no one could hope to remember entire the long story which must have been narrated after the events which happened at Troy. I therefore class together all ballads which are orally preserved ; and of them a considerable number seem to preserve the memory of historical facts which have no other record.

I have seen a large troop of Faroe islanders, men and women, great girls, young men and little children, holding hands and winding about a house like a great snake, each joint in the tail singing chorus to a ballad, of which the head man sang the verses. The subject was an ancient Scandinavian story, and it has been orally preserved in the ballad, as the Greek story of the Iliad was preserved in verse before it was written.

In the Highlands of Scotland a great number of ballads are remembered and repeated. Of these, some were written down in 1530; many are "Ossianic," and attributed to Ossian. I

wish I could add that the Epic Ossian is orally preserved. I have not found it, and I believe that all epics are founded upon ballads which were vagrant traditions, and oral history of real events.

The sequence which I have thus attempted to show is, —

1st. An event.

2nd. A narrative.

3rd. A narrative broken and distorted.

4th. A narrative helped by a form of words.

(a) A proverbial saying.

(b) A measured prose.

(c) A verse of some kind.

The next class may be called Popular Romance.

Popular Romance.

Popular romances are, as I believe, compounded of fragments of narrations of real events which have taken a form which suits fancy, and is easily remembered. They are like plants which are made of chemical bases, or of “ protoplasm.”

The story which is now told by word of mouth in the highlands of Scotland by men who cannot read, and who understand no language but their own, is told in the lowlands by highland drovers, and is taken up by thousands of vagrants and spread abroad. The story which the gipsy vagrant tells at a wake, is carried back to his distant home in the islands. The emigrant carries his story to the antipodes ; and so vagrant traditions wander over the world. The very same collection of incidents, woven into a story, is told in Norse, in Scandinavia ; and of these queer myths many are also told in various dialects of Lapp, in the north of Russia. The story is Aryan, and non-Aryan at once. We know that the very same incidents in the same sequence, differently dressed up and put on the stage, were made to act in Italian by Straparola, by Doni, and by other early writers. Further, some of these are known to black races in Africa.

The reason why some animal has a stumpy tail, is told in an African language, in Norse, in Gaelic, in Lapp, and in some South-American form of speech. It is the same story all over the world, but it is differently told everywhere.

After trying every theory that has come within my ken, I hold that popular tales are, in the widest sense of the word, human.

The story about the stumpy tail is neither Aryan nor Turanian ; it is common to the human race, white and black now, I believe it to be impossible to say what race first strung this rude chaplet of beads, as it is impossible to find out the first owner of a vertebrate skeleton and fix its date [1].

The author of the preface to the translation of Norse tales has said that a nation dreams all its history in its popular tales. With my present experience I hold that he said well, but that he

did not say enough. A man dreams bits of his life and of all that he has learned of the past, with all that he thinks about the future. Like a man, a race of men dreams its longer life, and all that it learned from still older ancestors, and learned to think about the unknown future in its religious beliefs.

All that I learn of the past from the beginning of human thought seems to hang together with popular traditions. The more I learn, the more points of contact I find between mythology and popular tales. As a man can often anatomize a dream, and assign each incongruous element in it to something which happened in waking hours ; so, when I sit down to examine traditions, I seem to find shivered fragments of history, of manners and customs, religions, and laws of all times, so far as they are known to me. I believe that the same thing has been found by every one who has worked for himself on his own bough in this great tree of knowledge. I believe that the same thing will prove true if ever we get to know all the current traditions of the world.

And now, one word in conclusion. It seems to me worthy of your Society to take up this withered branch of ethnology, and treat it on scientific grounds, to see if it will grow.

While every man is his own architect, the result is a sorry hut ; but if every man who finds a stick or a stone brings it to a builder, he may help to raise a goodly cairn. I have brought you some pebbles and drift, which are but rubbish till sorted. If put in their places, these waifs and strays may help builders and architects who construct theories out of rubbish and old bones. If you accept my rubbish, and use it, you will do me great honour. The catch-words, the keynotes to this harmony of popular tales I take to be “ Continuity” and “ Evolution.” No big work of any kind is ever done without combination : it would take many able workmen and much hard labour to gather and to make good use of current oral tradition, even in the British isles. No single man, be he Solon in wisdom and Hercules in strength, is fit to accomplish the whole work in a life as long as that of Methusaleh. If the work be worth doing, let us combine.

When my friend Col. Lane Fox asked me to read you a paper about the migrations of popular tales, to last for half an hour, I knew that the task had kept me working half my life, and that I could not yet see half the size of it.

I hope that I have now said enough to show you what a gigantic many-headed dragon of a subject has to be fought and conquered before you can hope to taste the golden fruit of this tree of knowledge, and drink a draught from “ the weary well at the world’s end.”

[1] The author here read samples of Popular Romances.

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