Bards, Ministrels & Songs

The song lore of Ireland ; Erin's story in music and verse

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When Ireland lost her independence, Norman and Saxon did all they could to uproot everything that recalled the old order. Bard, harper, minstrel, and story-teller, those who entertained the Irish gentry with the poetry arid music of their race, were regarded by the invaders with peculiar displeasure. But the things which made the foreigners hate the whole artist tribe, endeared them to all ranks of the Irish people. Even the English of the Pale came under the spell and, disregarding the law, they gave the singers hospitable entertainment.

The gravest charges brought against the brotherhood were licentiousness and enmity towards the English. Spenser complains of the bards that, " So far from instructing young men in moral discipline, they do themselves more deserve to be sharply disciplined ; for they seldom use to choose unto themselves the doing of good men for the ornaments of their poems ; but whomsoever they find most licentious in life, most bold and lawless in his doings, most dangerous and desperate in all parts of disobedience and rebellion, him they set up and glorify in their rhymes, him they praise to the people, and to young men make an example to follow." There is in this statement a kind of truth that is more misleading than downright lying. The especial favorites of the bards were the pagan heroes Cuchullin and Finn Mac Cool, Oisin and Caoilte, men whose lives do not square with Christian morality. But neither, for that matter, do the lives of some of the English kings, which Shakespeare made into plays. Yet Spenser never protested against the immorality of Shakespeare.
There is probably some truth in Spenser's assertion that the bards led the chieftains into riotous excess ; but he fails to show, that, in so doing, they were falling any lower in the moral scale than their contemporaries of England, France, Spain and Italy. Of this we may be sure : the offenses of the bards would have attracted little attention, if their poems had not been an expression of the unconquerable spirit of the Irish race—

" The firm resolve not to submit or yield."

It would be folly to advance on behalf of the bards any claim to virtue higher than the prevalent morality of their time. They were artists and had the artist's prodigal disposition. But they were at least as virtuous livers as the frequenters of Chaucer's Tabard ; the example they set was as innocent as that of the brotherhood of the Mermaid ; they were as staunch upholders of the ten commandments as the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth.

Spenser's indictment is based on the assumption that there is something inherently vicious and perverse in rebellion against British rule. He vilifies the Irish bards with the same pen that exalts Queen Elizabeth into a paragon of virtue and beauty. He was intruded into Desmond's manor of Kilcolman, and part of the estate of 3028 acres and chief rents made over to him had belonged to Lord Thetford. He came over to Ireland a stranger ; he never learned the language of the people and there still exist records of complaints made against him of encroaching on his neighbors, taking the land of poorer folks, wasting the wood and

turning the corn to his own account. His mood is ferocious even for a confessed enemy, for he deliberately advocates a policy the object of which is to drive the Irish into such straits that they will “ consume themselves and devour one another” !

Yet Spenser is forced to admit the art and invention of the bards, though he only knew their work at second hand.

“ Yes, truly,” he says, “ I have caused diverse of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them ; and surely they savored of sweete witt and good invention, but skilled not of the goodlye omamentes of poetrye ; yet were they sprinckled with some pretty flowers of theyr owne naturall devise, which gave good grace and comeliness unto them, the which it is great pittye to see soe abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which would with good usage, serve to beautifye and adorne virtue.”

If the bardic poetry had not shown a spirit unconquerably Irish and national, its morality would never have been called in question. But the virtues of the bards were “ sanctified and holy traitors” to them. They loved Ireland and, for that fault, they suffered misrepresentation, want, imprisonment, confiscation, death itself. But no persecution could extinguish their patriotism. For centuries their poetry and their music kept alive the national spirit and, if the world asks for their deathless monument, it may be found in the long line of cruel exactments by which the English government vainly tried to effect their extermination.

As long ago as the Parliament assembled at Kilkenny by Edward the Third, in 1367, the “ Bards, minstrels and rhymours” entered upon their long martyrdom. Edward and his advisers noted with alarm that life in Ireland was fast turning Normans and English into Irishmen, and they suspected the bardic company of an important part in the transformation. To check the process the Parliament issued a mandate to the sheriff and seneschal of the liberty of Kilkenny, forbidding the “ entertainment” of these persons. If the bards and minstrels might no longer be “ entertained,” their livelihood was taken from them. But the Parliament over-estimated its power. An act which made high treason of intermarriage between the invaders and the native population and forbade the putting of English children to nurse in Irish homes was too sweeping to be practical, But it was there to serve at need as an engine of oppression. It might always be invoked when a pretext was wanted for some act of tyranny.

Sixty years later, in 1435, it was determined to move in the matter more vigorously. It had been complained that comedians, harpers, bards and others “ went among the English and exercised their arts and minstrelsies, and afterwards proceeded to the Irish enemies and led them upon the king’s liege subjects.” So Henry the Sixth ordered his marshals in Ireland to imprison the harpers, and, to whet their zeal, he allowed them to appropriate to their own use the gold and silvers, horses, harness and instruments of the captives. The bait held out was an attractive one ; but the measure seems to have been abortive ; for, in 1481, an act was passed forbidding the entertainment of harpers as guests.

Henry the Eighth acted with characteristic craft. He made it law that any person who should make verses “ To anyone under God on earth except the king” should lose his goods. From time immemorial the bards had sung the praises of the chieftains, proclaimed their genealogies, incited the living to emulate the prowess of their ancestors. The Henrician act seems to have had little more effect than its predecessors. Possibly it too was meant as a threat rather than an ordinance to be rigorously enforced.

A sterner policy was adopted when Elizabeth came to the throne. The time for threats had gone by. An act was passed directed against poets and musicians indifferently, grouping them under the one contemptuous name of “ rhymers,” It sets forth that these “ rhymours” “ by their ditties and rhymes, made to divers lords and gentlemen in Ireland, to the commendation and high praise of extortion, rape, ravin and other injustice, encourage these lords and gentlemen rather to follow these vices than to leave them.” The act continues “ That for making the said rhymes rewards are given by the said lords and gentlemen” and concludes that “ For the abolishing of so heinous an offense, orders be taken.” The nature of those orders may be gathered from the fact that O’Brien, Earl of Thomond, hanged three poets. In 1578, Sir Lucas Dillon, chief baron, was ordered to punish all malefactors, meaning thereby all rebels, rhymers and Irish harpers. He obeyed by hanging a priest and Rory oge, a brehon. To rid North Wicklow of “ Bards, rhymers and other notorious malefactors,” he issued a proclamation, warning them that they would be whipped if they were caught in that part of the country after ten days and with death after twenty days.

These orders and enactments were part of a general policy which aimed at the destruction of all that savored of Irish custom or spirit. The temper of the government may be gathered from articles between Sir John O’Reilly and the Irish privy council, drawn in 1584. Sir John is expressly forbidden to assemble the queen’s people upon the hills, to keep brehons or to suffer the brehon law to be used within his country. Lastly, “ He is not to use or keep within the house any Irish bard, carroghe or rhymer ; but, to the utmost of his power, shall remove the same from his country.”

But the bards and minstrels were not to be silenced. So, in 1606, the lord lieutenant of Munster issued a proclamation, ordering the marshals of the province “ to exterminate by martial law all manner of bards, harpers, etc.” This was no unauthorized act of tyranny ; it was the mature determination of the government. Ten days after the issuance of the mandate. Queen Elizabeth wrote to Lord Barrymore, ordering him “ to hang the harpers wherever found and destroy their instruments.”

With what thoroughness the government policy was carried out we may learn from a poem written by one of the proscribed bards, Andreas Mac Marcuis, about 1607. The translation is by Dr. Sigerson :

Homes are heartless, harps in fetters.
Guerdons none for men of letters.
Banquets none, nor merry meetings :
Hills ring not the chase’s greetings.

Songs of war make no heart stronger,
Songs of peace inspire no longer,
In great halls at close of day,
Sound no more our fathers’ lays.

While the musicians of the Elizabethan court were writing down Irish tunes for fair ladies to play en the virginals, the men who sang those selfsame tunes in Ireland were suffering persecution. The experience of Mac Marculs was typical of the fate that had befallen the whole tuneful brethren. A bard of the North, in the service of Aedh (Hugh) Mac Anghosa, who had fled the country, leaving his dependant protectorless, exclaims :

If a sage of song should be
In the wage of court or king,
Ha ! the gallows bars the way.
Ah I since Ae from port took wing.

Under the rule of James the First the persecution of bards and minstrels went on hand in hand with the planting of the lands of the Irish chiefs with English and Scotch settlers. About 1620, O'Gnive, chief bard of the Nials of Clanboy, composed a lament for his bardic brethren. These verses are an account of what was actually taking place under the eye of the poet, himself marked out for destruction.

Fallen the land of learned men.
The bardic band is fallen ;
None now learn the song to sing ;
For long our fern is fading.
Scan the schools made hard to steer
In Ulster's land and Leinster ;
Southward 'tis so ; nine in ten
From fine and foe have fallen.
Connacht, crafty forge of song.
Is also hurled headlong.
Doom and gloom have hushed the harp ;
For us no room, no rampart.

During the war between Charles and the Cromwellians, harpers, minstrels and wandering musicians had to carry letters of identification, made out by the magistrate of the place to which they belonged. Without those papers they could not travel. When the Cromwellians gained the upper hand musical instruments of all kinds were destroyed, organs in churches because the Puritans thought the organ godless, the harp because it helped to keep alive the national spirit. Lynch, in his " Cambrensis Eversus," says that, " After 1641 the harp was broken wherever it could be found and thus all memory of its form and materials will be unknown and lost to our immediate posterity." But Lynch underrated his countrymen's secretiveness and tenacity.

Throughout the penal days, following the accession of William of Orange, down to the middle of the eighteenth century, poet and minstrel shared the fate of the persecuted clergy. They followed their profession by stealth, hiding away in glens and caves, hunted by prize seekers as wolves were hunted in days of old. Yet hard though their lot was, it had in it something heroic which compensated for many miseries. Outlawed and ostracized though they were, these men represented the ancient culture of Erin, and the people loved them.

Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, the long tyranny wore to an end. The ancient songs were heard in the land once more ; but the bardic order was dead. Men sometimes say the Irish harp is dead likewise ; but that is no true word : the genius which made the harp of Erin famous throughout Christendom will yet awaken it to new life.

What would we not give for the autobiography of one of the old bards—the chronicling of his daily doings, the company he moved among, and the scenes he saw It would be one of the most interesting books in the world. Perhaps the unharvested treasure of Gaelic hidden

away in old rooms may bring to light some such story and enable us to look on the past through eyes which saw as no latter-day historian can hope to see.

Fortunately for us, the darkness which enshrouds the lives of the bards does not cloak from view the story of the harpers. These melodious servitors of the Gael were the peculiar interest of that first serious investigator into the subject of Irish song, Edward Bunting. Thanks to him, we possess a comparative abundance of curious lore concerning performers on the harp.

It has already been shown what an important part the harp played among the Irish of pre-Christian days and how, after the people had been converted to the faith of Christ, even churchmen used the instrument to accompany themselves in singing. Irish literature shows that down to modern times the harp never ceased to be the musical instrument of the whole people in preference to all others. Hardiman quotes an MSS. history of Ireland, written in 1636, now in the library of the Irish Academy, which throws vivid light on this point. According to this authority " The Irish are much addicted to music generally and you will find very few of their gentry, either men or women, but can play upon the harp ; also you shall find no house of any account without one or two of these instruments, and they always keep a harper to play for them at their meals and all other times, so often as they have a desire to recreate themselves or others which come to their house."

No body of men ever led more picturesque lives than did these harpers, in spite of the fact that they were often chosen for their profession because of the affliction of blindness. They played for kings and great ladies ; they traveled far and wide and, when they were dead, Scotland and Ireland quarreled over their possession, as the seven fair cities quarreled over Homer. Rory dall (blind) O'Cahan, in Scottish story Rory dall Morison, is called by Bunting, " the first of our later harpers." He was contemporaneous with James the First, who sent for him and placed the royal hand on his shoulder. A courtier felicitated O'Cahan on the honor that had befallen him. " A greater than King James has placed his hand on my shoulder," said Rory. " Who was that, man ?" cried King James. " O'Neill, sire," said the harper. On another occasion, Lady Eglintoun peremptorily bade him play a certain tune ; but Rory, indignant at the slight, rose and left the castle. But the dame expressed her sorrow and the musician forgave her. He wrote the tune, " Da mihi manum" in token of reconciliation.

There is the closest connection between the minstrelsy of Scotland and that of Ireland. Jameson in his " Letters from the North of Scotland" says that " Till within the memory of persons still living, the school for Highland poetry and music was Ireland and thither professional men were sent to be accomplished in those arts." Eminent harpers passed and repassed between the two countries. The Hebrides and the Scotch Highlands were a sure asylum for Irish bards and harpers in time of persecution. One harper, Thomas O'Connellan, they made baillie of Edinburgh. Tradition credits O'Connellan with the composition of " The Dawning of the Day" and " Planxty Davis" (also known as " The Battle of Killiecrankie"). O'Connellan is further said to have taken into Scotland the original " Lochaber," the composition of which is assigned to Miles O'Reilly of Killincorra, County Cavan. Connellan himself was a native of Cloonamahon, in Sligo, and he died at Loughgurm, County Limerick, before 1700. When Thomas was dead, his brother Laurence, said to be the composer of " Molly McAlpin," for which Moore wrote " Remember the Glories of Brian the Brave," went to Scotland, taking with him his brother's compositions. The fame of the brothers filled the whole Gaelic Northland, both Erin and Alba. An ode to William O'Connellan attributes

his power over the strings to the inspiration of a fairy, an explanation of musical skill as old as pagan Ireland.

> There is no heart's desire
> Can be felt by a king
> That thy hand cannot snatch
> From the soul of the string,
>
> By the magical virtue
> And might of its sway ;
> For, charmer, thou stealest
> Thy notes from a fay.

Forced to leave their native land, some of these itinerant harpists went far afield and led adventurous lives. Acland Kane, a native of Drogheda, where he was born in 1720, made his way to Rome and played before the Pope and the Pretender. Leaving the Eternal City, he traveled to Madrid, where there was a large colony of expatriated Irishmen. Kane soon wore out the welcome of his friends, however, and had to make his way to Bilbao afoot, carrying his harp on his back. His latter years he spent in Scotland, where he died in 1790. O'Kane was burly and probably choleric. It is related that, when he offended his Highland patrons, " they cut his nails, so that he could not play till they grew to their proper length"—a form of punishment which seems about as rational as gagging a nightingale.

As the old order decayed and the ancient Irish families grew more and more impoverished, the harpers lost cast. They ceased to form part of the household of the hereditary chieftains and had to eke out a livelihood by traveling about the country, staying a week with this family, a month with that, always welcome, always feasted, veritable lords of misrule to the younger generation. Their besetting sin was riotous living ; but, seeing that they were under the ban of the law, and had no constant service, there is little wonder in that. Perhaps the greater marvel is that most of them behaved so decently. Still they sank low from their old estate. Imagine the shock to the worshippers, when Thady Elliott struck up " Planxty Conor" in the most solemn part of the Mass. Thady used to accompany the service at Navan Chapel on his harp and he was guilty of this gross irreverence to win a bet. Under the old régime, the Brehon law would have meted him out severe punishment. But now the Brehons were no more ;—the harper was a masterless man and it was against the law to say Mass. Owen Keenan, who belongs to the same age as Elliott—the first half of the eighteenth century—marks the same sure decadence of the class. He fell in love with the French governess of his patron, Mr. Stewart, of Cookstown, County Tyrone, and, notwithstanding his blindness, he tried to emulate Romeo and climb to his lady's window by a rope ladder. But his master jailed him for a house-breaker. Keenan outwitted him, however, for the time at least. Another blind harper, Higgins by name, made the jailer's wife drunk, stole the keys and liberated his friend, who, with a boy on his back, made his escape. Keenan was recaptured, however, and came within an ace of conviction at the assizes. Then he emigrated to America with his Juliet, who forsook him. Sir Mawlby Crofton and other officers, quartered at Oswego, told how Keenan came there, quarreled with the company, " beat them very prettily and took a Miss Williams from them all."

Some such promiscuous amorist of the harp is celebrated in that old song, the " Sosheen Bawn," or " The White Coverlet." It tells how a harper called at a farmhouse and played the gallant with the rich housewife's daughter with such effrontery as to rouse the latter's ire.

Determined to get rid of him, she asked him to help her to twist a straw rope. The unsuspecting harper consented. As he twisted the rope he had to back away from the good-wife, and, when he had passed the threshold, she slammed the door in his face. In the following verse, translated by Dr. Hyde, the harper is pleading his suit with the daughter of the house :

> If thou art mine, be mine, white love of my heart ;
> If thou art mine, be mine by day and by night ;
> If thou art mine, ever enshrined in thy heart ;
> And my misfortune and misery that thou art not with me in
> the evening for wife.

The maiden answers :

> Do you hear me, you silly, who are making love?
> Return home again and remain another year as you are.

To which the harper rejoins :

> I came into the house, where the bright love of my heart was
> And the hag put me out, twisting of the Suggaun (straw rope).

The melody with which this song is associated, " The Twisting of the Rope," is a perfect example of the waywardly artistic. It was almost the despair of Moore, when he wrote for it, " How dear to me the hour," and he describes it as " one of those wild sentimental rakes which it will not be easy to tie down in sober wedlock with poetry."

Fortunately for the precision of our knowledge of the ancient way of playing the harp, Bunting enjoyed the privilege of the friendship of Denis Hempson, an old harper who, born in 1695, lived to the patriarchal age of 112. Bunting says that he " realized the antique picture drawn by Cambrensis and Galilei, for he played with long crooked nails and, in his performance, the tinkling of the small wires under the deep notes of the bass, was peculiarly thrilling." Hempson lost his sight by smallpox, when a boy, and he was taught the harp by Bridget O'Cahan, for, as Hempson said, confirming the statement made in the manuscript history quoted above, " In those old days, women as well as men were taught the Irish harp in the best families and every old Irish family had harps in abundance." Bunting tells how, in playing, Hempson " got the strings between the flesh and the nail, not like other harpers, who pulled it by the fleshy part of the fingers alone. He had an admirable method of playing staccato and legato, in which he could run through rapid divisions in an astonishing style. His fingers lay over the strings in such a manner that, when the stroke was with one finger, the other was instantly ready to stop the vibrations. so that the staccato passages were heard in full perfection."

Bunting did his best to encourage the performance of the Irish harp by promoting annual meetings and competitions. But the old harpers died off and there were few to learn their art. It seemed as though the harp were irrevocably doomed to extinction. But so too did the Irish language, and to-day Gaelic is being revived all over Erin. The Irish genius which made the harp what it was can resuscitate the old glory of the harp, and the music of the ancient Gael will be heard in the land once
more.

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How The Songs came down to us

THE bards and musicians form individual strands in the tradition which links us with the Celtic past. Another strand is the people themselves—the common people, the peasantry. Singers from pure love, musicians untaught by any teacher save God, men and women, from childhood to age, bore their part in preserving Ireland's birthright of song.

A truly remarkable circumstance about this tradition is the fact that until recent times it was independent of written record. The Irishman did not know what it was not to trust to his memory ; to this day the Irish piper rarely makes use of notes ; as for the people at large, they sang the old tunes because they could not remember the time when they did not know them. A mother crooned their infancy with lullabies ; the sound of the spinning song was as familiar to them as the glow of the peat on the hearth. Without conscious effort, they learned a number of songs which became part of their being, like the language they spoke. Strains of gladness and sorrow, tunes wedded to the tasks of daily life, left an indelible impress on the mind. It is in facts like these that we must seek an explanation of the survival of Irish music.

It may be objected that, though such a tradition will hold good for a number of generations, it does not furnish sufficient grounds for belief in the high antiquity attributed to many examples of Irish melody. In our slavish regard for the written word, we are apt to forget the tenacity of the human memory. We need a Coleridge to remind us that a fact once apprehended by the human mind is retained for ever. If we forget, it is not because the record has been destroyed, but because the throng of impressions prevents its coming to the surface. Touch the right note of suggestion and it will emerge anew. But the life of the Irish peasant was simpler than the life we lead to-day. The chambers of the memory had fewer guests and they were better entertained. In the whirl of modern existence, one impression crowds upon another so quickly that our mind is a blur, rather than a succession of easily recoverable images. If it be true, as we are told, that the liturgies of the East were handed down orally, from master to novice, for hundreds of years, and thus preserved in their original purity, there can be no difficulty in believing in the perpetuation of Irish music, independent of any written record. For music, especially when it is associated with words, is infinitely easier to remember than liturgical sentences.

The Irish musician was not deemed competent unless he knew his music as perfectly as the storytellers knew the tales of Deirdre and Finn Mac Cool. That is the reason why no use was made of notation. If it had been thought necessary to write down the old tunes, the Irish people could easily have done it—none better than they. People sometimes rush to the conclusion that, because the old melodies were not recorded, the Irish must have been ignorant of notation. An appeal to history will quickly dismiss this fallacy. The monasteries of St. Gall and Ratisbon, renowned from the beginning for the cultivation of the Gregorian chant, were founded by Irishmen. Between these great centers of musical learning and Ireland there was continual intercourse. It is obvious, therefore, that, if the Irish had chosen to write down their melodies, instead of leaving them to the safeguarding of popular remembrance, they could have done so. Their own priests, at home, were thoroughly conversant with the Gregorian notation and could easily have used it for secular purposes as it was used in other countries. But it never occurred to them to do so. The Irish cherished their songs so dearly that artificial aids to memory would have struck them as a needless encumbrance. The monstrous idea that

the old tunes could die only dawned on the Celtic mind in an age of decadence. Even persecution was powerless to suppress them, for the persecutors themselves came under their spell. A more dangerous enemy was the gradual Anglicization of the people. The spirit which made people whip their children for talking Irish was little likely to breed affection for Irish songs. But the deadliest enemy of all was famine. The calamities of the years 1845-6 did more to destroy Ireland's music than either the intolerance of the Saxon or the supineness of the Celt. The old folks, those natural depositaries of tradition and lovers of the Ancestral song, died off in thousands, and the young people, growing up in a land blasted by misfortune, had nobody to teach them the ancient lore of the race. Many fled to America, and, if their children to-day are ignorant of Irish music and poetry, it must be written down, not as a fault, but as a misfortune. Fault or misfortune, the present generation ought to remedy the defect.

The famine would have dealt Irish music its death blow had it not been for the patriotism of a few noble-minded men. These men were the collectors and recorders of Irish songs and dances. Burke Thumoth, who published a book of Irish airs as far back as 1720, was the pioneer in this truly Irish undertaking and he had one or two imitators in a small way in the same generation. But the systematic work of collecting the old music really began with Edward Bunting, who, between the years 1796 and 1840, published three volumes of Irish tunes, the majority of them taken down from the playing of the last sad remnant of the Irish harpers. But Bunting, enthusiast though he was, had little science, and the crowning achievement of Irish song collecting was done by that great Celticist, Dr. Greorge Petrie, one of the brightest names in the annals of Irish art and letters, the worthy brother in antiquarian research of Eugene O'Curry. From boyhood days the collecting of the old tunes was Petrie's passion. Throughout his long life of usefulness, whenever he heard an Irish melody which was unfamiliar to him, he noted it down. His holidays he spent now in one province, now in another, penetrating into little frequented parts of the country, sometimes with O'Curry for companion, always with his faithful notebook and his beloved violin.

When we feel grateful to Thomas Moore for " The Meeting of the Waters" we also owe thanks to George Petrie, who took down the air from the singing of an old peasant woman in Sligo and thus found the poet his inspiration. To Petrie melody was " that divine essence without which music is as a soulless body" and, of all national airs, he considered those of Erin the most beautiful. Yet, with the modesty of a true scholar, he belittled his work as a collector, called it a hobby, a recreation, whereas, in reality, it was the life work of a man whose spirit was " finely touched" to music and destined to do a work for Erin worthy to rank with the achievements of her greatest warriors and sages. He took almost infinite pains to secure a correct record of the songs he noted down. Though not a musical pedagogue and, therefore, liable to unessential errors which a precisian would not fall into, Petrie had the greater gifts of a fine ear and a keen sense of rhythm. Added to this he possessed the crowning virtue of a philosophic conception of the way in which a collector of folk-songs should do his work. He never fell into the sin of which Moore and his musical collaborator, Sir Thomas Stevenson, were so often guilty : he never modified an ancient melody to suit modish ideas of musical beauty. His honesty was invincible ; he set down what he heard with the exactitude of an archaeologist.

Petrie's biographer has left us a picture of him, at work in the island of Aran» and it is at once a charming tableau and an inspiring proof of Petrie's artistic sincerity.

“ Inquiries having been made as to the names of persons ‘ who had music,’ that is, who were known as possessing and singing some of the old airs, an appointment was made with one or two of them to meet the members of the party at some little cottage near to the little village of Kilronan, which was their headquarters.

“ To this cottage, when evening fell, Petrie, with his manuscript music book and violin, and always accompanied by his friend, Professor Eugene O’Curry, used to proceed.

“ Nothing could excel the strange picturesqueness of the scenes which night after night were thus presented.

“ On approaching the house, always lighted up by a blazing turf fire, it was seen to be surrounded by the islanders, while its interior was crowded by figures ; the rich colors of whose dresses, heightened by the firelight, showed with a strange vividness and variety, while their fine countenances were all animated with curiosity and pleasure.

“ It would have required a Rembrandt to paint the scene. The minstrel—sometimes an old woman, sometimes a beautiful girl or a young man—was seated on a low stool in the chimney corner, while chairs for Petrie and O’Curry were placed opposite, the rest of the crowded audience remaining standing. The song having been given, O’Curry wrote the Irish words, when Petrie’s work began. The singer recommenced, stopping at every two or three bars of the melody to permit the writing of the notes, and often repeating the passage until it was correctly taken down and then going on with the melody exactly from the point where the singing was interrupted. The entire air being at last obtained, the singer—a second time—was called upon to give the song continuously, and, when all corrections had been made, the violin—an instrument of great sweetness and power—was produced and the air played as Petrie alone could play it, and often repeated.”

For half a century Petrie pursued this labor of love, and some idea of the monumental character of his achievement may be gathered from the fact that he collected no fewer than 2000 Irish tunes. A proportion of these are variants, put on record because of the light they shed on the growth of melody. Allowing for duplications of this kind, there still remains a collection of some 1800 Irish melodies—a treasury of folk-song the equal of which no other country in the world can boast. Ireland, the Cinderella among nations, kept at home to be the servant of her more fortunate sisters, has dreamed dreams in the solitude of her chimney corner, dreams so beautiful that even her rivals are moved when they hear them. Most inspiring thought of all, the memory of these songs has been kept green, not so much by the great and noble, though they have borne their part, as by the common people.

It is a fascinating occupation to try to trace the melodies to their origin. We marvel and rejoice at the humbleness of the sources whence such beautiful melodies flow. That pathetic love-song, “ I once loved a boy,” was noted down by the daughter of Smollett Holden from the singing of a servant girl. The air now known as “ My Love’s an Arbutus,” from its association with Mr. Graves’ lovely song, was obtained by Petrie from the singing of an old gentleman who had learned it in childhood. “ The Smith’s Song,” in which some forgotten Irish composer, by making a tune out of the strokes of the sledge on the anvil, anticipates the conceit, though not the air, of Handel’s “ Harmonious Blacksmith,” was sung by Mary Hacket of Glenshane. The ballad singers of Dublin streets have proved a veritable mine of melody. Decrepit, blind, penniless, they still had something which to-day the world would not willingly let die. Poor in fortune, they were rich in the things of the imagination, and what is

that but the highest riches in the final analysis of worth ? Farmers whistled Petrie their plow tunes ; girls sang him milking songs ; fishermen, beggars, students, parish priests, fired by the collector's enthusiasm, gave him of their melodious store. When the complete Petrie collection was issued a year or two ago, under the editorship of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, Dr. P. W. Joyce, who had communicated to Petrie a large number of songs, was delighted to find that his old friend had punctiliously honored the receipt of each by affixing thereto the name of the contributor. Old Owen Connellan, professor of Gaelic languages at Queen's College, Cork, bowed beneath the burden of fourscore years and thirteen, was moved to send Petrie a song which he had learned in childhood from his mother, who lived to the great age of 110. Another tune was overheard as it was sung by a little girl at the foot of Slieve Gullan and noted down. In a narrow but essential sense of the word the Petrie collection is the work of a single enthusiast ; but it could never have come into being without the loving co-operation of the song-loving people of Ireland.

Who composed these melodies ? Nobody knows. In a way, it may be said that they had no composer ; they are a growth rather than an individual creation. Sung by many generations, often in localities far removed from one another, adapted successively to poems of varying sentiment, they have been subject to continual modification. Districts have their own versions which contrast curiously with one another yet bear so strong a family likeness as to place the existence of a common original beyond question. A hundred generations in Erin's " Forge of Song" have labored half unconsciously to frame such masterpieces of melody as " The Last Rose" to give the air the name by which it is best known, and " The Coulin." Is it said that they lack the impress of individual inspiration ? They have the even rarer virtue of being the musical expression of the genius of the Irish people.

Such is the view commonly taken by folk-lorists to-day. But it was not always so. Less than a century ago Edward Bunting laid down the law that a melody once determined, never changes. If Bunting had traveled about the country as Petrle did and gone into the homes of the people, he would never have made such a foolish assertion. The truth would have been driven home upon him that a tune may exist in many forms, subtly differentiated one from another in contour, metre and rhythm. It was inevitable that it should be so. Who has not been haunted by a melody which refused to crystallize into exact form, but lingered in the memory, uncertain and nebulous ? A person of warm fancy and musical gifts will often unconsciously make good the hiatus out of his own imagination. It may even happen that the modified tune is better than the original. In Irish music this has happened in innumerable instances. The absence of an authoritative version to which appeal could be made, encouraged change. Many persons too are given to varying whatever they whistle or sing. In the unmusical this may be a vice ; in those who have a talent for melody it is artistic self-assertion. Instrumentalists are particularly prone to this habit. They love to vary a melody in such a way as to bring out the characteristics of violin, flute or harp.

Both these tendencies are illustrated again and again in the growth of Irish melody, and the adventures of a melody are oftentimes as interesting as those of an individual. Glance for a moment at the fortunes of that beautiful air, " The Coulin." Tradition links it with an edict passed by the Parliament of Kilkenny in the fourteenth century. This law forbade the " Degenerate English," who were fast becoming assimilated by the native population and forgetting their origin, to wear their hair in the " coulin" or headdress of the Irish. Naturally the coulin became a symbol of loyalty to Erin, and the Irish maiden in the song—unfortunately its words have not come down to us—is said to have expressed her preference for the lad who wore his hair in the national manner over the stranger.

The song lore of Ireland ; Erin's story in music and verse (1910)
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