

Erinn Delights

*Bards*

*Of The Gael and Gall*

*Examples of The*

*Poetic Literature of Erinn*

*Done into English after The Metres and*

*Modes of The Gael*

By

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

1897

INTRODUCTION.

*May not a buried literature have claims upon our attention ? If it be of interest to delve and discover a statue or a city, long concealed, should it not be more attractive to come upon a kingdom, where long-forgotten peoples live, love, and act ?*

Remembering Erinn.

ST. COLUMBA. [1] (A.D. 563).

'TWERE delightful, O Son of God,  
Forward faring.  
Sail to hoist o'er swelling surges,  
Home to Erinn !  
O'er Moyn-Olarg, past Benevna,  
Foyle-ward winging.  
Where we'd hear the pleasant music  
Swans are singing.  
Hosts of sea-gulls would give welcome,  
With white pinions,  
Did " Red Dewy" [2] reach, rejoiceful,  
Their dominions.  
Much I have here—but not Erinn—  
Were that gladness !  
On this unsung shore of exile,—  
Shrouded sadness !  
Woeful was mine ordered voyage,  
King of Heaven !  
Cuil's red combat leaves me lonely  
Here, bereaven.

Dima's son is happy yonder,  
                     Down in Durrow ;  
 All his mind desires he heareth.  
                     Night and morrow :  
 'Mid the elms the swooning breezes  
                     Ever playing.  
 Joyous note of blackbird's voice, its  
                     Wings displaying,  
 Lowing of Ros-grena's kine, at  
                     Dewy dawning,  
 Cuckoo's call at Summer's brink, from  
                     Forest awning.  
 Of this peopled world I've left three  
                     Dear things only :  
 Durrow, Derry's grove of Angels,  
                     Lewy, lonely ;  
 I've loved Erinn's cascade-land, not  
                     Rule unrightful,—  
 Days with Congall, feast with Caindech  
                     Were delightful.

#### The Fall of The Book-Satchels.

ST. COLUMBA.

“ Now when Longarad was dead, men of lore say this, that the book-satchels of Erinn fell down on that night. Or it is the satchels wherein were books of every science in the cell where Columbcille was that fell then, and everyone in that house marvelled at the noisy shaking of the books. So then said Columbcille, ‘ Longarad in Ossory,’ quoth he, ‘ a sage of every science has now died’ .... *et dixit.*” [3]

Dead is Lón  
 Of Kilgarad ; make ye moan.  
 Now must Erinn's tribes deplore  
 Loss of Lore and Schools o'erthrown.

Died hath Lón  
 Of Kilgarad ; make ye moan.  
 Loss of Lore and Schools o'erthrown  
 Leave all Erinn's borders lone. [4]

#### Delights in Erinn.

ST. COLUMBA. (A.D. 563).

Lovely Edar's Hill [5] to me,  
 Ere we sail the pale, pale sea :  
 Billows breaking at its base,

Bare and lone its lofty face.  
Lovely Edar's Hill to me.  
After the bright-bosomed sea :  
There to row our boatlet o'er  
White waves racing round the shore.

Fleet my Curach's flying track.  
When on Derry turns its back ;  
I lament the happy havens.  
Seeking Alba of the ravens.

My foot's in my tuneful Curach,  
My heart bleeds in constant sorrow ;  
Men must lead, or feebly follow.  
Ignorance is blind and hollow.

There's an eye of gray  
Looks back to Erinn far away :  
While life lasts, 'twill see no more  
Man or maid on Erinn's shore !

I gaze o'er the bitter brine,  
From these oaken planks of mine.  
Big tears wet that eye of gray—  
Seeking Erinn, far away.

Still on Erinn rests my mind—  
Lene and Linné left behind.  
On Ultonian mountains wild,  
Meath and Muman smooth and mild.

Many heroes eastward are,  
Many an ail, ill and scar.  
Many scant of garb and art,  
Many a hard, jealous heart.

Many, west, sweet apples shine.  
Many kings and princes fine.  
Many snowy-blossomed sloes.  
Many oak trees, few the woes.

Sweet her birds, her clerics sage,  
Soft her youth are, wise is age—  
Noble men who glad the sight.  
Noble maids for nuptial rite.

Westward is sweet Brendan now,  
Colam, son of Crimtan's vow.  
(Westward shall fair Baithin be,  
And Adamnan after me.) [6]

Bear my greetings, noble youth !  
O'er to Congall's soul of truth,  
Bear my greetings home again.  
To Emania's king of men.  
Blessings bear, benedictions,  
From this heart of afflictions,  
Half for Erinn—seven times !  
Half for Alba's eastern climes.

Bear my blessing with thy sail  
To the Nobles of the Gael ;  
Let them never more give ear  
When Molaisi's words they hear.

Were it not Molaisi's speech,  
I should stand on Imlais' beach,  
Keeping constant watch, to ward  
Ail and ill from Erinn's sward.

Bear my blessing to the West,  
Broke my heart is in my breast ;  
Should a quick death be my bale,  
'Tis for great love of the Gael.

Gael, O Gael ! O name most dear !  
Wish I've none but that to hear ;  
Dear fair Cumin o'er the brine,  
Caindech dear, and Comgall mine.

Came all Alba's cress to me.  
From its centre to its sea,  
I would choose a better part—  
One house set in Derry's heart !

Dear for these things Derry fair :  
Purity and peace are there,  
Hosts are there of angels white.  
Moving through it, noon and night.

Derry mine ! my small oak-grove !  
Little cell, my home, my love !  
O thou Lord of lasting life.  
Woe to him who brings it strife !

Dear is Durrow, Derry dear,  
Dear Raphoe is, calm and clear,  
Dear Drumholme, where sweet fruit swells,  
Dear to me are Swords and Kells.

Dear too, westward, evermore,  
Drumcliffe on Culkenny's shore —  
O to see fair Foyle in might,  
'Mid its woodlands were delight !

Delight is there.—There's delight  
Where flash ocean's sea-gulls white—  
Far I bear from Derry's grove.  
Quiet peace and lasting love.

Conall Dead.

*By His Spouse* (A.D. 634). [7]

OCHAGÓN ! [8]—here is the head  
Of Conall of the keen blue blade :  
The head of understanding clear,  
The noble, dear, devoted head.

Ochagón ! here are the eyes  
Of Conall's wise and generous head ;  
From these the lashes used to rise  
And flashes mild and manly sped.

Ochagón ! here is the mouth  
That north and south the poets praise,  
Of slender grace and apple-red,  
Like honey shed was Conall's mouth.

Ochagón ! here is the hand  
Bore Conall son of Scanlan's brand.  
The hand that strong in conflict strove.  
The hand of Conall—my first love !

Ochagón ! here is the side  
Where oftentimes ours nobly lay ;  
From Moyle's gray tide there came a hound  
With wile to wound that stainless side.

Ochagón ! here are the feet  
That ne'er gave way where warriors meet :  
Feet still first in fiery fray,  
The battle-bravest Conall's feet !

Och ! and here his Fort for aye,  
The strong cold Clay for all the years,  
Conall's Fort—where I deplore  
Whose tale is o'er—the House of Tears !

The Mothers of Bethlehem. [9]

First Woman

Why tear my love's son from me,  
Me, who reared him ?  
My breast fed him,  
My womb bore him,  
My veins did suckle him,  
My heart he filled,  
My life was he.  
My death his taking,  
My strength is gone ;  
My voice is choked,  
My eyes are blind.

Second Woman.

My son ye snatch,  
I'm guiltless of ill,  
But kill even me.  
Kill not my son ;  
My breasts are milkless,  
My eyes are flowing.  
My hands are trembling,  
My body stumbles ;  
My husband's sonless,  
Myself am strengthless,  
My life—a death.  
O God, my one son !  
My fost'ring worthless,  
My sickness sterile  
Till Doomsday lost ;  
My bosom silenced,  
My heart crushed.

Third Woman.

One ye seek slaying,  
Numbers ye slaughter,  
Nurslings smiting,  
Fathers gashing—  
Mothers murd'ring.  
Hell ye were filling.  
Heaven's gate closing,  
Wantonly shedding  
The blood of the righteous.

Fourth Woman.

Come to me, O Christ,  
Take swiftly my soul,  
Alike with my son.  
Ah, Mary of might,  
Mother of God's son.  
See, sonless am I,  
For *thy* son are slaughtered  
My mind and my sense,  
I'm made a mad woman  
For want of my son ;  
My heart is a death-froth,  
Because of sad slaughter,  
From now till the judgment.

GAEL AND NORSE.

*From the Seventh to the Thirteenth Century.*

The Blackbird's Song. [10]

A.D. 850.

Great woods gird me now around.  
With sweet sound merle sings to me :  
My much-lined pages over  
Sings its lover minstrelsie.

Soft it sings its measured song,  
Hid among the tree-tops green :  
May God on high thus love me,  
Thus approve me, all unseen.

The Heavenly Pilot. [11]

*Cormac, King-Bishop of Cashel (837 — 903).*

Wilt thou steer my frail black bark  
O'er the dark broad ocean's foam ?  
Wilt thou come, Lord, to my boat,  
Where afloat, my will would roam ?  
Thine the mighty : Thine the small :  
Thine to mark men fall, like rain ;  
God ! wilt Thou grant aid to me  
Who come o'er th' upheaving main ?

Niall's Dirge [12]

*By Queen Gormlai, His Spouse, A.D. 919.*

Move, O monk, thy foot away,  
Lift it now from Niall's side,  
Over-much thou'st cast the clay  
Where I would, with him, abide.

Over-long thy task, this day,  
Strewing clay o'er Niall slain ;  
Tread no further, friend, delay,—  
Raise it not to meet the plain.

Ah, close not for aye the grave.  
Cleric sad, with solemn lay ;  
From o'er Niall bright and brave  
Move, O monk, thy foot away.

Golden King, not thus wert bound  
Had I power thy strength to stay.  
Leave his pillar, leave his mound,  
Move thy foot, O monk, away.

I am Gormlai, who, in gloom.  
Sing for him the sorrowing lay ;  
Stand not there upon his tomb.  
Move, O monk, thy foot away.

The Ruined Nest. [13]

*Author Unknown.*

SAD is yonder blackbird's song,  
Well I know what wrought it wrong ;  
Whosoe'er the deed has done,  
Now its nestlings all are gone.

Such a sorrow I, too, know  
For such loss, not long ago ;  
Well, O bird ! I read thy state  
For a home laid desolate.

How thy heart has burned, nigh broke,  
At the rude and reckless stroke !  
To lay waste thy little nest  
Seems to cowboys but a jest.



Thy clear note called together  
Flutt'ring young in new feather ;  
From thy nest comes now not one—  
O'er its mouth the nettle's gone.

Sudden came the callous boys,  
Their deed all thy young destroys :  
Thou and I one fate deplore—  
For my children are no more.

By thy side there used to be  
Thy sweet mate from o'er the sea ;  
The herd's net ensnared her head —  
She is gone from thee, and dead.

O, Ruler of high heaven !  
Thou'st laid our loads uneven :  
For our friends on ev'ry side  
'Mid their mates and children bide.

Hither came hosts of Faery  
To waste our home unwary ;  
Though they left no wound to tell  
Brunt of battle were less fell.

Woe for wife ; for children, woe !  
I, in sorrow's shadow, go ;  
Not a trace of them I had  
Hence my heavy heart is sad.

The Sea-Maiden's Vengeance. [14]

*Author Unknown.*

A GREAT gallant king of yore  
Ruled shore and sea of Erinn ;  
Noble then all sections shone  
'Neath Rigdon's son of daring.

O'er the mane of slow gray seas,  
With the breeze, lay his hoar way ;  
To behold his foreign friend  
He would wend north to Norway.

Sped his splendid vessels three.  
When the sea calmed its motion ;  
Till they, sailing, sudden stop  
On the ridgy top of ocean.

They refused to wend away —  
Fixed they lay, no where faring !  
Then into the dark dread deeps  
Ruad leaps, greatly daring. »

When he dived for their release,  
Through the sea's surging waters ;  
There he found the forms divine  
Of its nine beauteous daughters.

These with clear soft accents said,  
It was they stay'd his sailing :  
That to leave nine maidens sweet  
Were a feat few prevail in.

He with these nine nymphs remained.  
Where there reigned shade nor sadness ;  
'Neath the waters, where no wave  
Ever gave gloom to gladness.  
One of these his bride became,  
Still his fame forced him forward ;  
But he vow'd to greet her lips  
When his ships came from norward.

Once on board, he bade them sail  
Past the pale billows breaking ;  
And, with one bound, make their course  
To the Norse of quick speaking.

O'er the salt sea then they rode.  
And abode, sweet the story.  
Till the seventh glad year ends  
With their friends, great in glory.

Ruad then ran out, once more,  
On the hoar salt sea faring ;  
Speeding forth his ships to reach  
The bright far beach of Erinn.

Warped and wrong the royal will,—  
Solemn still is promise spoken :  
He should have gone to the maid  
As he said, nor pledge have broken.

When the prince of Tuired's name  
Unto Muired's [15] borders came.  
Around the shore — foul his fame !  
A sound arose of sad acclaim.

'Twas the sweet-voiced women's song  
Borne along in music's motion.  
Following Ruad's fleeing sail  
O'er wail of wave-worn ocean.

Sailing, in bronze boat, they came—  
No plank-frame, made by mortal—  
Those nine maidens, fair and fierce,  
Till they pierce Ollbin's [16] portal.

Dire and dread the deed then done  
There by one, 'mid the water,  
Ruad's son—her own—she slew.  
Vengeance knew, sweet in slaughter !

Then, upraising high her hand,  
Forth she cast him on the strand, —  
Shrank the shore and shudd'ring foam  
From King Ruad's welcome home !

•

“ Take These Heads.”

Having achieved their feats, the Children of Tuirenn sailed homeward, wounded to death, Brian alone upstanding. At last he spoke : “ I see Benn Edair, and Dun Tuirenn, and Tara of the Kings.” “ We should be full of health could we see that,” said another; “ for thine honour's love, O brother,” said they, “ take these heads on thy breast that we may see Erinn afar, and we care not be it death or life thereafter.” And one spoke this lay : [17]

Take these heads upon thy breast,—  
Son of Tuirenn brave and best,  
Torch of Valour, void of guile !—  
That we may see Erinn's isle.

Raise upon thy shoulder, too.  
These our heads, thou champion true !  
That from o'er the waters, we  
Usna, Taltin, Tara, see.

Boyne's Bru [18] and Dublin darkling,  
Freman and Tlacta sparkling,  
Liffey's plain, and Bregia's air,  
And the hills round Tallin's Fair.

If I saw Benn Edair forth,  
And Dun Tuirenn in the north,—  
Welcome then were death to me.  
Were it death with agony.

- [1] St. Columba was born in the year 521. He went into exile to Iona in 563. Having submitted the question of his responsibility for the battle of Cuil-dreimne to St. Molaisi, he was ordered to leave Erinn, and to see it no more. He returned once, it is said, blind-folded, to save the bards from expulsion. He died in 597.
- [2] “Derg Dructach”—“Red Dewy”—St. Columba’s sea-ship.
- [3] Whitley Stokes, LL.D., “On the Calendar of Cengus,” Dublin ; “Royal Irish Academy’s Transactions,” 1880 ; Note from Lebor breac. Cengus speaks of the “Hosts of the Books of Erinn.” The manuscript books were preserved in leather satchels, often ornamented.
- [4] The varied repetition of the first line, and of the last two in each stanza entitle St. Columba to be regarded, I believe, as the inventor of the Rondeau.
- [5] Benn Edair, *i.e.*, the Bluff of Edar, that Dublin hill which the Norsemen called Hoved, the Head, whence its present name of Howth.
- [6] This is probably an interpolation by a later bard.
- [7] Dean of Lismore’s Book. Congall Claen, son of Scanlan, Prince of Ulster, was killed at the battle of Moira (Magh Rath), A.D. 634. Conall is the phonetic form, in the Dean’s Book.
- [8] Ochagón is an exclamation of grief like Ullagone. It is written Ochagan.
- [9] Professor Kuno Meyer, “Gaelic Journal,” Dublin, May, 1891. Text and Translation. It is in “rosg,” Irish blank verse.
- [10] “Reliquie Celtiche. Il manoscritto irlandese di S. Gallo.” Firenze, Torino, Roma, 1872. Cavaliere Nigra found the original Irish verses on the margin of an ancient manuscript of St. Gall’s. The monk had been copying, when the merle (or blackbird) sang, and he paused to write this little lay. Love of animals was a characteristic of the ancient Irish saints. Various charming anecdotes show this. St. Ciaran of Saighir (the first resident native saint) is related to have formed his first community of animals : a furious wild boar came to assist him, then a fox, a wolf, a badger, and a fawn. Thus he made a little monastery in the forest, amongst pagans. When the fox gave way to appetite, and carried off the saint’s shoes to gnaw, the badger brought him back. “O brother,” said Ciaran gently, “why hast thou done this theft, so unbecoming to a monk, for there are wholesome water and food for the community, and if thy nature made thee prefer meat, God would have made it thee of the tree-bark around.” Here is another example from the Lebor Breac (Stokes, “Calendar of Cengus,” Note xl.). “Maelanfaid saw, on a day, a little bird a wailing and lamenting. ‘Ah, my God,’ quoth he, ‘what has happened here? I vow,’ quoth he, ‘I will not eat food till it is revealed to me.’ So while he was there he beheld an angel (coming) to him. ‘That is well, O cleric,’ saith the angel, ‘let this not give thee grief any more. Molua Mac Ocha is dead, and therefore it is that the living creatures bewail him, for he never killed a living creature, whether small or great. So that not more of the people bewail him than the other living creatures, and the little bird which thou seest.’”
- [11] “Book of Leinster.” In O’Curry’s “Manners and Customs,” Vol. III, p. 388. This Irish poem, composed in the ninth century, anticipates the central thought of Tennyson’s exquisite verses, “Crossing the Bar.” O’Curry says that Cormac, who wrote the “Psalter of Cashel” has always been considered “one of the most distinguished scholars of Europe of his time. Besides the knowledge he is recorded to have acquired of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, the British, Saxon, and Danish” (*rectè* Norse) “and other northern languages, he is regarded as having been one of the greatest Gaedhelic scholars that ever lived.”
- [12] The Dean of Lismore’s Book, Edited by the Rev. Thomas McLauchlan. Edinburgh : Edmonston and Douglas. Niall was slain in battle by the Norsemen, A.D. 919.
- [13] The original of this touching poem is found in “the famous fourteenth century manuscript, known as the Lebor Breac,” writes Prof. Kuno Meyer, who first edited and

translated it for the “ Gaelic Journal,” 1890. It was composed long before the fourteenth century.

- [14] “ Book of Ballymote.” In “ Atlantis,” Vol. IV. O’Curry : note, pp. 235-240. This singular lay, if presented in German, might pass for a Teutonic poem. It cannot be doubted that it was owing to Irish teaching that a pupil of St. Gall’s introduced rime into German. How far its literature has been otherwise affected is insufficiently known. It would be very curious if the germ of the legend of the Lorelei had been carried and naturalized on the Rhine by St. Goar (Guair), or some other of its many Irish pilgrims.
- [15] The region between Howth and the Boyne.
- [16] Mouth of the River Ollbin, now Dilvin.
- [17] The Fate of the Children of Tuireann, “ Atlantis,” Vol. IV.
- [18] Brugh : a fort.

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 : cdl ; americana

<https://archive.org/details/bardsofgaelgalle00sigeiala>

Edited and uploaded to [www.augty.org](http://www.augty.org)

December 20 2013