

‘Older than Noah’

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In the present day we can hardly realize the condition of the many past generations who obtained any information or education they possessed without the aid of books, by mere oral instruction and traditional stories, through the medium of a tongue, if not now extinct, yet in a moribund condition, and which possesses very little, either ancient or modern, published literature in the ordinary acceptance of the term —

“ 'Tis fading, oh, 'tis fading, like the leaves upon the trees,
In murmuring tone 'tis dying, like the wail upon the breeze,
'Tis swiftly disappearing, as footprints on the shore,
Where the Barrow, and the Erne, and Loch Swilly's waters roar,
Where the parting sunbeam kisses Loch Corrib in the West,
And Ocean, like a mother, clasps the Shannon to her breast.”

Spasmodic efforts have been made to arrest its decline, and its study has been introduced by the Intermediate Education Commissioners into their examinations, a mere waste of time for ordinary schoolboys, for it maybe asked whether Irish is extensively used, or whether its literature has any real value in the current of everyday life. The most ardent enthusiast for the study of the Irish language can hardly maintain that it is spoken by a large or important section of the population, but the question of its literature stands on a different footing. The language of Athens or of Rome may be well worth attention long after it has ceased to be spoken ; but in the case of Irish literature a distinction must be drawn between the Latin MSS. produced in the Irish monasteries which spread the fame of their scribes over Europe, and Gaelic MSS. of a later date. There are, no doubt, old writings, *i.e.* occasional meagre insertions of the Gaelic language, short treatises introduced into Latin MSS., as well as inscriptions in Ogham character. These however, cannot be classed under the head of literature. Putting on one side early Latin MSS., religious treatises and Ogham inscriptions, it is difficult to discover an Irish MS. (those at present translated are, it is to be presumed, done into English as being samples) that, to the ordinary nineteenth-century reader, does not appear extremely childish. Irish literature is mere protoplasm. If it had a history, its record would show an arrested development. Under favourable circumstances it might have become vertebrate, or at any rate more lifelike, but various causes appear to have worked in unison in opposition to its growth ; and in regard to Irish poetry, it is related to literature, properly so called, as a nebula is to a star. The most that can be said in its praise is that it is a rudimentary effort towards a maturity never attained. Far the most valuable part of Irish literature is that portion that throws light upon the earlier history of the country, and to extract the true from the false is a complicated and difficult task ; but the race of Irish scholars, who alone can deal with these questions, is not likely to become extinct, even should the language cease to be spoken.

With respect to this study of early Irish history, as extracted from the annalists and biographers, what is most required is, an increased application of the critical spirit. Dr. J. K. Ingam remarks that :— “ We have often in the past too readily assumed the truth of any statement found (as the phrase is) in one of our old books without examining the trustworthiness and the sources of knowledge of each authority. To take an example, in O'Curry's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, there is abundant learning, a wealth of quotation from the Chronicles, but in criticism it falls, I think, far short of the works of the recent Scottish historians. Criticism, I am aware, is not popular.” Yet old books, sacred books, even the Bible itself, have had to submit to the searching analysis of modern criticism, with the

result that, with regard to the latter, advanced and liberal-minded German theologians have, in the New Testament, resigned belief in miracles ; whilst in the Old Testament, they have given up the authenticity and authority of most of the Pentateuch. With the yielding of all this, there is little for modern criticism to attack. Even the more “ orthodox ” English school do not hold that the destruction of the swine was “ a miracle,” look on Genesis as a composite work, and do not treat the earlier part as strict history.

When their characters are subjected to analysis, the heroes and heroines of the earliest Irish traditions are certainly not Christian, whilst in the prevalent narratives, the varnish of Christianity is but thinly applied. Most of the tales, at least those that have been at present translated, are but clumsily patched together, so that the junction of the Pagan and Christian portions is quite apparent. Take, for example, the legend of the formation of the present Lough Neagh. The scene is laid in the first century of the Christian era : consequently before the introduction of Christianity into Ireland. In the King's palace, which stood in the centre of the plain now occupied by the lake, was an enchanted well (its origin was, to say the least, very peculiar) ; when not in use it was kept covered, as, owing to its magical properties, it would otherwise burst forth in a raging flood. Through neglect of the “ person in charge,” it was left one morning uncovered; it overflowed, and all the members of the King's household, with the exception of three, were drowned, and the present sheet of water was formed. One of the persons thus preserved was a woman styled Liban, who, together with her lap-dog, was, by magic, permitted to live in safety beneath the waters. Liban soon became tired of her inactive life, and beholding with envy the lively tenants of the lake darting about and around her, expressed the wish of being changed into a salmon. Instantly, with the exception of her head, she was thus transformed, whilst her lap-dog became an otter, and in this manner she continued to roam for the space of three hundred years, until — and here the Christianising of the old story visibly appears — she is caught in the net of an Irish saint, is brought ashore, resumes her human form, sings her story in melancholy verse, receives the rites of the Church, dies immediately, and is buried in all the odour of sanctity.

A result similar to the overflowing of Lough Neagh, from neglecting or disobeying the forms prescribed when procuring a supernatural supply of water, occurs when what may be termed the “ rush enchantment ” is practised. It is as follows: — In certain localities (needless to say, on low-lying ground) there grow magical tufts of rushes. If the postulant finds one of these tufts, and pulls up a rush, a most refreshing supply of water will exude from the cavity thus occasioned in the soil. He may now allay his thirst, but the rush must be replanted when he has finished, or otherwise subterranean waters will pour with ungovernable fury from the orifice whence the water has been drawn, and overwhelm, not only the delinquent, but also the entire neighbourhood. This incident occurs in numerous Irish tales, the scenes of which are laid in various parts of the kingdom.

There appears to be very little originality in Irish myths. Some legends of the saints were moulded on the Old Testament model. For instance, St. Fallen, pursued by Pagan enemies, arrived at the edge of a lake which barred his further progress. He struck the water with his crozier, when it divided, offering him a means of escape. On arriving at the further side of the lake, he turned and struck the dried ground, when it instantly became covered with water as before, drowning his pursuers who were half way across.

Robert Atkinson, LL.D., remarks that there are not wanting hints that the early clerics pruned, with no sparing hand, the tales that formed the amusement of the people, and which must have been handed down from ancient times. Nothing can be more significant than the circum-stances of the early history of the once famous tale of the

Táin Bó Cúalnge. “ About the year 600, the poet Senchan assembled the poets of Ireland to ascertain if any of these remembered the whole of the story, but received as answer that they only knew fragments of it. He then asked his pupils which of them would take his blessing and go into the country of Letha, to learn the Táin, which a certain *Saoi* had taken to the east after the (book called) *Cuilmenn* had been carried away. Now Letha was the ancient name for that part of Italy in which Rome is situated ; so that there can be little doubt what had become of the tale. But a yet more significant element is introduced ; for according to one account. the story was recovered by the intervention of St. Ciaran and the Saints of Ireland, who fasted and prayed at the grave of the famous legendary chief Fergus mac Roig, in order that God might send them that chieftain to relate to them the history of the Táin. The relation of the poets to the clergy is here set forth in hardly mistakable terms ; the latter were willing that the poets should again resume their functions as narrators of the old stories, after these had been sufficiently purged of offence by their journey to Kome, and the long forgetfulness that had so overtaken them.”

The Christianising of Pagan legend is almost everywhere apparent. For instance, on the alleged landing of the Milesians only some 1300 years B.C., they were met by Bamba, one of the numerous queens of Ireland, accompanied by her female attendants and by Druids. She appears to have been “ interviewed” by an invader, who questioned her regarding her family and relations, somewhat in the style of a modern newspaper reporter seeking for “ copy.” “ I am come,” said she, in reply to his inquiry, “ of the sons of Adam.” “ Which, of the sons of Noah are you descended from ? “ inquired the invader, who although a Gentile, must have been well acquainted with Jewish genealogies. “ I am older than Noah,” replied Bamba, “ and I have resided on this mountain since the Deluge.”

The idea of Rider Haggard's Queen She was thus forestalled by the monastic historian.

St. Patrick is dragged into the legend of Cuchullin (Coolin), Ossian into that of St. Patrick. The latter tale is a good specimen of a connecting link between Pagan and Christian thought. It is recounted that Ossian survived the famous battle of Gabhra,[1] in which all his comrades perished, and was conveyed to the Elysium of the Pagan Irish, whence, after a long lapse of years, and many urgent entreaties to the then ruling powers, he was permitted to visit once again the scenes of his youth and manhood. He was given a magnificent white steed on which to return, but was warned that if he allowed his own feet to touch the earth, he would never re-enter Tirnanoge. On arrival in Erin, Ossian found that Finn MacCool and his warriors were but dimly remembered ; his fortress was a mere mound overgrown with weeds and bushwood ; moss and lichens covered the huge casting stones of the Fern ; prayers and hymns were sung where, in his days, bards recited the prowess of warriors, and the sickle was in men's hands instead of spear and buckler.

As with sorrowful heart he rode up his native valley, a crowd of men striving to raise a huge stone, asked his assistance. Stooping from the horse he, unaided, heaved the mass into position, but the exertion caused him to overbalance himself, the magic steed flew neighing away, and the last of the race of heroes lay on the hillside, a white-haired blind old man, weighed down by the infirmities of upwards of two centuries.

Shortly after this as he was reciting a poem, in which he extolled the greatness and strength of his contemporaries and forefathers, the profuse feasts of their hunting days, when they cut up their quarry and baked it with heated stones in the huge cooking places on the wild moors or mountain sides, and described the tall gigantic deer hunted by them, his listeners laughed incredulously. The old man rose in anger, and going to a neighbouring heap, where were piled the relics of bygone hunts, he selected therefrom a Shank-bone, and returning to the

banquet took from the table one of the shank-bones of the deer on which the guests were then feasting and dropped it through the hollow of the deer bone he had brought in. This happened at the period of St. Patrick's arrival in Ireland, and meeting Ossian in his mission-ary tour, the saint, actuated by feelings of compassion, took him under his protection. St. Patrick made many attempts to convert him to Christianity, the conferences generally ending with Ossian's lament for his lost comrades. The saint, pitying the misery of the brave old man, would introduce some remark on past events which drew from the bard a narrative of a battle, a hunt, or some enchantment worked on the Feni by magicians, which as usual terminated in a fresh lament over his desolate state and the half forgotten deeds of his companions.

The old warrior did not also relish the fasting fare, the rigorous austerity of the saint and of his household ; he was angry at being aroused at night by the clanging of the bells and at daylight by the chanting of matins, preferring the melody of the birds and the music of the hounds to these innovations.

Men, animals, plants and fruit were of larger proportions in the days when Ossian was in his prime, than were the degenerated specimens which existed on his return to Erin. A free translation of the Irish proverbial saying on this subject, formerly often quoted by the country people, is as follows:—

“ Smaller each succeeding race and more to falsehood prone,
And wetter each season, while later its fruits are grown.”

It is therefore not surprising that the meal of an ordinary man should appear a mere trifle to the old warrior-bard, and St. Patrick's kitchen resounded daily with the angry quarrels of Ossian and the saint's housekeeper, who being of a niggardly disposition, doled out for each meal no more than whetted the appetite of the blind man. One day the fight terminated by the scolding housekeeper declaring that what she had given ought to be more than enough even for Ossian's enormous appetite. Her voice was drowned in the wrathful roar of the enraged old warrior, as he vociferated : “ I often saw a berry of the mountain ash as large as your miserable pat (*misgaun*) of butter ; an ivy leaf as large as your barley cake ; and a quarter of a black-bird as large as your quarter of mutton.”

The retort of the virulently tongued housekeeper “ you lie,” sank deeply into Ossian's proud heart, but though he bore her affront in recollection, and had planned the vindication of his veracity, he henceforth, to the astonishment of the shrew, received his meals without a murmur, for adherence to truth was one of the most pleasing characteristics of the Feni. In another part of the legend, Ossian is represented as again very indignant with St. Patrick, for implying that he had coloured his narratives of other days with fiction. The old warrior-bard exclaims : —

“ We, the Fians, would tell no lie,
falsehood's cup is sour ;
Truth and strength e'er brought us safe,
In peril's darkest hour.”

The Feni are in Ireland “ what the race who fought at Thebes and Troy were in Greece ; Sigurd and his companions in Scandinavia ; Dietrich and his warriors in Germany ; Arthur and his Knights in Britain ; and Charlemagne and the Paladins in France ; that is, mythic heroes, conceived to have far exceeded in strength and prowess the puny beings who now occupy their place.”

Ossian possessed a favourite bitch with young at the time, and the blind bard instructed the intelligent boy selected by St. Patrick to be his guide and attendant — who was devotedly attached to his charge, and always listened with ecstasy to the tales of the prowess of the warriors of other days — to acquaint him as soon as the puppies were born. When informed, that there were ten, he told the boy to procure a freshly-skinned horse hide, nail it with the fleshy side out to a board on the side of the house, and then, facing the puppies towards it, throw them against the hide, one by one, and inform him of the result. A laugh from the lad attracted Ossian's attention, who inquired the cause. The boy explained that the puppies had all fallen to the ground, except one, who clung tenaciously to the hide. Ossian told him to rear that one, and drown the other nine.

One summer morning Ossian announced to the boy his intention of going a journey, bringing with him the dog, which he had in the meantime carefully reared and trained. Arriving at the foot of Slievenamon, they turned eastward into the long winding valley of Glanasmole, and Ossian asked the lad whether he observed anything remarkable. The boy replied that he only saw a large tree bearing fruit, which, but for its enormous size, he thought might be berries of the quickbeam or mountain ash ; Ossian told him to pluck one of the berries. Turning towards the rocky side of the glen, the boy's attention was attracted by ivy growing on the cliff, the leaves of which were so large that their shadow overspread and darkened the glen ; one of these immense leaves was also gathered. They retraced their steps towards the mountain which they ascended, and proceeding to the rude stone monument which crowns its summit, Ossian told his young guide to lift the covering slab of the tomb. The boy essayed the task, but soon convinced of its impracticability declared that nothing less than the strength of a giant could raise so ponderous a stone. The old blind warrior lifting it with ease, exposed to view in the cavity beneath three instruments of war and of the chase, which had been in use in the days of his youth ; a great trumpet, a bronze ball employed as a missile, and a keen edged sword. These, by his direction, his guide took out and proceeded to clean. Ossian then told the lad to blow the trumpet, and asked whether anything strange was to be seen. The boy answered in the negative. Ossian ordered him to blow again and again, as loud as he could, but nothing was observed. Ossian then seized the trumpet, and placing it to his lips blew a blast, the reverberations of which were heard far and wide ; he blew a blast still louder, and again a third even more loud and far-echoing. Soon a dense cloud overspread the horizon, and the sky was darkened by flocks of birds which alighted in the valley. They came in three distinct flocks, the size of the birds increasing in each succeeding flight, the last consisting of enormous birds of the blackest plumage. Ossian then ordered the lad to unslip the dog, and send him down into the valley amongst the birds, where he was soon fiercely engaged in slaughtering them. At length, they were all killed except one jet black bird, larger than all the rest, which sat perched on a rock overhanging the valley. Ossian informed the youth that this bird was the object of their search, and the hound was soon engaged in a furious contest with it ; after a long and fearful struggle, the dog killed it and drank its blood. But the bird before it died had infused a quantity of virus into the dog which rendered him suddenly mad, and he rushed back towards his master, with wide-opened mouth, exposing its bloody fangs, as if he would devour him. The boy in hurried accents described the situation. “ Courage,” ex-claimed Ossian, “ the dog has tasted blood for the first time, cast the bronze ball into his gaping mouth ; be firm, for if you miss, he will destroy us.” The youth lost courage and trembled, but Ossian snatched the implement from his shaking hand and said, “ direct my hand.” Ossian, under this supervision, hurled the ball into the hound's gaping jaws, so that he was at once choked.

After surveying with wonder the vale filled with the slaughtered birds, the lad was directed by Ossian to cut off one of the quarters of the enormous black bird with the sword, and they returned, in triumph, carrying with them also the mountain-ash berry and the ivy-leaf. Laying

the three trophies on the kitchen table, Ossian called for St. Patrick and his housekeeper, narrated the whole affair, concluding with emphasis, “ now do I lie ?” and forthwith proceeded to cuff the woman. The national saint interposed, soothed the acerbity of the old warrior's temper, expressed astonishment at his adventures, which afforded such unequivocal evidence of the strictness of his veracity, and gave orders that he was never, on any pretence, to be stinted in his meals.

In their more ancient MS. form these old tales and poems, so called, are so bald and disjointed, that the style, parodied in the inimitable scene between the irate Highlander, Hector M'Intire, and Oldbuck, the Antiquary, is not in the least over- drawn. A very much toned down, and very free translation of the commencement of the poem, which opens with a dialogue between Ossian and St. Patrick, ridiculed by Sir Walter Scott in his novel of *The Antiquary*, is as follows : —

OSSIAN.

“ I care not for thee, senseless clerk,
Nor all thy psalming throng ;
Whose stupid souls, unwisely dark,
Reject the light of song.

“ Unheeding while it pours the strain
With Fenian glory swell'd ;
Such as thy thought can scarce contain,
Thine eye has ne'er beheld.”

PATRICK.

“ Son of Finn, the Fenii's lame,
Thou gloriest to prolong ;
While I my heav'nly King proclaim
In psalm's diviner song.”

OSSIAN.

“ Dost thou insult me to my face?
Does thy presumption dare
With the bright glories of my race,
Thy wretched psalms compare?”

In another of these unedifying discussions between the Holy man and the Poet, St. Patrick, to try and demonstrate the all-prevailing power of the Almighty, declared that a fly could not buzz in Heaven without God's knowledge. The old heathen, whom he was trying to convert, made a good point, when he retorted that at Finn's Camp, a thousand men might enter, eat, drink, and depart, without the Chief's knowledge.

In popular, as well as in written tales, St. Patrick is also dragged into the legend of Cuchullin [Coolin] . Sometimes, though in rare instances, Druids appear on the scene, but how art: they depicted ? Not as dignified priests, the guardians of then existing religion and science, but such as they are afterwards described by their opponents, the Christian missionaries, as mere jugglers. It seems to be now admitted that the Iron Age did not really commence in Ireland much before the introduction of Christianity, and yet these heroes of

romance are represented as hewing at each other with swords of iron like the Vikings of later date.

Another way, in which the more ancient texts have been tampered with, has been pointed out by the late J. O'Beirne Crow : — “ There is nothing more painful to the Irish student, than to see the way in which our transcribers of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth century have corrupted our ancient tracts. When they met a difficult form or phrase their invariable habit was to put it into another form somewhat resembling the original in sound, or to substitute what they thought a synonym, or to omit it altogether.” The same Irish scholar was even of opinion that the idea of a military force, or Militia, having existed in ancient Erin, arose from a verbal change in the text, simply because the title, “ Royal Champion of Erin,” like “ Royal poet of Erin,” was, in later transcriptions of the older text, turned into “ King of the Keni of Erin,” and he adds, “ that such a body, however, has never had a being in Erin, I hope to be able to show.”

The original and terse expressions of early Irish prose were no longer appreciated by the more modern school of writers. An elaborate description of the most trifling incidents, a piling together of superfluous adjectives, a constant repetition of standing phrases became the fashion, in addition to which the copyist was often tempted by his own ideas as to the correctness of style, to venture on an even further expansion of the already unnecessarily loaded text.

The real value of the tales and romances is best judged by the archaeologist, for the writers usually depicted the state of things as they existed in their own time, and not in the remoter period which they are supposed to describe. Such compositions shed tolerably true side-lights on ancient manners and customs, but to do this, the date of their last redaction must be approximately settled. When this has been done, it will be found that, although ancient, they are, for the true elucidation of pre-Christian times, of comparatively little importance.

However poor the survivals as a whole, may appear to us, we must nevertheless assume that what has been preserved belongs to the best productions of these early ages, that they were works on which the literary critics of the period, as well as subsequent generations, placed a high value. Taken as a whole, this class of literature may be compared to a stream, the character of which varies in all the different stages of its progress, clear at the source, foul at the mouth ; to ascertain its real value, we must trace it back, through all its channels and feeders, to its birth.

That a great number of Irish MSS. must have perished at an early period is evident from the frequent destruction by fire of the most celebrated monasteries. The very titles of the books so lost are often enumerated. In later times, in the dedication of his translation of the Annals of Clonmacnoise, Connell Mageoghegan describes the destruction of MSS. as then going on, and states that tailors were in the habit of cutting up, with their scissors, the leaves of books once held in great repute, and that they sliced them into long strips for measures.

Myths, and tales invented to teach a moral, remain at the base of all thought and of all creeds, for legends endowed with apparent ever-enduring vitality, shadowy traditions of old-world life, echoes which vibrate in the folk-lore of every people, are embedded in scattered fragments in present-day faiths.

In former times the peasantry, imbued with many apparently Eastern ideas, were confirmed fatalists ; what the gods or saints decreed could not, or should not, be altered. It was, to use an Eastern expression, “ kismet,” and ought not to be averted. Thus rain is sent down by

permission of God, or of the saints, in proportion to the deserts of men ; therefore, it is sinful in the extreme to irrigate fields or water gardens, for if the powers above wished them to flourish they would send rain to moisten them. In illustration of this', a traditional story, which passed as gospel among the sages of national lore, is found with slight variations, in many districts of Ireland.

A rich master baker, possessed of new-fangled ideas about insuring the growth of vegetables, contrary to the will of heaven, was engaged, on a hot summer's day, in watering them, when he was accosted by a stranger, who inquired what he was doing. The baker answered that he was watering plants suffering from long drought. The stranger replied that he should have left that work to God, who knew the time for watering better than man, and that if God had wished them to flourish He would have poured down rain upon them. The stranger then suddenly vanished. The baker, who noticed something super-human in his visitor, felt the force of his observations, abandoned the watering, and, full of anxiety, returned to where he had left a batch of bread baking under the charge of his men whom he found fast asleep. Opening the strongly-heated oven, he saw all the loaves shot out into luxuriant ears of green wheat. From this the baker inferred that the stranger was a heavenly messenger sent to reprove him for his impious act in producing artificial rain. This story was quoted by the peasantry as proof that man has no right to attempt to supply, by labour or any artificial means, what God, in His bounty, is wont to send in His good time. O'Donovan was of opinion that the story was not invented by any knave for the purpose of encouraging idleness, but that it originated in the idiosyncrasy of the people.

There is considerable similarity between folk-lore current in the East and that still existing amongst a large portion of the population of Ireland, more especially in remote localities. The Celtic mind is essentially Eastern in character, and legends still current illustrate this. A few present a beautiful fancy ; for instance, we have the ancient Irish romance of “ the Children of Lir ” metamorphosed into swans ; and anyone acquainted with many of the large lakes of Ireland, more especially Lough Erne, cannot have failed to note the swans which at almost every season of the year are seen upon the bays and inlets. They come and go scathless, for, in the minds of the Celtic peasantry, they represent the souls of holy women, victims of the fire and sword of the Northmen who swept over Lough Erne again and again. This is a good example of a pagan legend being Christianised, not in oral tradition alone, but also in manuscript form, for the Irish delight to give a local colour and habitation to mythic and traditional characters as well as to incidents that take hold of the fancy, whether with regard to the exploits of the comparatively modern but ubiquitous Northmen, or to the actions of the far older mythological Druid-gods of the Dedanann. “ The Children of Lir ” are, as a matter of course, freed from their enchantment by the intervention of a Christian bishop, are converted from paganism to Christianity, and, on their departure to realms above, sing their death-song, thus paraphrased by P. W. Joyce in *Celtic Romances* : —

“ Come, holy priest, with book and prayer ;
Baptise and shrive us here :
Haste, cleric, haste, for the hour has come,
And death at last is near.

“ Dig our grave — a deep deep grave,
Near the church we loved so well ;
The little church where first we heard
The voice of the Christian bell.”

In the armorial bearings of the Borough of Sligo, a hare is depicted as being held fast by an oyster. According to local tradition the hare trod accidentally on an open oyster, and the bivalve resenting this intrusion at once closed on the foot of poor puss. A Cork boatman recounted a similar anecdote of a rat going to feed on an oyster, whose shell lay invitingly open, at low water ; but the oyster, closing its shell, held him fast until he was drowned by the returning tide ; this tale agrees with one of La Fontaine's fables. The same incident, but in connexion with a fox, was narrated, some centuries ago, to one of the earliest western travellers, as being then current in India. Thus, a story may be traced from land to land, and from age to age ; and this agreement is very interesting, as tending to point out the common sources from which our traditions were derived.

There is great similarity between the Persian story of Eustam and the Bardic tale of Conloch. An Irish chief with an unpronounceable name,

“ A terrible man, with a terrible name,
A name which you all know by sight very well,
But which no one can speak and no one can spell.”

and King Midas were both afflicted with animals' ears. The resemblance of the Irish to the classic story is too close to admit of being accidental. The Irish chief, desirous of concealing his deformity, caused every barber who dressed his hair to be put to death. It happened that once the lot fell on a young man, the only son of a poor widow, and the importunities of the mother prevailed on the king to spare his life, on condition that he kept the Royal secret. The necessity of secrecy so preyed upon the youth's mind that he sickened, and an eminent Druid told him that if he did not divulge the secret, he would never recover his health. The youth, thinking he could effect this without anyone being the wiser, dug a hole into the ground, into which he whispered the awful secret. The King's harper having broken his instrument, went in search of wood to mend it, and selected a willow which grew close to where the hair-dresser had imparted his secret to mother earth. The harp was repaired, but when strung could sound but one refrain, “ The King has two horse's ears.”

A King of Macedon and a King of Erin effected the destruction of their enemies by appareling a number of young men to represent women.

According to the Bardic tale, Turgesius, the great Norwegian conqueror of Ireland, had established himself on Lough Ree where he commanded the water-ways of Ireland. Here he fell in love with the beautiful daughter of Melaghlin, King of Westmeath, and demanded her from her father. Fearing to refuse, Melaghlin pretended to consent, but sent in his daughter's stead twelve beardless youths, dressed up as maidens, to personate his daughter and her attendants. After Tergesius and his boon companions had laid aside their arms and armour and had drunk to excess, they were assassinated by the disguised young warriors.

The Greek Thersites and Conan the Irish warrior were both bald, were great boasters, and great cowards. The following is the Homeric description of the scene between Ulysses and Thersites : —

“ Peace, factious monster, born to vex the state,
With wrangling talents form'd for foul debate ;
Curb that impetuous tongue, nor rashly vain,
And singly mad, asperse the sovereign reign.
Have we not known thee, slave of all our host,
The man that aets the least, upbraids the most.”

Compare the above with the poem of “ The Chase,” where Oscar thus addresses Conan : —

“ Cease thy vain babbling, senseless fool,
Bald boaster, stain to arms,
Still forward to promote misrule,
But shrinks at war's alarms.

“ My son high raised his threatening blade,
To give his fury sway,
But the pale Conan shrunk dismayed,
And sprang with fear away.”

According to P. W. Joyce, Conan is “ the best-marked and best-sustained character of the Ossianic romances ; large-bodied, a great boaster, a great coward and a great glutton. He had a venomous tongue, and hardly ever spoke a good word of anyone, he was the butt for the gibes and mockery of the Feni, but they dreaded his foul tongue. The story-tellers never lose an opportunity of having a fling at Conan, and of turning him into ridicule, for his cowardice, his big talk, and his gluttony.”

The Formorian giant Balor and Perseus, in some respects, resemble each other ; in both stories the precautions taken are almost identical, precautions that were defeated by supernatural means, and in both instances the decree of destiny is fulfilled by the murder of the grandfather, whilst the peculiar property of Balor's eye, has its parallel in classic myth. Probably the oldest written account of the superstition regarding the Evil Eye in Ireland, is that related of Balor. He became possessed of the power as a child, when one day, he happened to pass a sacred building in which Druids were busy brewing a magic decoction. Overcome with curiosity, he peeped in through a crevice to observe what was going on. At that moment the “ medicine men” lifted the lid of the caldron, and the vapour, which escaped, passed into one of Balor's eyes, carrying with it all the deadly venom of the brew. Balor thus could strike whole armies dead with the terrible power of his gaze.

After the Pagan giant Balor, one of the few ancient instances of the fatal effects of the malific eye is narrated of a St. Silan, probably a “ verted ” Pagan who possessed the unenviable property of a poisonous hair in his eyebrow that killed whoever in the morning first looked on him. The sequel is thus told by Lady Wilde. “ All persons, therefore, who, from long sickness, or sorrow, or the weariness that comes with years, were tired of life, used to try and come in the saint's way, that so their sufferings might be ended by a quick and easy death. But another saint, the holy Molaise, hearing that St. Silan was coming to visit his church, resolved that no more deaths should happen by means of the poisoned hair. So he arose early in the morning, before anyone was up, and went forth alone to meet St. Silan, and when he saw him coming along the path, he went boldly up, and plucked out the fatal hair from his eyebrow, but in doing so, he himself was struck by the venom, and immediately fell down dead.”

The infant Hercules when yet in his cradle strangles a serpent ; the great Irish hero Cuchullin (Coolin) when a child strangles a huge watch-dog, the terror of the country side. The Greek Adonis and the brave and gay Dermot, are each killed by a boar. This last-mentioned legend was certainly the most popular and wide-spread tale current amongst the Irish-speaking population, and it is, of all the legends which have descended to our days, the one which has been least Christianised. The tale as recounted in the county Sligo, is given in chapter xiii.

In the oldest bardic legends which have descended to our time, there are, here and there, glimpses of past phases of thought and character calculated to arrest attention. This literature comprises a number of prose tales of warlike adventures. Amongst them there is a class known by the designation of "Caves"; these are stories respecting various occurrences in souterrains or underground dwellings, such as the capture of a "cave" used as a place of refuge or habitation, or the narrative of some adventure in, or plunder of one of these artificial underground dwellings. There is the tale of the hiding of Dermod and Grania in a cave on the Hill of Howth ; the tale of the Cave of Croghan ; and the adventure of a chief named Cuglass who disappeared in the cave at Baltinglass since called after him. A list of these wild legends is given by O'Curry in his *M.S. Materials of Ancient Irish History*, There are also accounts of maritime voyages and adventures, tragic occurrences, visions and dreams ; of these some have been translated in a most literal manner, whilst others have been paraphrased, so that an English reader can form an approximate idea of their merit. But, as a rule, the translations we at present possess are about the dreariest reading that can well be chosen ; as one turns page after page of slavishly literal rendering, absurdities and inanities jostle one another, so that we ought to feel a deep debt of gratitude to the few translators who have attempted the task of producing some kind of more polished version. The best essay, as yet, is probably Dr. Joyce's *Celtic Romance* in which the original expressions are paraphrased, and no strictly literal rendering is placed before the reader. The paraphrase enables the modern reader to trace the ancient ideas and train of thought, better than he could with a more literal translation before him. " Even seven hundred and fifty years ago," writes the Rev. E. Hogan, s.j., in his translation of *Cath Ruis na Rig for Boinn*, " such things were looked on as ' l'histoire veritable des temps fabuleux,' as the scribe of the Tain Bo Cuailnge in the *Book of Leinster* writes at fol. 104 b : ' A blessing on everyone who shall faithfully memorize the Tain in this form and shall not put it into any other form. But I, who have transcribed this history, or rather fable, do not believe some things in this history or fable. For some things in it are delusions of demons, some are poetic figments, some seem true (similia), and some not ; some are written to amuse fools.' "

As to the merit of these stories, the most opposite opinions have been expressed. " Some have represented them as devoid of all value or interest," remarks Dr. J. K. Ingram, " others have spoken of them as a literature of the first order, and have almost implied that the Irish intellect of the present day would find its best possible culture in their study. The truth, as usual, lies between these extreme views. We possess, in Irish, no work of genius comparable to the Nibelungen Lied, or the Song of Roland. To speak of the Tain-Bo-Cuailnge as a Gaelic Iliad seems, to say the least, an imprudent comparison. But without any great continuous composition there are in the remains which have come down to us, passages of much beauty and tenderness ; some of the tales are impressively and touchingly told, and there is one singular relic ' the Vision of MaeConglinne' which is instinct with genuine humour of the Babelaisian type," but this tract is apparently of comparatively late date.

There is also the humorous story of " The pursuit of the Gilla Dacker and his Horse," a narration of a practical joke played by an enchanter on sixteen of the most renowned of the Feni, whom he carried off on the back of an enormous horse, to " the Land of Promise." The story, in modern version, is shortly as follows : Finn MacCool was one day in camp at Knockainy in Limerick, most of his companions being away hunting, when a look-out apprised him of the advent of a huge unwieldy man, leading or rather dragging an immense skeleton-like horse after him. On emerging from his tent Finn beheld this extraordinary being approaching in a most lazy fashion, each step achieved as if by a painful effort. Finn demanded his name, his birthplace, and what he wanted. " Gilla Dacker (Slothful Fellow) is the name I am called. The spot I come from is not worthy of a place in your memory. No one will

employ me, I am so lazy, and so I seek service with the hospitable chief of the Feni of Erin." Finn laughed, and told him that he might stay with his grooms. The giant thanked him, saying, "May the King of the North live in fear of you. Go my poor horse, and graze with the noble beasts on the meadow, the great Finn gives you permission." Finn had, however, scarcely entered his tent, when he heard such a squealing and galloping from the pasture that he rushed out and beheld the bony steed of the lazy fellow, biting and kicking the other horses, and scattering them in all directions. "Dog of a sluggard," shouted the irate Finn, "'run to the pasture," secure your cursed beast, and let me not set eyes on either of you again." "Chief of the warriors of Erin," replied the Sluggard, "the slowest of your men would be in Dublin before your servant could reach the meadow. But let Conan catch him by the mane and I will be warrant for his quietness." Conan seized the brute's mane, and the weird steed at once stood still as if changed into stone; in vain did stick and leathern thong resound on his ribs; he remained with set feet as if planted in the ground. At the suggestion of its owner Conan then jumped on its back and plied stick and thong afresh, but without avail. "Ah, where is my memory fled," said the Slothful One, "he will not move without feeling the weight of sixteen men such as Conan." Fifteen of Conan's companions clambered, one by one, on to the back of the ill-conditioned steed, who thereupon, at a touch of his master's magical rod, galloped away followed by his owner, but at such a pace as made pursuit vain. The men tried to throw themselves off, but failed, as they found that they were firmly fastened to the back of the magical horse.

For the adventures of Finn and of his companions in the pursuit and recovery of their captive comrades there is not space.

For the most part these tales bear internal evidence of their origin and composition belonging to no very remote period, and they have, in many instances, been interpolated or amended by modern transcribers. Whilst illustrating a very rude state of society, they often present interesting evidences of inventive power, and many of these humorous and lengthened compositions were recited from memory, and thus transmitted through many successive generations in the mountainous districts of Munster, in the plains of Leinster, in the glens of Ulster, or throughout the wilds of Connaught.

According to modern criticism, these stories naturally divide themselves into two epochs, one comparatively ancient, the other modern. The older series is that of which Cuchullin is the centre, and is supposed, by some, to have first been reduced to writing in the ninth century, when monastic chroniclers converted mythical tradition into pseudo-history, and the after-descent of these stories belongs to written literature rather than to oral tradition. In fact, as already stated, each fresh transcriber adapted them to the times in which he wrote.

The reader who is not acquainted with Irish may be warned parenthetically that Cuchullin is pronounced somewhat like Coolin, according to the orthographic fancy of Celtic ideas, which invariably supplies a superabundance of consonants. We should, however, remember that one of the greatest defects in the English language is its extraordinary spelling, but nevertheless in this it is completely outdone by the Irish Gaelic, which, as pointed out by William Larminie in *West Irish Folk Tales*, "is troubled in an aggravated form with every evil that afflicts English. Different sounds are written in the same way. Identical sounds are written in different ways. Silent letters attain to a tropical forestine luxuriance, through which the tongue of the learner despairs of hewing a way. There are, moreover, cases in which there is no indication in writing of single sounds, and even syllables which are actually pronounced; and there is at least one case of a word being written as if it began with a vowel while it really begins with a consonant."

Cuchullin combined in his person the bravery of Achilles with the beauty of Paris. Tighernach (Teernah) calls him “ the bravest hero of all the Scots ”; and Irish writers delight to dwell on his exploits. According to these chroniclers he had, however, three faults — he was too young, too bold, and too handsome. Regarded from another standpoint Cuchullin is, to a certain extent, a mythical and mythological being, as the account of his life given in written records has apparently been remodelled on that of Christ. Cuchullin's age at death is thirty-three. He has an immortal father and a mortal mother of the royal line ; he is born in a district remote from Emania, the Irish Jerusalem ; when a child of ten he steals away from his mother with his little wooden shield and sword of lath to contend with the hero-youths of Emania, as the boy Jesus went into the Temple to argue with the Jewish Doctors ; in fact, his deeds, as a youth, are a mere adaptation of the recorded early life of Christ in the Apocryphal Gospels. He is brought up by Culand the artificer, as Christ is brought up by Joseph the carpenter ; he is employed defending the weak against aggression ; the last three years of his life are full of trouble and misery ; he dies, after being pierced by a dart, after taking a drink, exclaiming, “ The Gods of Erin have deserted us,” standing erect with his back to a pillar-stone to which he had tied himself : other coincidences might be given.

The legends of the second epoch cluster around Finn Mac Cool, who is placed in the third century of the Christian era. It would appear as if most writers on the subject have accepted the date ; but there is nevertheless a pleasing divergence of opinion. Some hold that Finn was really a very ancient semi-mythical personage, dragged down, so to speak, by the monks to almost Christian times ; while some of the German school turn Finn into a ninth-century leader of the Irish against the Danes of Dublin, by whom he was slain.

Even by the most pronounced champions of Irish legendary lore, popular stories, still recounted in the vernacular, are allowed to be provokingly incomplete. They are, in general, incoherent ; more like remembered fragments of ancient stories than a complete composition.

In the written semi-historical tales and legends it is singular how comparatively rare are the references to the ancient gods of Erin, and although the early Fathers tell us less of heathendom than they knew, still it is difficult to understand how the clerical pruning knife was able, so scientifically, to cut off the principal characters from the scene, and leave it even readable ; yet, “ however interesting to scholars in their original form,” remarks Dr. Ingram, “ I do not think these tales will ever win their way to general esteem among cultivated readers, except as transmuted into shapes better adapted to our ideas, and with a certain breadth of modern thought and feelings subtly mingled with their substance.”

[1] Moore, in his *History of Ireland*, remarks with great candour that — “ The fame of this fatal battle of Gahhra, and the brave warriors who fell in it, continued long to be a favourite theme of the Irish bards and romancers, and upon no other foundation than the old songs respecting the heroes of this combat, mixed up with others relating to chieftains of a still more ancient date, has been raised that splendid fabric of imposture, which under the assumed name of Ossian, has, for so long a period, dazzled and deceived the world.”

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