

TRANSACTIONS OF THE OSSIANIC SOCIETY.

EDITED BY

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IT is not for several reasons proposed to discuss here, beyond making a few necessary remarks, the age and authorship of the various Irish compositions known by the generic name of Fenian : amongst others, because the subject is one that could not possibly be fairly handled in a mere introduction. When, therefore, Oisín is spoken of as the author of that body of poems which bears his name, it must be understood that no assumption is made, and no law laid down, but merely a tradition stated.

To the reader who has ever asked from a real desire for information that question which is all but invariably heard when mention is made of the Irish language before the uninitiated — Is there any thing to read in Irish ? — it may be acceptable to learn somewhat more fully and more definitely than is often convenient in conversation, the nature and extent of at least one branch of our native literature, that which the Ossianic Society has undertaken as far as may be to rescue from obscurity.

The Fenian compositions, then, consist of prose tales and of poems. It is lawful to call them collectively "Fenian," since the deeds and adventures of the Fenian warriors are equally the theme of the tales and of the poems ; but to these latter alone belongs the name "Ossianic," for Oisín is traditionally regarded as their author, whereas the prose tales are not attributed to him. The poems are known among the peasantry of the Irish districts as "Sgeulta Fiannuigh-eachta," Stories of the Fenians ; and moreover as "Agallamh Oisín agus Phadruig," The dialogue of Oisín and Patrick ; for Oisín is said to have recited them to the Saint in the latter days, when, the glory of the Fenians having departed for ever, he alone of them survived ; infirm, blind, and dependent upon the bounty of the first Christian missionaries to Ireland. We do not learn whether those pious men eventually succeeded in thoroughly converting the old warrior-poet ; but it is plain that at the time when he yielded to the Saint's frequent requests that he would tell him of the deeds of his lost comrades, and accordingly embodied his recollections in the poems which have descended to us, the discipline of Christianity sat most uneasily upon him, causing him many times to sigh and wearily to lament for the harp and the feast, the battle and the chace, which had been the delight and the pride of the vanished years of his strength. These indications of a still untamed spirit of paganism St. Patrick did not allow to pass uncorrected, and we find his reproofs, exhortations, and threats interspersed throughout the poems, as also his questions touching the exploits of the Fenians[1] (vid. the Battle of Gabhra) ; and whatever period or author be assigned to the Ossianic poems, certainly nothing can be better or more naturally expressed than the objections and the repinings which the aged desolate heathen opposes to the objections of the holy men.

Thus far a few words on the name and general character of these poems. As to their number here follows a list which is not indeed offered as by any means perfect or complete, but which contains the names of those which are most popular, and which are found in most manuscript collections ; and though some poems be not enumerated therein, it is hoped that it will suffice for the information of those who, not being Irish scholars, yet have some curiosity in these matters, for the use of whom these remarks are intended. These, then, are the chief poems of Oisín the son of Fionn the son of Cumhall with the number of ranns or stanzas in each, viz. :

Agallarnh Oisín agus Phadruig[2] — The Dialogue of Oisín and Patrick (199). Cath Chnuic an air[3] — The Battle of Knockanaur (80). Teach Mheargaigh go h-Eirinn — The coming of Meargach to Erin (237). Caoidh mhna Mheargaigh — The Lamentation of the wife of Meargach (96). Anmanna na b-priomhlaochra do bhí ar Chnoc an air — The names of the chief warriors who were at Knockanaur (26). Anmanna na g-con agus na n-gadhar do bhí ag an bh-Feinn ag fagbail Chnuic an air — The names of the stag-hounds and hounds which the Fenians had when leaving Knockanaur (75). Laoidh na seilge — The lay of the chase (81). Radh na m-ban — The testing of the women (120). Sealg Sleibhe Fuaid — The chase of Slieve Fuaid (198). Sealg Ghleanna Smoil — The chase of Glennasmol (83). Sealg Locha Lein — The chase at Loch Lein (56). Laoidh an Deirg — The lay of Dearg, i.e. the red one (75). Laoidh Airchinn inhic Chronnchair — The lay of Aircheann son of Cronnchar (27). Laoidh Dhiarmada Bhrice — The lay of Diarmuid of Brice (30). Laoidh an duirn — the song of the first (50). Laoidh Chab an dasain — The lay Cab an dasain (57). Laoidh Loin mhic Liomhtha — The lay of Lon mac Liomhtha (44). Marbhrann Osgair — The death-song of Oscar (77). Laoidh na Con Duibhe — The lay of the black stag-hound (57). Laoidh Oisín ar thír na n-óg — Oisín's lay of the land of the young (147). Tuarusgabhail chatha Gabhra — The account of the battle of Gabhra (88). Caoidh Oisín an-diaigh na Feinne — Oisín's Lamentation after the Fenians (159). Teach Chonnlaoch go h-Eirinn — The coming of Connlaoch to Erin (28). Caoidh Chongculainn a n-diaigh a mhic — Cuchullainn's Lamentation for his son (11). Toitean tighe Fhinn — The burning of the house of Fionn (66). Sgeuluigheacht Chaoilte d'Osgar — Caoilte's narration to Oscar (82). Laoidh Thailc mhic Threoin — The lay of Talc mac Treon (23). Sealg Sleibhe g-Crot — The chase of Slieve Grot (72). Laoidh Mhaghnuis rígh Lochlainn — The lay of Magnus king of Lochlann (40). Comhrac Chuirrill agus Ghoill mhic Mhorna — The combat of Cuirrill and Goll mac Morna (38). Comhrac na Feinne agus mhic rígh na Sorcha mar gheall ar inghin rígh Thire fo thuinn — The combat of the Fenians and the son of the king of Sorcha for the daughter of the king of Tir fo thuinn (40). Camhrac Mhaghnuis mhic rígh Lochlainn — The combat of Magnus son of the king of Lochlann (32). Agallamh Eibhir re Conall Cearnach — The Dialogue of Eibhear with Conall Cearnach (35). Cath an bhais — The battle of death (54). Cath na suirge — The Battle of the wooing (105).[4]

The total number of stanzas in these poems is 2594 ; and as each stanza is a quatrain, we have 10,376 lines or verses.

The prose romances of the Irish were very numerous ; for as Dr. O'Donovan tells us in his introduction to the Battle of Magh Rath, [5] it is recorded in a vellum manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, that the four superior orders of poets, that is to say, the Ollamh, the Anruth, the Cli, and the Cano, were obliged to have seven times fifty chief stories, and twice fifty sub-stories the manuscript referred to gives the names.

Of these and many other tales a number probably never were committed to writing, but lived in the mouth of the bards ; whilst the manuscripts which contained others are no longer to be found, having either already perished utterly, or being even now in process of decay in some dusty corner of one or other of the vast continental libraries.[6]

Some stories, again,[7] are as yet known only to the reader of the Book of Leinster, the Book of Lismore, the Leabhar na h-Uidhre (Book of the Dun Cow), and other rare and unique manuscripts ; which after many vicissitudes and narrow escapes, have at last found a safe and dignified resting place for their venerable age in the Libraries of Trinity College, Dublin, of the Royal Irish Academy, of the British Museum, and in the Bodleian.

But those stories which are as yet comparatively unknown and which relate to other than the deeds of Fionn and his men, may be for the present dismissed ; and we proceed forthwith to enumerate the Fenian tales which to this day live among the people, and are known as Eachtraidhe, (Adventures), hence marvellous histories or legends. They are as follows, and their titles will sufficiently explain the subject of each.

An bhruighean chaorthainn — The Enchanted fort of the quicken tree. Bruighean Cheise corainn — The Enchanted fort of Ceis corann. Bruighean bheag na h-Almhaine — The little enchanted fort of Almhain. Bruighean Eochaidh bhig dheirg — The Enchanted fort of Eochaidh beag the red. Toruigheacht Shaidhbhe inghion Eoghain oig — The Pursuit of Sadhbh daughter of Eoghan og. Toruigheacht an ghiolla deacair agus a chapail — The Pursuit of the Giolla Decair and his horse. Toruigheacht Diarmuda agus Grainne — The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne. Oidheadh an mhacaoimh mhoir, mac righ na h-Easpaine — The Death of the tall youth the son of the king of Spain. Oidheadh Chonnlaoidh — The Death of Conlaoch. Feis tigh Chonain — The Assembly at the house of Conan. Eachtra Lomnochtain t-Sleibhe Riffe — the Legend of Lomnochtan of Sliabh Riffe. Eachtra Cheadaighd mhoir — The Legend of Ceadach mor. Oath thulaighe na in-each — The Battle of Tulach na n-each (the hill of horses). Cath Fionntragra — The Battle of Ventry, Cath Chnucha — The Battle of Cnucha (Castleknock near Dublin), Cath Mhuighe Mhuchruime — The Battle of Magh Muchruime. Ionnsaighidh Mhuighe Leana — The Attack of Magh Leana. Brisleach Mhuighe Mhuirtheimhne — The Breach of Magh Muirtheimhne. Deargruathar Chonaill Chearnaigh — The Bloody defeat by Conall Cearnach. Cuire Mhaoil Ui Mhananain go d-ti Fiannaibh Eirionn — The Invitation of Maol the grandson of Manarian to the Fenians of Erin. Eachtra bhodaigh an chota lachtna — Legend of the churl of the yellow coat. Oileamhain Chongcullainn — The Education of Cuchullainn. Comhrac Fheardhiaidh agus Chongcullainn — The Combat of Fearthadh and Cuchullainn, Nuall-dubhadh Oiliolla Oluim a n-diagh a chloinne — The Lamentation of Olioll Oluim after his children. Bas na g-curaidheadh — The death of the heroes. Agallamh na Seanorach — The Dialogue of the Sages.

Equally popular and well known are the following tales, which though written in the same style, do not relate to the Fenians :

Toruigheacht Cheallachain Chaisil — The Pursuit for the recovery of Ceallachan of Caiseal (from the Danes). Cath Chrionna — The Battle of Crionna. Cath Chluana tarbh — The Battle of Cluan tarbh (Clontarf), which are embellished accounts of historical incidents, and their age may probably be estimated relatively as the dates of the events which they record.[8] Oidheadh chloinne Tuirinn — The death of the children of Tuireann. Oidheadh chloinne Lir — The death of the children of Lear. Oidheadh chloinne Uisnigh[9] — The death of the children of Uisneach. Eachtra Thoirdealbhaigh mhic Stairn — The Legend of Turloch son of Starn (the king of Lochlan's nephew). Eachtra chloinne Thoirdealbhaigh mhic Stairn — The Legend of the children of Turloch son of Starn — These relate to the Tuatha De-Danann and their domination in Ireland, except the third, which is a story of the Milesians. The first-named three form a triad, which has for ages been known as " Tri truagha na sgeuluigh-eachta" or, The three sorrows of story, i.e. the three tragical romances.

Lastly, there are some stories which seem to be mere efforts of the imagination, the name and pedigree of one or more of the chief actors indeed being historical, but all the accessory characters and incidents manifestly fictitious. In these we meet with kings of Greece, of Spain, of Gaul, of Ireland, of Scotland, of Britain, and of Scythia, indiscriminately plundering and slaying one another, and visiting each other's territories on business or pleasure with as much facility as they might in the present days of improved locomotion ; whilst many

names occur in them which are plainly borrowed from the history of the later Roman Empire. Asia also and Africa are frequently mentioned. Such are *Eachtra chloinne righ na hIbrruidhe* — The Legend of the children of the king of Iorruaidh. *Eachtra ghiolla an fhiugha* — The legend of Giolla an fhiugha. *Eachtra Chonaill Golbain* — The Legend of Conall of Golban. *Eachtra mhic an lolair* — The Legend of the son of the eagle. *Eachtra an mhadra mhaoil* — The Legend of the cropped dog. *Eachtra Iollainn airrudheirg* — The Legend of Iollann of the red weapons.

These would seem to be the most modern of all our stories ; in some of which Irish characters do not occur at all, but the chiefs and warriors of other legends are replaced by foreign knights and esquires,[10] that is to say, by champions so called indeed, but in thought and act so thoroughly Celtic as Fionn mac Cumhaill himself and his mighty men.

Some account having been already given in the Introduction to the Battle of Gabhra of the manner in which the Ossianic poems have been preserved, and of the progressive changes which the language of them has undergone ; we shall say no more here on the subject, but confine the rest of our remarks to the prose tales.[11]

The history of Ireland may be roughly, but for our purpose conveniently, divided into three periods. The prehistoric or mythic, in which we are lost and bewildered in the maze of legends of the Firbolgs, Tuatha De Danann, and Milesians, and which may be said to extend to the Christian era ;[12] the elder historic, from the Christian era to the English invasion, A.D. 1170 ; and the later historic from 1170 to the present time. And it is curious that the two first periods furnish all the legends which universally and most vividly prevail at this day, whilst the third is only, so to speak, locally remembered. Thus in connection with the castles and passes of Thomond, there abound amongst the natives of that district stories of the O'Briens and Mac Namaras ; but out of their own country, who remembers them ? The peasants of Innis Eoghain (Innishowen) and Tir Chonnaill (Tirconnell) have by no means forgotten the O'Donnells and O'Neills ; but who hears of them in Munster ? And about Glengarriff O'Sullivan Beare is yet spoken of; whilst in Leinster you will hear the praises of the O'Byrnes, O'Mores, and O'Tooles, the Butlers, Fitzgeralds, and Fitzpatricks. But even such legends as we have of all these ; of Cromwell ; and of the Revolutionary war of 1688 ; besides being localised, are mere vague and isolated anecdotes, compared to the accurate and circumstantial reminiscences which survive of those far more remote ages. How is this ? It is not that these men's deeds were confined to their own localities, the Irish chiefs were accustomed to visit their neighbours without regard to distance. O'Donnell marched from Donegal to Kinsale to fight Queen Elizabeth's forces, besides other expeditions into Munster ; Red Owen O'Neill defeated the English in a general action of great importance at Benburb in 1646, as Hugh O'Neill had done before in 1597 at Druimfliuch ; and O' Sullivan Beare cut his way with a small number of men from Glengarriff to a friendly chief in Leitrim in 1602.[13] It is not that the knowledge of these deeds was not diffused throughout the country ; for Annals were kept in Irish down to 1636, when the Four Masters wrote in the Convent of Donegal ; to which place was conveyed to them, by some means, accurate intelligence of all that happened in the most remote part of Ireland. Poets also continued for many years later to sing loudly in praise of their patron warriors. Perhaps it may be accounted for by the events of the later historic period not having been embodied in romances, like those of the other two. Yet still we have " *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaigh*," or The Triumphs of Turlough O'Brien, being a narrative of the wars of Thomond written by John Mac Rory Mac Grath in 1459 ; perfectly authentic indeed, but in number of epithets and bombast of expression far outdoing any of the romances, being in fact the most florid production in the language ; and it has not become popular, nor is it comparatively known. This cannot be attributed to the antiquity of the language ; for in the first place, the language of 1459 written without pedantry[14] would

be intelligible to Irish speakers of the present day, with the exception of a few forms and words which have become obsolete ; and in the next place, old inflections, as they fell into disuse, would have been replaced by newer, and words which from the obsolescence of the things to which they related might have become obscure, would have been explained by tradition. All this has taken place in the case of the Ossianic poems,[15] and of the romances now popular ; many of which are undoubtedly very old,[16] such as "The Three Sorrows of Story," the Battle of Magh Muirtheimhne, and the Battle of Clontarf, which is attributed to Mac Liag the bard of Brian Borumha. In these indeed, as in all the stories, there are abundance of words no longer used in conversation ; but which are understood by the context, or which in districts where such pieces are read, there is always some *Irishian* sufficiently learned to explain.[17] Hence the reader who speaks Irish may have often heard a labourer in the field discoursing *ex cathedra* of the laws and the weapons of the Fenians, and detailing to his admiring and credulous hearers the seven qualifications required by them in a newly-admitted comrade. But the customs of the later chiefs ; their tanistry, their coigny, and livery, &c., are but dimly remembered here and there, and the terms of their art have resumed their primary sense, their technical meaning being forgotten. Thus *Caoruiigheacht* at present simply means cattle, but at one time denoted those particular cattle which a chief drove from his neighbour in a *creach* or foray, together with the staff of followers who were retained and armed in a peculiar manner for the driving of them,[18] and *Ceatharnach*, which meant a light-armed soldier, (as distinguished from the *Galloglach*, gallowglass or heavy-armed man), now signifies merely a bold reckless fellow, and as a term of reproach, or in jest, a robber and vagabond.[19]

To end this digression, whatever it may be that has given vitality to the traditions of the mythic and elder historic periods, they have survived to modern times ; when they have been formed into large manuscript collections, of which the commonest title is " Bolg an t-salathair," answering to "A comprehensive miscellany." These were for the most part written by professional scribes and schoolmasters, and being then lent to or bought by those who could read but had no leisure to write, used to be read aloud in farmer's houses on occasions when numbers were collected at some employment, such as wool-carding in the evenings ; but especially at wakes. Thus the people became familiar with all these tales. The writer has heard a man who never possessed a manuscript, nor heard of O'Flanagan's publication, relate at the fireside the death of the sons of Uisneach without omitting one adventure, and in great part retaining the very words of the written versions. Nor is it to be supposed that these manuscripts, though written in modern Irish, are in the mere colloquial dialect any more than an English author now writes exactly as he converses. The term modern may be applied to the language of the last three centuries, when certain inflections and orthographical rules obtained, which have since held their ground ; and the manuscripts we speak of though admitting some provincialisms, many of which are differences of pronunciation, [20] (especially in the terminations of verbs), more than anything else, have retained the forms proper to the modern literate language as distinguished from the colloquial, such as the prepositions *fri* and *re* (by or with), *ro bha se* for *do bhi se* (he was), &c. In some manuscripts, certainly, these distinctions have not been observed ; but we here speak of good ones, among which we class the two from which has been derived the text published in the present volume. The first is a book containing a number of legends and Ossianic poems, and entitled " Bolg an t-salathair ;" written in 1780, at Cooleen, near Portlaw, in the county of Waterford, by Labhras O'Fuarain or Lawrence Foran, a school-master : and he apologises in a note for the imperfections of his manuscript, alleging in excuse the constant noise and many interruptions of his pupils.[21] The second is a closely written quarto of 881 pages from the pen of Martan O'Griobhtha, or Martin Griffin of Kilrush, in the county of Clare, 1842-3.

This manuscript, which a few years ago came into the Editor's possession, is called by the scribe "An Sgeulaidhe," i.e., The Story-teller, and is entirely devoted to Fenian and other legends, of which it contains thirty-eight ; some having been transcribed from manuscripts of 1749.[22]

From what has been said before it will be understood that the language of these tales in their popular form, though not by any means ancient, is yet, when edited with a knowledge of orthography and a due attention to the mere errors of transcribers, extremely correct and classical ; being in fact the same as that of Keating. Nor is it wise to undervalue the publication of them on the score of the newness of their language, and because there exist more ancient versions of some : that is, providing always that the text printed be good and correct of its kind. On the contrary, it seemed on this account most desirable to publish them, that there have hitherto been, we may say, no text books of the modern language, [23] whilst there still are at home and abroad, many Irishmen well able to read and enjoy such were they to be had. The Fenian romances are not, it is true, of so great an interest to those philologists whose special pursuit it is to analyse and compare languages in their oldest phase, as the ancient Irish remains which have been edited with so much learning and industry during the last twenty years ;[24] but they will delight those who lack time, inclinations, or other requisites for that study of grammars and lexicons which should prepare them to understand the old writings ; and who read Irish, moreover, for amusement and not for scientific purposes. It has been already said that some of these legends and poems are new versions of old ; but it is not to be supposed that they are so in at all the same degree or the same sense as, for instance, the modernised *Canterbury Tales* are of Chaucer's original work. There is this great difference, that in the former nothing has been changed but some inflections and constructions, and the orthography, which has become more fixed ; the genius and idiom of the language, and in a very great measure the words, remaining the same ; whilst in the latter all these have been much altered. Again, the new versions of Chaucer are of the present day ; whereas our tales and poems, both the modifications of older ones, and those which in their very origin are recent, are one with the other most probably three hundred years old.

The style of the Irish romantic stories will doubtless strike as very peculiar to those whom it is new, and it is to be hoped that no educated Irishman will be found so enthusiastic as to set them up for models of composition howbeit, there is much to be considered in explanation of their defects. The first thing that will astonish an English reader is the number of epithets ; [25] but we must remember that these stories were composed and recited not to please the mind only, but also the ear. Hence, adjectives, which in a translation appear to be heaped together in a mere chaos, are found in the original to be arranged upon principles of alliteration. Nor will the number alone, but also the incongruity of epithets frequently be notorious, so that they appear to cancel each other like + and - quantities in an algebraical expression. Here is an example ; being the exordium of "The Complaint of the daughter of Gol of Athloich :"

"An Arch-king, noble, honourable, wise, just-spoken, abundant, strong, full-valiant, knowledgeable, righteous, truly-cunning, learned, normally legal, gentle, heroic, brave-hearted, rich, of good race, of noble manners, courageous, haughty, great-minded, deep in counsel, lawgiving, of integrity in his sway, strong to defend, mighty to assist, triumphant in battle, abounding in children, acute, loving, nobly comely, smooth, mild, friendly, honest, fortunate, prone to attack, strong, fiercely powerful, constantly fighting, fiercely mighty; without pride, without haughtiness ; without injustice or lawlessness upon the weak man or the strong ; held the power and high- lordship over the two provinces of Munster, &c." [26]

The confusion and contradiction which here appear would have been avoided, and a clearer notion of the king's character conveyed, by arranging the epithets into proper groups, with a few words of explanation ; somewhat in this manner :

" There reigned over Munster an arch-king, who as a warrior was mighty, brave, fierce, &c., who as a ruler was equal, just, wise in counsel, &c., and who to his friends and to the weak was mild, gentle, &c.

But then the writer would have been compelled to break up his long chain of adjectives which fell so imposingly in the native tongue on the listener's ear, and to forego the alliterative arrangement of them, which is this : The first three words in the above sentence, (a noun and two adjectives), begin with vowels ; the next two adjectives with *c* ; then follow three beginning with *l* ; five with *f* ; three with *c* ; three with *s* ; three with *m* ; three with *r* ; four with *c* ; three with *g* ; four with *m* ; two with vowels ; and four with *b*.

Alliteration was practised in poetry by the Anglo-Saxons, but this seems attributable rather to the embryo state of taste amongst them, and to an ignorance of what really constitutes poetic beauty, than to the genius of their language ; hence the usage did not obtain in the English, and at the present day alliteration, whether in prose or poetry, is offensive and inadmissible ; except when most sparingly and skilfully used to produce a certain effect. It was, doubtless, the same want of taste which introduced, and a want of cultivation which perpetuated the abuse of alliteration amongst the Celtic nations, and prevented the bards of Ireland and Wales from throwing off the extraordinary fetters of their prosody[27] in this respect ; and it is a great evidence of the power and copiousness of the Celtic tongues, that even thus cramped they should have been able to move freely in poetry. Impose the rules of prosody by which the medieval and later Celtic poets wrote upon any other modern European language, and your nearest approach to poetry will be *nonsense-verses* ; as the first attempts of school-boys in Latin verse are called, where their object is merely to arrange a number of words in a given metre, without regard to sense.[28] Alliteration was not only abused in poetry, but also in prose ; and indeed it may be asked whether the introduction of it at all into the latter is not of itself an abuse. But differently from many other languages, the genius of the Gaelic, apart from external causes, seems to impel to alliteration, and its numerous synonyms invite to repetitions which, properly used, strengthen, and being abused, degenerate into jingle and tautology. The Irish speakers of the present day very commonly, for emphasis sake, use two synonymous adjectives without a conjunction, instead of one with an adverb, and these they almost invariably choose so that there shall be an alliteration. Thus a very mournful piece of news will be called "Sgeul dubhach dobronach," or "Sgeul dubhach doilghiosach," or "Sgeul buaidheartha bronach," in preference to "Sgeul dubhach bronach," and other arrangements ; all the epithets having, in the above sentences at least, exactly the same meaning. An obstinate man that refuses to be persuaded will be called " Duine dur dall," and not " Duine dur caoch ;" " dall" and " caoch" alike meaning blind. Besides the alliteration, the words are always placed so as to secure a euphonic cadence. And this would denote that the alliteration of the Irish and further proofs of their regard for sound, have other sources than a vitiated taste : but it is to this latter that we must attribute the perversion of the euphonic capabilities of the language, and of the euphonic appreciation of its hearers, which led to the sacrifice of sense and strength of sound ; and this taste never having been corrected, the Irish peasantry, albeit they make in their conversation a pleasing and moderate use of alliteration and repetition, yet admire the extravagance of the bombast of these romances. Another quality of the Irish also their corrupt taste caused to run riot, that is their vivid imagination, which forthwith conspired with their love of euphony to heap synonym on synonym. It is well known how much more strongly even an English-speaking Irishman will express himself than an Englishman : where the latter will simply say of man, "He was making a great noise ;" the other will

tell you that "He was roaring and screeching and bawling about the place." Sometimes this liveliness becomes exceedingly picturesque and expressive : the writer has heard a child say of one whom an Englishman would have briefly called a half-starved wretch, "The breath is only just in and out of him, and the grass doesn't know him walking over it."

Had these peculiar qualifications of ear and mind, joined to the mastery over such a copious and sonorous language as the Gaelic, been guided by a correct taste, the result would doubtless have been many strikingly beautiful productions both in prose and verse. As it is the writings of Keating are the only specimens we have of Irish composition under these conditions. Of these, two, being theological, do not allow any great scope for a display of style ; but his history is remarkably pleasing and simple, being altogether free from bombast or redundancy of expression, and reminding the reader forcibly of Herodotus. In poetry, perhaps the most tasteful piece in the language is, with all its defects, "Cuir an mheadhoin oidhche," or the Midnight Court, written in 1781 by Bryan Merryman, a country school-master of Clare, who had evidently some general acquaintance with literature. This is mentioned to show by an example that alliteration, when merely an accessory and not the primary object of the poet, is an ornament. These lines are from the exordium of his poem a passage of pure poetry :

Ba ghnath me ag siubhal le ciumliais na h-abhann,
Ar bhainsigh uir 's an drucht go trom ;
Anaice na *g-coillteadk*, a *g-cuim* an t-sleibh,
Gan *mhairg*, gan *mhoill*, ar shoillse an lae. [29]

How much the two last lines would suffer if written

Anaice na *bh-fodhbhadh*, a *g-cuim* an t-sleibh,
Gan *aire*, gan *mhoill*, ar shoillse an lae.

Though the assonance is preserved, and of the two words substituted one is a synonym of the original, and the other, though of a different meaning itself, preserves the sense of the line as before.

The oldest specimens of Irish composition are perfectly plain, and Dr. O' Donovan gives it as his opinion, (See introd. Battle of Magh Rath), that the turgid style of writing was introduced into Ireland in the ninth or the tenth century ; whence it is not known. The early annalists wrote very simply, but many of the later entries in the Annals of the Four Masters are in the style of the romances.

It may be a matter of surprise to some that the taste of the Irish writers should never have refined itself, the more so that the classics were known in Ireland. But though we find, indeed, many men spoken of in the Annals as learned in Latin, there is but small mention of Greek scholars : thus it may be supposed that their acquaintance was chiefly with mediaeval latinity. Fynes Moryson mentions the students in the native schools as "conning over the maxims of Galen and Hippocrates ;" the latter most likely in some Latin version of the schoolmen ; but we do not hear that they studied Thucydides and Tacitus, Homer and Virgil, who would have been more likely to elevate their taste and style. Nor is the mere study of the classics sufficient to purify the literature of a nation ; much else is required, such as encouragement, and acquaintance and comparison with the contemporary writings of other countries. These advantages the Irish authors did not enjoy. Their only patrons were their chiefs, and this fact, together with the reverence of the Celts for prescription, united with other causes to confine their efforts to the composition of panegyrical and genealogical poems, and of bare annals ; the very kinds of writing, perhaps, which admit of the least

variety of style, and which are most apt to fall into a beaten track. Of nature and of love our poets[30] did not comparatively write much, and such remains as we have of this kind cause us to wish for more. Of the effect of study of the classics, without other advantages, we have an example in the effusions of the poets of the last two centuries, numbers of whom were schoolmasters, and well read in Homer, Virgil, and Horace. The effect has been merely that innumerable poems, otherwise beautiful, have been marred by the pedantic use of classical names and allusions, *otio et negotio*.

But how can we wonder, considering all adverse influences, at the defects of Irish literature, more especially in works of fiction, when we look abroad. In the last century the French were delighted with the romances of Scuderi, and England was content to read them in translations until Fielding appeared. Slavish imitations of the classics abounded, pastorals and idyls ; and until the time of Addison[31] the most wretched conceits passed for poetry, and bombast, which but for the nature of the language would perhaps, have equalled that of the Irish romances in diction, and which many times does so in idea, for grandeur. True, this was an age of decadence ; still if with learning, patronage, and opportunity, stuff can be written and admired, there is excuse for many defects where all these aids are wanting.

But, notwithstanding that so many epithets in our romantic tales are superfluous and insipid, great numbers of them are very beautiful and quite Homeric. Such are the following, applied to a ship, "wide-wombed, broad-canvassed, ever-dry, strongly-leaping;" to the sea, " ever-broken, showery-topped, (alluding to the spray) ;" to the waves, "great-thundering, howling-noisy." Some of these are quite as sonorous and expressive as the famous πολυφλοισβοιο θαλασσησ.

Throughout the Fenian literature the characters of the various warriors are very strictly preserved, and are the same in one tale and poem as in the other. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, like many men in power, is variable ; he is at times magnanimous, at other times tyrannical and petty, and the following story does not show him in a favourable light. Diarmuid, Oisín, Oscar, and Caoilte mac Ronain, are every where the χαλοι χαγαθοι of the Fenians ; of these we never hear any thing bad. There are several graphic scenes in our tale, and the death of Diarmuid and his reproaches to Fionn are very well told. Some notice of the race to which Diarmuid belonged, and of one or two other matters besides which might reasonably have found a place in this introduction, are unavoidably postponed to the additional notes at the end of the volume, and for the present we shall allow the Tale of the Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne to speak for itself.

S.H. O'G.

*Erinagh House, Castleconnell,
December, 1856*

[1] It will be for those who may at any time seek to determine the age and source of these poems, to consider whether these passages be part of the originals, or later interpolations ; for on this of course much depends. than the objections and repinings which the aged desolate heathen opposes to the arguments of the holy men.

[2] It will be remarked that this name is here assigned to a single poem ; it is so called in manuscripts, because it is the opening piece of the Ossianic poems, commencing with an exhortation from Patrick to Oisín to arise and listen to the orisons of the monks, and consisting through, out of a conversation between the saint and the bard. Nevertheless, as has

been said above, the whole corpus of Ossianic poems are called Agallamh Oisín agus Phadruig as well.

[3] *Cnoc an air*, i.e. *the hill of slaughter*, in the county of Kerry. It still bears the name, which is anglicised as in the text. This and the four following poems, which also relate to this battle, are perhaps the most generally admired among the people.

[4] The Irish names of the poems have been purposely printed in the Roman character for the convenience of Scotch Gaelic scholars, should these pages chance to be seen by any such.

[5] Printed with translation and notes for the *Irish Archaeological Society*. Dublin : 1842.

[6] In the story of the Battle of Magh Rath, Congal Claen in his metrical conversation with Ferdoman, boasting of the prowess of the Ultonians, mentions the following battles and triumphs, viz. The Battle of Rathain, of Ros na rígh, of Dumha Beinne, of Edar, of Finncharadh : the first day which Conchobhar gave his sons, the taking of the three Maels of Meath by Fergus, the seven battles around Cathair Con rui, the plundering of Fiamuin mac Forui, the plundering of Curoi with the seventeen sons of Deaghaidh, the breach of Magh Muchruime, the bloody defeat by Conall Cearuach. Of the greater part of these events Dr. O'Donovan says that there is no record extant, and of one or two a short mention is made in the Book of Leinster ; but as the two named battles form the subject of separate romances which are well last known at the present day, we may conclude that similar accounts at onetime existed of all the others, the loss of which as above.

[7] Such as *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, or the Cattlepoil of Cuailgne, (of which very few modern copies are to be found), in *Leabhar na h-Uidhre* ; the demolition of *Bruighean da Berga* in the same and in two other old manuscripts. Also the stories of the magical cauldrons at *Bruighean Blai Bruga*, at *Bruighean Forgaill Monach*, at *Bruighean mic Ceacht*, at *Bruighean mic Dathó*, and at *Bruighean da choga*. All these tales are mentioned in the battle of Magh Rath, and the information as to the books in which they are preserved is derived from Dr. O'Donovan's notes.

[8] Of some of these legends no ancient copies are now known to exist ; but to speak generally, the history of one may perhaps be applied to all. Thus the Battle of Magh Rath was fought A.D. 637, of which there is authentic historic record in the *Annals of Tighernach*, the *Chronicon Scotorum*, and the *Annals of the Four Masters*. The oldest copy of the romance of this battle is in a manuscript of the XV century ; but the language and other internal evidence combine to shew that the story, as it has come to us, was compiled in the XII century, and various hints and quotations of the author leave no doubt that he again had more ancient manuscripts before him, the age of which is undetermined.

[9] This tale is published in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin*, 1808.

[10] Adhering to the purpose of not deeply investigating the age of these productions, we may yet suggest one or two queries. Such legends as the last mentioned were clearly written after the Normans had made known to the Irish the institutions of chivalry, which were not indigenous to the Gael is it fanciful to suppose, since we find such frequent mention of Europe, Asia, and Africa, also of "the three divisions of the world," that the imaginative narrator would have introduced the New World as well had it been discovered in his day, hence that the stories were written before 1492, or at all events before 1500 ? Again, the Legend of the Cropped Dog is of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, and the name of Arthur

occurs in the legend of Iollann whence did the Irish derive their knowledge of these personages, was it from the Welsh colonists in Ireland, or from the Norman books of chivalry?

[11] That is to those of which the names have been cited above, which are the greater part of what have remained current among the people in modern times.

[12] Far be it to deprive of all claim to truth such parts of our history as profess to record what happened in Ireland before the birth of our Lord ; because from the singular continuity, accuracy, and minuteness, with which annals, genealogies, and historical poems are known to have been compiled by monks and the hereditary historians of the great native chiefs, even from the Vth century until the early part of the XVIIth, thus testifying to the natural bent of the Gael to preserve their own history 5 it is probable that the primitive Irish did not neglect to transmit true records of some kind to their posterity. Whether they were acquainted with the art of writing, as some maintain ; or whether by the Ogham, and poems orally preserved. Yet who shall thoroughly discern the truth from the fiction with which it is every where entwined, and in many places altogether overlaid ? The word *mythic* also applies in great measure to the earlier portion of the elder historic period. This note is appended to sooth the indignant feelings of those, (if such there be at this day), who stickle for the truth of every the most ancient particle of Irish history, and who may not relish any doubts thrown upon the reasonableness of their cherished dreams of the past. There was at one time a vast amount of zeal, ingenuity, and research, expended on the elucidation and confirming of these fables ; which, if properly applied, would have done Irish History and Archaeology good service, instead of making their very names synonymous among strangers with fancy and delusion. The Irish Annalists confined themselves to bare statements of facts, never digressing ; hence we find fable set down as gravely as truth. What trouble would have been saved to their modern readers had they done as Herodotus, who in relating a more than usually great marvel, is wont significantly to tell us that he only gives it as he heard it. It may grieve some that so many of us now hesitate to receive as valid those genealogies by means of which, thanks to the ingenious fancy of our ancient bards, (who upon the introduction of Christianity freely borrowed from the Mosaic history), every Gael living in the year 1856, be he a kilted Mac Donald, or a frieze-coated O'Neill, can deduce his descent step by step from Adam ; that is, providing the last five or six generations be remembered, for in these latter days pedigrees have been sadly neglected. There are now also many good Irishmen, who do not consider that the date or details of the various influxes from Scythia and Iberia into Ireland are as trustworthy as those of the Peninsular war, or of other modern events ; but let the destruction of these illusions be compensated by the reflection, that it is now established in the eyes of the learned world that the Irish possess, written by themselves, and in their own primitive and original language, more copious and more ancient materials for an authentic history than any nation in Europe.

[13] This feat is commemorated in Munster by a wild and well known pipe-tune, called "Mairseail Ui Shuillibhain go Liathdruim", O'Sullivan's march to Leitrim. Perhaps no chief of the latter ages enjoys a clearer or more wide-spread traditionary fame than Murrough O'Brien, Baron of Inchiquin, who sided with Queen Elizabeth in what Philip O'Sullivan calls the *Bellum quindecim annorum*. His severity and ravages earned him the name of "Murchadh an toiteain" or, Murrough of the conflagration, and throughout Munster they still commonly say of a man who is, or appears to be frightened or amazed, " Do chonnairc se Murchadh no an tor do b'fhoigse dho" i.e., he has seen Murrough or the bush next him.

[14] Keating, who was born in 1570, and wrote shortly after 1600, is perfectly intelligible at this day to a vernacular speaker, his work being the standard of modern Irish in orthography and the forms of words ; whereas the Four Masters, who wrote in 1636, and Duaid Mac

Firbis, who wrote in 1650 1666, employ so many constructions and words which even in their day had been long obsolete, that a modern Irish speaker must make a special study of the Grammar and of glossaries before he can understand them.

[15] Vide p. 16 et seq. of the introduction to the *Battle of Gabhra*, where extracts from ancient manuscripts are compared with the corresponding passages of the poems now current.

[16] It is a pity that O' Flanagan when he published what he calls "The Historic tale of the death of the sons of Usnach," did not mention the manuscript from which he took it, and its date. However, the best authorities agree in referring the story itself to the XIIIth century. The Romantic tale on the same subject, which he gives also, is the version now current ; nor does he say where he got it. Some forms are in a trifling degree more old-fashioned than those of the very modern copies ; the orthography very much more so than that of the oldest copies of Keating : but that may be attributed to O'Flanagan's desire to abolish the rule of "caol le caol agus leathan le leathan," (for the last three centuries the great canon of Gaelic orthography), which may have led him to spell according to his own system.

[17] The term *Irishian* may possibly be new to some. It is among the peasantry the Anglo-Hibernian equivalent of the word *Gaoidheilgeoir*, a personal noun derived from *Gaoidheilg*, the Gaelic or Irish language ; and means one learned in that tongue, or who can at all events read and write it ; which simple accomplishments, in the neglected state of that ancient idiom, suffice to establish a reputation for learning amongst those who can only speak it.

[18] This word is anglicised to *creaght* by the English writers on Irish affairs, of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries. Dr. O'Donovan mentions in a note to the Four Masters that this latter meaning of the word is still known in the county of Donegal.

[19] The English writers style a light Irish soldier a *kern*, pi. *kerne*; which they have taken wrongly from *ceithern*, pi. *ceitheirne*, which is a noun of multitude. In Scotland it has been better rendered by *catteran*. Cormac says that the original meaning is *one who plunders in war* (O'Reilly sub voce), and that certainly was their employment and in peace too.

[20] Thus a Munster manuscript will have *chugham* (to me) where a northern one will have *chugam* ; the latter being the correct form : and again, *do tugag* (was given) for the northern *do tugamh* ; the literate form being *do tugadh*. But this is a mere idiosyncrasy of pronunciation, which is reproduced in manuscript from want of a knowledge of orthography in the scribe ; for northern and southern will each in his own way read off the literate form in the above and all other cases, as easily as if he saw his peculiar pronunciation indicated ; just as two English- men equally understand the words *said* and *plaid* when written, though one sound the *ai* as *ay* in *day* in both words, and the other as *e* in *red* in the first, and as *a* in *lad* in the second. These peculiarities, however, are always discarded in Irish printed works of the most modern date, e g. The Irish Thomas a Kempis ; except where it is desired to give a specimen of provincialism, as is partly done in "The Poets and Poetry of Munster," by John O'Daly (Dublin, 1851). But it is to be regretted that the Highlanders are, even in print, regulating their orthography by the peculiarities of their pronunciation, to a much greater extent than is done in the most recent Irish manuscripts we mean such as may be written in this very year. Thus the Scotch print Oran for Abhran (a song). Some remarks will be made on Gaelic orthography in the additional notes at the end of the volume.

[21] This volume was lent for collation by the Society's Secretary, Mr. John O'Daly, of 9, Anglesea-street, Dublin, whose collection of Irish manuscripts is alone sufficient to keep the Society at work for the next forty years or more.

[22] The Editor has also, written by this industrious scribe, a smaller quarto volume, in which are found nearly all the Ossianic poems that have been enumerated, good copies of the Reim rioghraidhe, of the contention of the bards, and of the Midnight Court, besides many miscellaneous poems of the last three centuries.

[23] Almost the only original work in correct Irish ever printed in the country, was a portion of Keating's History, published by Mr. William Haliday in 1811 ; which is both uninviting in appearance, and difficult to procure. Most other Irish works have been translations, of which the best undoubtedly is the translation of Thomas a Kempis, by the Rev. Daniel A. O'Sullivan, P.P. of Inniskeen, county of Cork ; who is an accomplished Irish scholar and poet.

[24] Not only in Ireland by the Rev. Dr. Todd and by Dr. O'Donovan, but on the Continent. To Zeuss belongs the honour of having exhumed and printed the oldest known specimens of our language. It is true that he was in a measure indebted for this to his more favourable situation for visiting the monasteries of Austria and of Switzerland, and the library of Milan, where these treasures lie. But for his masterly interpretation of them, and the splendid system of critical and philosophical grammar which he has built of these materials, [*Grammatica Celtica*, Lips. 1853], we have only to thank his own great science and patience. The unique philological training of Germany alone could produce such a work.

[25] These, however, are very sparingly used in the story of Diarmuid compared to some others.

[26] Many epithets are repeated in the translation, but this is from the want of synonyms in English ; in the original they are all different words. Some also, which in the Irish are compound adjectives, have to be rendered by a periphrasis.

[27] Which includes minute and stringent rules of assonance as well as of alliteration.

[28] The Spaniards use assonant rhymes, but in a far more confined sense than the Irish. We believe that Mr. Ticknor states in the preface to his "Spanish Literature," that Spanish is the only European language' which employs these rhymes. But those who will read "Cuirt an mheadhoin oidhche," will not readily allow this.

[29] I was wont constantly to walk by the brink of the river,
Upon the fresh meadow-land, and the dew lying heavy ;
Along by the woods, and in the bosom of the mountain,
Without grief, without impediment, in the light of the day.

[30] That is, down to the end of the sixteenth century.

[31] See Macaulay's *Essay on Addison*.

Transactions of the Ossianic society, for the year[s] 1853-1858 (1854)

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