

IRISH LITERATURE: ITS ORIGIN,
ENVIRONMENT AND
INFLUENCE

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Two worlds commemorate that great adventure of Columbus, who, four centuries ago, after tragic effort, sailed forth from Huelva, and at last found the fringe of a new continent. He opened its gates to the kingdoms of Europe, but that vast region had been ages before discovered by the ships of the daring sea-kings who gave it the name of "Great Ireland" — a prophetic name.

These men we know; Brendan and Cabot, too, we know; but who shall tell of him who first, setting his prow against the western sunlight, drove into the dark mists of the Unknown, and discovered Ireland? Forgotten are his name and race, forgotten his struggles, who must have been his own king, counsellor, and guard, in an adventure greater by far, in comparison, than that of the Genoese. But these things we can tell of the primeval colonists of our land. When the great migrations of mankind streamed over Europe, in many branching currents, those were not the least valorous who went first and farthest. When the Northern Ocean and the Atlantic billows set bounds to their travel, those must have been amongst the bravest of heart, the most skilled of hand, and the most aspiring of mind, who shaped, stored, equipped, and manned the boats that were launched upon these strange seas to confront all terrors. And it may be a comfort to know, in view of prevalent hypotheses, that the stock of the Anthropoids never went through evolutions in this country. Whatever may have happened elsewhere, the beings who first leaped upon our shores must have been among the foremost in the developed attributes of manhood.

These isles were to the ancients what America has been to modern Europe, and more. The apparent course of the sun seemed an invitation, and ever-flying hope showed, in the splendour of its setting, the glories of the Hesperides. When Pytheas of Massilia saw the Teutons in the region of the Elbe, he rejected the view that they had migrated, in favour of the theory that they were autochthonoi, or products of the place, for it was inconceivable that so dreary a territory could attract rational

beings. It was otherwise as regards Ireland. The rumour of its fairness seems to have reached Homer; to this verdant isle of Ogygia Ulysses came, and here Calypso welcomed and wailed him.

The land must have appeared very beautiful to those first comers who had traversed the desolate wastes and shaggy forests of the continent, but its aspect was not altogether that of to-day. Green pastures there were, where the wild deer browsed, and a wonderful profusion of flowers, and mountain moors that seemed mantled in purple and gold. But there were also the mysteries of dark forests of sombre yew, balsamic pine, and immemorial oak, where lurked the fierce wild bull, lean wolf, and other foes of life, now like them extinct. We dwell above their remains, for the Book of Nature is a palimpsest where the record of a new life is written over the dead letter of the old.

Men coming to a new home bring with them a stock of ideas, some ancestral, some acquired on the way. They obtain others from the suggestions of their surroundings after arrival. In the excitement of change, in the presence of novel phenomena and new experience, the eye is made keen, the senses are quickened, and the brain is stimulated to the utmost. The rapid climatic variations of their insular abode must have affected those accustomed to more constant continental atmospheres. The earliest remnants of our literature reveal a people who were — or as, I think, who had become in these conditions — very sensitive to the things of nature, to whom fair objects of heaven and earth gave joy, and whose exalted imagination saw mystery in new phenomena. These (common things to us) contradicted their experience, and the unknown causes were identified with unseen beings. What wonder if sudden gusts unaccountable, light twirling eddies, mists marching through ravines and gorges, should mask the invisible powers! Man was face to face with nature, vibrating with every change, affected by every influence. His weapons had a secret life within, and the shield of

the champion sounded when one of the Three Waves of Erin rose roaring in foam.

The aspect of the living waters was ever present, in the surging seas, the full rivers in all the plains, the liquid voice of streams in every glen, and the silent, mystical lakes among the mountains. Sometimes the waters were troubled, and they saw therein the struggles of gigantic serpents – ancestral memories of extinct animals, or reminiscences of experience in other regions. Sometimes the waters sank, or, suddenly rushing up, overwhelmed the abodes of men, owing, they fancied, to some pledge broken to the invisible deities. These strange phenomena, which have given cause for so many weird legends, I have correlated with those that precede or accompany earthquake action. It has seemed to me probable that there were, of old, beyond our western coasts, islands, which, owing to the same seismic cause, have sunk beneath the ocean level. The memory of their existence, and the fact of their absence, might well give rise to those strange and beautiful traditions of the Lands of Youth, of Life, of Virtues – their mystical appearance and disappearance – which for ages inspired the imagination of the poets. When successive waves of invaders had flowed over the land, the earliest – driven into the woods, mountains, and remote isles – assumed mythical proportions in the minds of the later comers, and, in the haze of knowledge, the land and all its far islands became peopled with a population of phantoms.

That is the cloud-background of our history, the despair of arid annalists, which contains the Nibelungen treasure of our ancient literature. We do not look there for precise date, but for the lightning-flash of ideas in the darkness of the dawn. It was the Heroic Age of Ireland, when, as in Greece and Rome, all was gigantic, Titanic, or divine. On the mountain peaks of time man saw his own image in the midst of clouds, like the spectres of the Brocken, exaggerated, majestic and terrible. In such conditions the towers of Ilion rose, Hector and Achilles fought, and Olympus helped the fray. Hence the Epic which has thrilled the

world, and which, long ages later, broke the chains of the Turk, and made Greece a nation. That Epic stands alone, nor should we desire to have ideas cast in the same mould. Such desire is the defect of stereotyped thought, which does not understand that to have something diverse and original is to possess a treasure. Our ancient literature must be judged by itself, on its intrinsic merits as the articulate expression of independent humanity. If a standard is required, let it be compared with the non-classic literatures of the western world, and it will be found to rise tall and fair above them, like an Alpine peak which has caught the morning light whilst darkness reigns below.

It is certain that intellectual cultivation existed in Ireland long before the coming of St. Patrick. We have the laws at the revision of which he assisted, and I assert that, speaking biologically, such laws could not emanate from any race whose brains had not been subject to the quickening influences of education for many generations. Granting even that Christianity came before his day, there are yet abounding proofs that our ancient literature arose in pre-Christian days, so closely do its antique characters cling to it. Unquestionably no nation ever so revered its men of learning. They rewarded that reverence by giving immortal life to its heroes, and by winning for that people the respect of modern scholarship. I wish I could say of modern Ireland. But our people, generally, drink no more at the high head-fountains of their island-thought. This is one of the greatest losses which can befall a nation, for it loses thus its birthright, that central core of ideas round which new ideas would develop naturally, grow and flourish, as they never can on alien soil. There is a tone of sincerity in the ancient narratives which cannot exist in imported thought, and we are apt to lose inspiring examples of manful striving, loyal comradeship, truthful lives, chivalric courtesy, and great-minded heroism. It is true that so we escape some crude conceptions and improbable wonders. But, as in the physical order, each man seems to pass through various phases of racial development, so the individual in youth

has tastes similar to those manifested by the race in its youth. Every people has at first its ideals, simple, sincere, and great, mingled with myths that stimulate the imagination. Every young generation has similar wants, and will seek to satisfy them, if not here, then elsewhere, in a literature that debases the germinating ideals, dwarfs the mind, and soils the imagination.

With roots deep struck in the soil, the literature of the Irish Gael and commingled races grew vigorously from its own stock and threw out luxuriant branches and fair blooms. From the first, it exhibited characters peculiarly its own. But these were not what are considered Irish, in latter days: and here let me say that I am taken with dismay when I find some of my patriotic young friends deciding what is and what is not the Irish style in prose and the Irish note in poetry. We all know what is meant. But it is scarcely too much to say that you may search through all the Gaelic literature of the nation, and find many styles, but not this. If it ever existed, it existed outside of our classic literature, in a rustic or plebeian dialect. It must be counted, but to make it exclusive would be to impose fatal fetters on literary expression. As in other countries, there were not one but many styles, differing with the subject, the writer, and the age. At one period, we shall find works characterised by curt, clear and ringing sentences; at another the phrase moves embarrassed by its own luxuriance.

Still more remote from the popular notion, and far more emphatic, are the characteristics of Irish Gaelic versification of which there were many kinds. I shall give a summary of the rules which govern the formation of one species only, the *Dan direach*, or Direct Metre, of which, however, there are several varieties:

1. The lines must have a certain number of syllables.

2. There must be four lines in each quatrain of two couplets. The sense may be complete in the couplet, but must be complete in the quatrain.

3. Concord must be observed; *i.e.*, two words (not being prepositions or particles) in each line must begin with a vowel

or with the same consonant. If these alliterated words be the last two, the concord is perfect, if not, it is an improper concord. The third and last lines must have perfect concord.

4. Correspondence must be observed. The bards grouped the consonants into five classes, according to the characters of the sound. Perfect correspondence demanded that the end words in two lines should agree in possessing letters of the same class. [This may sometimes result in what we call rhyme.] If only the vowels rhyme, whilst the consonants are disregarded, then this is termed imperfect concordance.

5. Termination required the final word of each couplet to be one syllable longer than the final word in the preceding line.

6. Union is another essential. Similar to correspondence, in some respects, the same vowels need not be repeated – it suffices that they belong to the same class; the final word of one line chimes with a central word in the next.

There are other rules besides, but these are surely enough to prove that classic Irish verse was an extremely elaborate affair. It would be impossible to adapt the English language to verse so intricate. Its existence betrayed a highly refined development of the organs of speech and of hearing, which latter is what we should expect from the musical taste and skill of the race. From such rules, we can readily understand that the bardic corporation was competent to carry this refinement of technic, and to develop an intricacy of meaning to such a degree, that the outer world required an explanation. Some of the poems of Seancan Torpeist, in the seventh century, were quite as unintelligible as the most obscure of Browning's, but, unlike Browning, he was always able to translate them to a puzzled prince. Poets seemed to have a natural tendency in the direction of over-elaboration; they had been judges until they developed technicalities and an artificial law language, so that neither suitors nor audience could understand them. Then the princes interposed, adding laymen to the court. With their poetic tongue

there was no interference, until it had been unduly exercised in oppressing the chiefs.

Now, if we examine the mechanism of any of these elaborate verses, we shall perceive that it contains a lesson greater than has been hitherto noticed. Open the Book of Kells and look at one of the initial letters, with its wonderful intricacy of interwoven lines, its exquisite grace of form, and marvellous delicacy of tint. The first glance shows it to be a beautiful work of art, and at once we recognise that it must have been produced by men whose minds, eyes, and hands had been cultivated to the highest degree. It is not the product of the training and refining of an individual or of a generation, but of a series of successive individuals in many generations. Than some of these initial letters nothing of the kind seems to have ever been made so beautiful before, nor anything since. Thus human skill in particular departments may ascend progressively till it reach its zenith and then gradually decline. Mankind acquires, but loses also; its advance in one direction may mean retreat in another. And as works such as these are indices to the development of refinement, and to the co-operation of certain qualities and senses in man, these also must have their time of rise and fall.

Now the form-and-colour picture presented by one of these fine initials is, in another department, the sound-picture presented by Gaelic verse. A little examination shows that, besides possessing the sounds we recognise, and those which other European nations have noticed, the ancient Irish composers noted, identified and employed other and more subtle shades of sound. Consider this question for a moment, for it has a physiological as well as a literary interest. We all know what the term rhyme now means in English: the sound-echo of vowels and consonants in two or more terminal words.¹ It has

¹ But not now of entire words, as in the *rime riche* of the French, where *livre* (book) rhymes with *livre* (pound). English "perfect" rhyme is an incomplete word-echo, which secures some variety.

many charms, but tends to become monotonous in long poems; hence authors sometimes abandon it completely for blank verse, or, using it, endeavour to evade the danger of monotony by alternating the rhyme, carrying over the sense, or varying the length of line. Now this comes of narrowing the conditions. There is no cause, save custom and imperfect audition, why only the last vowel and consonant should be echoed. The ear recognises the echo of the initial letter, or of initial consonant and vowel, in concord or alliteration. Readers of Spanish dramas and of Irish street ballads notice also the chime of the accented vowel, the vowel-rhyme, or *assonante*, although the consonants differ. But the ancient Irish, in addition to these, had also other varieties, such as the correspondence between letters of the same class. This avoided the monotony produced by a reiteration of exactly the same letter, whilst it repeated the sound with a harmonious variation, and maintained a delicate airy phantom-chime which must have been delightful to the educated ear.

In connection with this question of sound-echo I have a proposition to put forward which may well seem startling. Of all the literary possessions of the human race, the wide world over, nothing now seems to us so constant, so universal, so eternal as rhyme. Now the fact is that rhyme was quite unknown to all the dialects of Europe, with one exception, for some centuries after the Christian era. The Greeks and the Romans wrote much poetry, but never rhymed it.² Their metrical system was elaborate, satisfactory, and pleasing, but it did not recognise the concordant chime of syllables. Again, there is no recognition of rhyme, as the term is now understood, in any of the Gothic dialects previous to the ninth century.

Now, what are we to infer from all this? Here I state my proposition, which is, that the human ear had not then acquired

² Sporadic exceptions of course are found in Ovid's occasional leonine lines. It is suggestive that he lived long and died amidst Scythians, from whom the Irish Gael deduce their descent.

the power of distinguishing and taking pleasure in these sound-echoes or repetitions which we call rhymes. That these would have been adopted, could they have been discriminated, must be inferred from their quick-extending popularity when introduced, and their subsequent universal prevalence.

Some years ago, a German professor introduced, and Mr. Gladstone, with the characteristic vigour of his many-sided mind, supported the theory that primitive man was partially colour-blind, that he could not discriminate well between differing hues. Many passages from the classic authors were adduced in support of this hypothesis, and the argument is based largely on the paucity or descriptive incompleteness of the colour-epithets. But, I venture to think that both these eminent authors would have considered their case strengthened beyond cavil had there been an entire absence of colour-epithets. That is my case: there is an entire absence of rhyme from the classic compositions and from the Gothic dialects, in the early ages, and therefore we must infer that the producers were deaf to the nice distinctions of chiming sounds. In other words, they were rhyme-deaf.

Whence, then, came this new faculty with which mankind has been endowed? There can be no doubt that all the European races, spread as they now are over the world, are indebted for this great gift, which has quickened, delighted, elevated, and ennobled them for ages, to the Celts, and demonstrably to the ancient Irish. That seems a great claim to make – so great that when an Irishman makes it, one might suppose exaggeration; but foreign scholarship confesses it in part, and the facts render its acceptance imperative. In our most ancient poems, such as that assigned to Lugad, son of Ith (who flourished long before the Christian era), where the language is archaic, full end-rhymes (of consonants and of vowels) are found amongst other examples of perfect correspondence.³

³ E.g., in its end-words: *tracht, éacht, fuàcht, ruacht*.

Granting that the ancient Irish possessed the gift of discerning and composing rhymes before other European nations, as well as a highly developed metric machinery, another question may arise. It might be alleged that, confined apart in an island remote from the Continent, Irish methods could in no way affect the literature of the central and southern peoples, whilst as regards the northern, it might be urged that the Irish had no points of contact with them except where sword met sword. And for this contention, which, I shall prove erroneous, support may indeed be found in some of our chroniclers and others who seem to imagine that fighting, not thinking, is the glory of nations, and so exaggerate the first and show a practical contempt for the last. Before entering on that topic, let me add another observation. The earlier development of auditory power in the ancient Irish, their keen discrimination of subtle sound-agreements and differences, did not stand alone. It must have been correlated with a corresponding evolution of the faculty of articulation, and, as this process went on, language as well as literature was consequently influenced. Other senses evidently shared in the development. In those initial letters, already mentioned, there is overflowing evidence of acute visual perception of colour, whilst appreciation of grace of outline and form is proved also from the writing of our oldest manuscripts, the finely wrought implements of metal, and the admirable shape of some of the flint arrow-heads, fashioned before metal was supposedly known. Mankind may lose what it has acquired (though not necessarily the inner aptitude), and with the ancient language is passing away some of the articulation-gains, as with our ancient civilisation have disappeared some of the educated powers of eye, and ear, and hand.

It occurs to me that from the mechanism of a people's literature, the composition of its metric especially, we can deduce conclusions as to the qualities and capacities in social and governmental matters. Building up verse may be correlated with the building up of a State, for it is an index of constructive

power. The rhythmical tramp of the hexameter of Hellas and Rome, and the sustained strength of their great epics, re-appear in the disciplined tread of phalanx and legion, and the long-continued control of their rule. In the ancient Irish metric there was less of the rhythmic tread, and probably, as a consequence, much less sustained power exhibited, whilst there is a great capacity for detail, a special aptitude for fine arrangements and nice distinctions. Our ancient laws and history reveal the existence of great capacity for complex social mechanism with a minor grasp of dominating and sustained control. The character of our metric might have changed had the race developed a strong central authority. In support of this speculation, I think it may be said that in France and England the classic form, borrowed from Rome, ruled with autocracy and disappeared with the theory of the right divine. The Revolution revolutionised poetry as well as politics.

It was a splendid idea of the bards to conjure back Oisín from the land of Youth, and present him and St. Patrick – types of Paganism and Christianity – in dramatic debate. The great passionate character of Oisín, his vivid love of battle and the chase, his generous spirit, his pathetic regret for lost kin and comrades, with his fiery flashes of revolt, constitute a creation in literature. No wonder that, even though amplified and altered in the garb of another language, the great conception left its impress on a later age. But I cite it here for a special reason, because it may also be taken as typifying the meeting and interaction of ancient Irish and Roman literatures. Christianity gave the Irish that cohesive organisation which their political system lacked, and the great schools took new vigour and vitality. Their rapid and wide-extended reputation shows that this must have been a pre-cultured people who could thus throw themselves so alertly into new study and so quickly conquer fame. The island became the University of Europe, whither students came from many foreign lands, and where they were warmly welcomed, supplied with food and books, and all

gratuitously. But never in any land had learning such an explosive power upon a people as upon the Irish. Elsewhere it merely gave limited impulses. Here, no sooner had scholars trained themselves in academic studies than all the old adventurous spirit of the nation revived, and, ignoring minor ambitions, they swarmed off, like bees from a full hive, carrying with them the honey of knowledge and the ability to create other centres that should be celebrated for all times.

They are known to have been the first settlers in Iceland. They penetrated to Athens, and helped potently to revive or establish the study of Greek in Europe. Some lines of their influences only may be noticed here, but these are remarkable. St. Sedulius (Siadal), A.D. 430, introduced from the Irish the terminal sound-echo or rhyme into Latin verse. This innovation was made in hymns, and as some of these, on account of their beauty and style, were adopted and chanted in the Church (as some till this day are sung), their influence in educating the ear and popularising rhyme over Christendom was incalculable. Take this example of interwoven echoes:

*“A solis ortus cardine, adusque terrae limitem,
Christum canam us principem, natum Maria virgine.”⁴*

Sedulius also produced a work of sustained power in hexameter verse, consisting of five books of nearly 1,800 lines, entitled *Carmen Paschale*, or *The Paschal Song*. It was the first great Christian Epic, and opened the way for all which came after.

Now, in this great poem, characterised by so much originality and dramatic power, Sedulius impresses certain marked Irish peculiarities upon the classic hexameter. Thus, in

⁴ These rhymes are more subtly complete than may be supposed, for the chiming syllables are enriched by this, that the preceding consonants **d** and **g** (as “soft”), and **t** and **p** (as “hard”), give class-chimes. Besides this, we have alliteration of two vowels in the first line, and of two consonants in the second.

the following passage, we find not only examples of “concord” in the alliterated letters, but also of “correspondence” in the terminal rhymes:

“Neve quis ignoret, speciem crucis esse colendam,
Quae Dominum portavit ovans, ration, potenti
Quattuor inde plagas quadrati colligit orbis.
Splendidus auctoris de vertice fulget Eous,
Occiduo sacrae lambuntur sidere plantae
Arcton dextra tenet, medium laeva erigit axem.”

The influence of this remarkable epic, read as it was in all the Irish (and all the Christian) schools on the Continent and in Britain, must have been immense. The systematic adoption by its author of rhyme, assonant and consonant, and of alliteration, must have moulded the forms of subsequent literary production in all the nascent languages of Europe, north and south, as it taught them the art of alliteration, of assonant, and of consonant rhymes.

The influence of St. Brendan was not less vast. If the tale of his voyage to the West, and his arrival in a land of fair birds and great rivers be true, he discovered America a thousand years before Columbus. In any case, this voyage to the Land of the Blessed stimulated the imagination of generations. It has been termed a prelude to the “Divina Commedia,” and, taken with other mystical visions, which, starting from Ireland, circulated over the Continent, it doubtless helped to direct the great genius of Dante. In a similar manner an Irish visionary tale of St. Patrick’s Purgatory, transferred into the Continental languages, gave origin to one of Calderon’s Spanish dramas.

This voyage of Brendan was influential in another direction—in the discovery of America. Columbus studied the narrative. Hrafn of Limerick, the Norse voyager, thoroughly knew it, as did others of his nation, such as Leif and his friends. But there is direct proof of its coercive power. As you sail into Bristol, you must pass under a high hill which is known to this

day as St. Brendan's Hill.⁵ There was a little chapel to St. Brendan on its summit, because of the reverence which all seamen, whether Norse, Saxon, or Celt, professed for the sailor-saint. Now, in 1480 two British merchants equipped two ships to sail to the Isle of Brasylle in the west of Ireland, but after nine weeks' vain voyaging they put into an Irish port. The Bristol men (who were largely of Norse blood) were not discouraged. In 1498, the Spaniard De Ayala informed his sovereign that for seven years they had every year sent out two, three, or four light ships in search of the Island of Brazil (*i.e.*, the Irish "Hy-Breasail") and the Seven Cities. The adventure was under the direction of Cabot, the Genoese, who discovered the northern shore of America a year before Columbus reached its more inviting isles. Thus, either St. Brendan's voyage is a fact, and then he was the true First Discoverer; or it is a fiction, and then it was the direct cause of that discovery. This were a remarkable result of the power of the imaginative literature of the ancient Irish. No other people on earth can claim the discovery of a Continent as the result of a romance.

Whilst some of the early Christians deprecated the study of the pagan classics, the Irish held large and more liberal views. This was peculiarly true of St. Columbanus. Authoritative, inflexible, a daring missionary, his royal mind embraced the wide domain of letters. His eloquence is confessed. His monastic maxims are described as fit for a brotherhood of philosophers, whilst his wit is shown in his lighter poems, his culture in the adoption of old Greek metre, and his Irish training in the terminal rhymes in the alliteration of many of his verses. The following show both final rhymes and concordant initials:

"Dilexerunt tenebras tetras magis quam lucem,
Imitari contemnunt vitae Dominum duc em:

⁵ Hunt, "History of Bristol, 1884."

Velut in somnis regnent una hora laetantur
Sed aeterna tormenta adhuc illi us parantur.”⁶

His national characteristics were impressed on the great School of Bobbio, which he created, in which he died, and whence his influence long radiated over Italy and the North.

Entering the old Cathedral of Aachen, or Aix-la-Chapelle, you will be shown the great marble chair in which, cold as the marble, Charlemagne sat enthroned, sceptre in hand, robed in imperial purple, and with diadem on brow, dead. So he sate when, a century and a half later, Otho and his riotous courtiers broke open the vault and stood sobered and appalled before the majesty of death. On that same chair he sate, in similar apparel, but with the light of life in his eyes, the new Augustus of a new Empire, when two Irish wanderers were brought before him. In the streets of the city in which he hoped to revive the glory of Athens and the greatness of Rome, they had been heard to cry out: “Whoso wants wisdom, let him come to us and receive it, for we have it for sale.” Their terms were not onerous – food and raiment. Their claims stood the test. One, Albinus, was sped to Pavia in Italy; the other, Clement, had the high honour of superseding the learned Anglo-Saxon Alcuin in the Palatine school of the Imperial city. Here, he taught the *trivium* and *quadrivium* – grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, and arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy – the seven arts. In his school sate Charlemagne under the school-name of David, the members of his family each under an academic name, and with these the members of the cortége, the Palatins or Paladins, destined to power and feats of fame. The teaching of the Irish professors here must have had considerable influence on the literature (*e.g.*, the *Chansons de Geste*) which afterwards took its heroes from their scholars. Their authority was enhanced by the

⁶ In the third line, the letters *v* and *r* are in (imperfect) concord. They belong to the same class of “light” consonants, from which it might be inferred that the ancient Irish did not roll the letter *r*.

fact that Charlemagne himself worked with his Irish professors at a revision of the Gospels on the Greek and on the Syriac text.⁷

In the crash and chaos which followed soon after his death, when feudal vassals, strong as their nominal suzerain, lived an isolated war-like life and forgot letters, in the confusion caused by the shifting about of nations from the east and north – partly a rebound from imperial coercion – certain Irish names shine with especial splendour. The first is that of Johannes Scotus Erigena. Of unquestioned learning, versed in Greek, he was the founder of Scholastic Philosophy. This affects us still, for in Scholasticism, as in a forge, the intellect of the Middle Ages was fired, tempered, and made supple, keen, and trenchant. Hence, with all its powers awakened and under alert control, it was rendered fit for the production of the new sciences of modern times. Nor should it be forgotten that Fearghal the Geometer had but recently died, whose daring scientific speculations as to the Antipodes had shocked the stiff-minded Saxon Boniface. Dicuil brought exact science to bear on a cognate subject, in his work on the measurement of the earth – a work which has been republished in several foreign countries, but never in his native land.

The multitudes of students who flocked to Paris to hear Erigena, contented with couches of straw in the Rue de la Fouarre and old halls of the University, were not the last who invaded it to hear an eloquent Irishman. Four hundred years later, in the very beginning of the fourteenth century, another, and perhaps a still more illustrious, representative of Irish thought, in the person of Duns Scotus the Subtle Doctor, throned it over the minds of men. So great was his renown that when in 1308 he came to Cologne the city accorded him a triumphal entry, more splendid than a king's.

Far, in every sense, from such ovations is that desolate island off the Scotch coast, where, in the sixth century, "a grey

⁷ Thegan; Pithou: Opp. cvii.

eye turned ever in vain" towards that Ireland "where the songs of the birds are so sweet, where the clerks sing like birds, where the young are so gentle, the old so wise, and the maidens so fair to wed." The exile charges his parting pupil to bear his blessing, part to Alba, part to Ireland – "seven times may she be blessed.... My heart is broken in my breast. If death comes to me suddenly, it will be because of the great love I bear the Gael."

Columba is the first Irish poet of exile – of which our nation has such sad experience since. His poetry, like his life, is instinct with the deepest affection for his native land, whilst his work has been the most fruitful in influence over the intellectual development of Scotland and England. From the island of Iona, chiefly, went forth that persuasive power which carried education over Britain. The majority of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, all the North of England, where English learning and literature took its rise, were bathed in an Irish intellectual atmosphere. Caedmon began his song in this environment, and when later, in the eight century, English Aldhelm first wrote rhymed Latin verse, it was because he had been a pupil of the Irishman Mailduff, the first Abbot of Malmesbury.⁸

To speak of literary relations between the Irish and the Norse may provoke some derision. Were not these the fierce seakings the "Danes," whose delight was in war, and whose avocation in peace was the plunder of shrines? They were, however, paradoxical enough to build Christ Church, and to richly endow it. And it is also a curious fact that, previous to three great invasions of other countries, for which they are severely blamed, they had been appealingly besought for help by their supposed victims. Iarl Hacon went to oppose the aggressions of the Emperor Otho; King Harald Sigurdson to avenge wrongs inflicted by English Harold; and Iarl Sigurd of the Orkneys (whose mother was an Irishwoman) could not resist

⁸ Malmesbury is a modification of Mailduff's burg.

the appeal of Irish beauty in distress—in the person of Queen Brian Borumha, who was mother of the Norse king of Dublin.

There were, in fact, many and important matrimonial alliances between the Irish and Norse princes, who often joined forces against foes. This happened at Clontarf, where the Irish of Leinster had the alliance of the Dublin and Orkney Norse, whilst Brian brought up the Danes of Limerick. This battle, let me remark, is described in the literature of both countries, and in both descriptions there are omens and spiritual beings such as signalise the epic of Homer. So great was Norse influence over Ireland that three of our provinces retain the Northern name-endings, and many a headland and bay has a Norse appellation. They delighted in the loveliness of the land. Linnæus, in latter days, fell on his knees before the splendour of a furze-bush in blossom, and we can readily imagine how tears came into the eyes of the Arctic rovers when they beheld the fresh green of Ovoca or were dazzled by the crimson and gold of Benn Edair, which they called Howth.⁹ Irish music charmed them, and even now some of our old airs awake echoes along the norland fiords.¹⁰

The latest and most distinguished authorities¹¹ declare that Irish literature has largely influenced that of the Scandinavians. Their Heroic Age was much later than ours, from the end of the ninth to the eleventh centuries, when the ambition of Harold Haarfagre to imitate the imperial methods of Charlemagne had driven the independent princes to far isles or foreign voyages. They were in close and continuous contact in peace and war with the Irish, “whose ancient civilisation was superior and therefore stronger.” Bergen, the old Norse capital, possessed a church dedicated to St. Columba, and the revered relics of its patron, St.

⁹ *I.e.*, Hoved, The Head.

¹⁰ Hr. Sjöden, the eminent Swedish harper, noted several Scandinavian airs but slightly varied from the Irish.

¹¹ Messrs. Vigfusson and York Powell in “*Corpus Poeticum Boreale*,” &c.

Sunniva, an Irish maiden! As you sail into Rejkiavik, the capital of Iceland, you pass the Westman Isles, so-called because of the Irish who had visited and dwelt there. Now Iceland—that strange attractive island, where cold white snow covers the hot volcanic heart—is the old home of the Sagas. It had been first peopled by some Irish monks. Another settlement took place when Queen Aud—widow of White Olaf, the Norse King of Dublin—went thither on the death of her son. Norsemen and Irishmen, her kinsfolk and dependents, accompanied her. Mr. Vigfusson, himself an Icelander, writes with a generous fairness, characteristic of the race, as follows:

“The bulk of the settlers were men who, at least for one generation, had dwelt among a Keltic population and undergone an influence which an old and strongly marked civilisation invariably exercises among those brought under it—an attraction which in this particular case was of so potent a kind that centuries later it metamorphosed the Norman knights of the foremost European kingdom with startling rapidity into Irish chieftains.”

“Moreover,” he adds,

“we find among the emigrants of all ranks men and women of pure Irish and Scottish blood, as also as many sprung from mixed marriages, and traces of this crossing survive in the Irish names borne by some of the foremost characters of the Heroic Age of Iceland, especially the poets, of whom it is also recorded that they were dark men.”

He considers that this close intercourse with the Celts had to do with heightening and colouring the strong but somewhat prosaic Teuton imagination into that finer and more artistic spirit manifested in the Icelandic Saga. The classic land of the Saga was in West Iceland, and there also the proportion of Irish blood was greatest. On the Norsemen who still remain there the Irish influence was yet more effective and powerful. Mr. Vigfusson makes an observation, which is a touching and keen reproach to those on whom it devolves to publish the manuscript materials of ancient Irish literature. He writes: “Only

when it is possible to judge fairly of the remains of the Keltic literature of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, can any definite conception of the influence it exerted on Icelandic, Norse, and English literature be properly estimated."¹²

With the great Sagas, the fame of which has spread abroad as their strong dramatic character deserves, Northern literature possesses the no less celebrated Eddas. These Eddic poems "discover an ideal of beauty," writes Mr. York Powell, "an aerial unearthly fairy world, and a love of nature which we do not find in the Saga." They also reveal that those who composed them were familiar with more southern scenes and manners; and the poems are shown to be the mental offspring of the men "who won Waterford and Limerick and kinged it in York and East England." "It is well to remark," he adds, "that among the first poets we have any knowledge of, the majority are of mixed blood with an Irish ancestress not far back in the family tree.... Their physical characteristics, dark hair and black eyes, like Sighvat and Kormack,¹³ their reckless passion and wonderful fluency are also non-Teutonic and speak of their alien descent." In Bragi's Eddic poem there is a very manifest introduction of a characteristic Irish rhyme-method.

Thus we have it on unquestionable authority that the noble Norse literature, which occupies a position of the greatest importance, dominating as it does the Teutonic world, was itself the offspring, in a certain sense, of our ancient Irish literature. Irish literary training and talent presided over and took part in its composition, gave dramatic vividness to its narrative – grace, method, and myths to its poetry.

With this knowledge in mind you will look with better insight into the story of the Norsemen in Ireland, and see them, no longer as a cloud of barbarians, but as brave adventurous knights whose voyages fringed our seas with a murmur of song,

¹² Vigfusson, Prolegomena to Sturlunga Saga.

¹³ From the Irish name, Cormac.

and whose cities, in quiet times, were the favourite resort of Irishmen skilled in letters and all the arts of peace and war. "Why should we think of faring home?" sang King Magnus. "My heart is in Dublin. I shall not return in autumn to the ladies of Nidaros. Youth makes me love the Irish girl better than myself."

Considering how often and how constantly the prejudice of the ignorant prevents a good understanding between neighbours, whether these be individuals or nations, I have sometimes thought of writing a book to be entitled: "The Good Deeds of our Enemies." Too often do we find writers stopping at nothing to cover the foe with obloquy. By this they put out their own eyes and blind our moral sight. Proceeding on a different principle, I should show enemies, not in their conflicts, but in their concessions, and the picture would give a truer idea of mankind, for it is surprising how many kind offices were mutually interchanged between foemen—even in this very country—who are always represented as savage, ruthless, and exterminating.

Ireland has been able to act upon the literature of the Continent and of Britain in three ways: first, directly, next by means of its pupils on the Continent, and finally by means of the Norse literature. The latter affected both Britain and Germany, so that the Irish spirit has had a double influence, be it much or little, upon both. Professor Morley, indeed, admits that "the story of our literature begins with the Gael"; and pointing out the intermixture of blood, he adds: "But for early frequent and various contact with the race which in its half barbarous days invented Oisín's dialogues with St. Patrick, and that quickened afterwards the Northmen's blood in France and Germany, England would not have produced a Shakespeare."

Certain it is, I think, that but for the influence of Irish literature, Shakespeare would not have produced a "Midsummer Night's Dream," "The Tempest," and "Macbeth." The aerial beings which characterise the first two plays are like

those delightful melodies which Boiëldieu in "La Dame Blanche," and Flotow in "Marthe" made popular over the Continent, and which the Irish ear, suddenly attentive, recognises as Irish in spite of their foreign surroundings.¹⁴

Teutonic poetry, in certain particulars, appears to have germinated from the seed which fell from the ripe Irish harvest. The alliteration found in "Beowulf," the first Anglo-Saxon epic, A.D. 750 (three centuries after Sedulius), seems a rather crude imitation. Rhyme was introduced into High German a

¹⁴ Shakespeare mentions an old Irish air, *Cailin og astor* (in "Henry II.", act iv., sc. 4); the air itself is give in Queen Elizabeth's Virginal Book, so that Irish music must have been admired at her court. It is curious to see the Irish alliteration still influential in the verses attributed to her:

"The doubt
of future foes exiles my
present joy,
And wit me warns
to shun such snares as
threaten mine annoy;
For falsehood now
doth flow and
subject faith doth ebb,
Which would not be
if reason ruled
or wisdom weaved
the web."

It is most interesting to observe that Shakespeare himself employs alliteration in his epitaph, and used it in a manner so closely conforming to the regular Irish system, as to suggest his acquaintance with it, *e.g.*:

"Good friend for Jesus'
sake forbear,
To dig the dust
enclosed here,
Blest be he
who spares
these stones,
And cursed be he who
moves my bones."

century later, and this was achieved by Otfried, who had acquired the gift in that great monastery of St. Gall to which the illustrious Irishman bequeathed his name, his spirit, and his scholarship, which long guided his many disciples.

The Nibelungen Lied and the Lay of Gudrun have been called the Iliad and the Odyssey of Germany. Both, however, have Norse originals. Now, with respect to the latter it is a remarkable but surely not a surprising thing, after all we know, that the opening scenes of the lay should be placed in Ireland. The fierce King of Ireland, Hagen (? Hacon), had a fair daughter Hilda, and to woo her for their King, Hettel of Denmark, came a number of daring champions, disguised as merchants. The wooing with music, which captures the Irish maiden's heart, the flight, pursuit, marriage and reconciliation, are told with animation. Gudrun, the daughter of Hettel's Irish wife, is the second heroine of the tale. In the Arthurian Romance of Tristan and Isolde (as in some others) there are Irish scenes and Irish characters. Isolde herself has bequeathed Dublin her name in Isolde's Tower and Chapel-isod. I need but remind you that the Arthurian Romances gave origin to Tennyson's "Idylls of the King."

The kindred peoples of France and of Spain were naturally not less influenced than the Teutonic races. The Romans did not give them rhyme; their own literature had perished; consequently they borrowed from the islands to which, in Cæsar's time, the continental Druids were sent for training. Assonant rhyme, found in some Anglo-Norman poems, was common in the Romance of Oc and all related dialects. "It is clearly the Irish *Comharda*" (correspondence), writes an English authority, Mr. Guest, "though not submitted in the Romance dialects to the nice rules which regulate its assonances in the Gaelic."

Irish literature has received gifts in return: in the old Anglo-Saxon Mystery Play, found in the Record Office, in the Anglo-Norman Rhyme of Ross, in the Song of Dermott, and in others

unfortunately still unpublished. Michael of Kildare is supposed to be our first poet in English, and he is the pioneer-poet of satire in that language.

This postern, which he opened into what has since become the vast empire of literature in English, gave entrance to many. Spenser came to us, through it, and, caught by the glamour of the Gael, gave us the "Faërie Queene," wherein he immortalises some of our scenery and pays tribute to the ancient renown of our nation:

"Whilome when Ireland flourished in fame
Of wealth and goodness far above the rest
Of all that bear the British Islands name."

It is noteworthy that the great poem, which marked the revival of English letters after Chaucer, was composed in Ireland. Granting that Spenser found models in Ariosto and Tasso, yet, if he had remained in London, he might never have risen above the standard of the Palace-poets. Shakespeare in London was saved by the drama demanding an environment of popular life. Probably nothing saved Spenser but his immersion in Irish nature, which his verse so faithfully reflects. Not only are the material beauties of our country – mountains, woods, and rivers – mirrored there, but its spiritual world also. The very name of Una is Irish, and our Puca appears in trimmed English as "the Pouke," whom Shakespeare again introduces as Puck, just as our Gaelic Madb becomes "Queen Mab."

But it may be said that Spenser was ignorant of the literature of the hostile Irish nation, and so could not be influenced by it. The case is otherwise. When Eudoxus asks: "Have they any art in their compositions, or bee they anything wittie in or well savoured as poems should be?" Spenser (as Irenæus) answers: "Yes, truely, I have caused divers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them, and surely they savoured of sweet wit and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry" (rather these were lost in a

prose translation); “they were sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their naturall device, which gave good grace and comelinesse unto them.”

It is a strange thing to say that Edmund Spenser, who so deprecates their “rebellious” love of liberty, might well have envied the position and influence of the Irish poets. At the Queen’s Court in England he had learned “what hell it is in suing long to bide,” to “eat the heart in despair,” and all the miseries of dilatory patronage:

“To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.”

In Ireland he saw a different state of things. The poets might almost be described as the patrons, for theirs it was to distribute praise or dispraise in poems, “the which,” says Spenser, “are held in so high regard and estimation amongst them that none dare displease them, for feare to runne into reproach through their offence, and be made infamous in the mouths of all men.”

Their compositions were sung at all feasts and meetings by other persons, and these also, to his surprise, “receive great rewards and reputation.” Certain it is, though strange, that Edmund Spenser, had he been least bard in the pettiest principality of Ireland, instead of being the first poet of the monarch of Great Britain, would not have died of hunger. Neglected and starving in Westminster, may he not have regretted his political efforts to destroy the one national organism which above all others had ever generously encouraged the representatives of literature?¹⁵

It is a study full of interest to watch the development of the culture of the Anglo-Irish Pale, and the continuance of that of the Irish nation. In Latin, their men of learning had long a common

¹⁵ It has been computed that, in the petty principality of Tyrconnell (now Donegall county nearly) the real estate allocated to maintenance of the *literati* amounted in value to £2,000 yearly, present currency.

language, but the vernacular was not neglected. In 1600 the literary organisation was still strong, and its strength was shown in the great Bardic Contention. Thirty-two years later an assemblage of historians, antiquaries, and monks was held to collect and collate materials for the great Annals of the Kingdom. Four years the Four Masters laboured at the work, safe by the far shore of Donegall, and fortunate it was, for soon after there was no safety in the "Athens of the West" – the "University of Europe" – for those of its faithful offspring who loved learning and letters. Teacher and pupil were banned. In the midst of morasses, forests, or mountain-glens, they still studied, their bards still sang, and their minstrels played, often with outposted sentinels on the watch.

What wonder if sadness shadowed the land? But disaster may have some compensating gifts to noble natures. The true laurel when crushed yields all its inner fragrance. Deprived of their princes and deposed from their estate, the bards ceased to be learned in the classic forms of literary technic; but they became poets of the people. The sincere voice of their hearts spoke in their song, which is brimful of passionate feeling and glowing with fair ideals. If in other times they had too often confined their efforts to the eulogy of particular princes, now it was otherwise. At the hearths of the people they sang the songs of a Nation.

Perhaps now the first idea of modern nationhood was conceived. Now, at all events, pathos became a character of Irish literature, distinguishing it deeply from that counterfeit of late grotesque, the authors of which resemble those mutilators of men who carved the mockery of laughter upon the face of grief.

What a subject for a painter would be that meeting between the blind and hoary bard Carolan, and the young, bright-eyed child Oliver Goldsmith! The venerable aspect of the ancient Celtic poet he never forgot. "His songs," he says, "in general may be compared to those of Pindar; they have frequently the same flight of imagination." He had composed a concerto "with such

spirit and elegance that it may be compared (for we have it still) with the finest compositions of Italy." This reminds us of the time when an enemy, Giraldus Cambrensis, declared that the skill of the Irish in music "was incomparably superior to that of any other nation."

The meeting of Carolan and Goldsmith may fitly typify the meeting of the literatures of the old nation and of the Pale – one venerable by age and glorified by genius, the other young, buoyant, and destined, like it, to be the guardian and the honour of our common country.

Irish literature is of many blends, not the product of one race but of several. It resembles the great oriel of some ancient cathedral, an illumination of many beautiful colours, some of which can never be reproduced, for the art is lost. We possess an unique treasure in that ancient literature which grew up from a cultured people, self-centred, independent of Roman discipline. Were it not for this we should look at the Northern world through Southern eyes, and, taking our view-point from the Capitol, see nothing beyond the light of the empire, but wild woods and wastes made horrid by Cimmerian darkness, and shifting hordes of quarrelsome barbarians. Yet these were the ancestors of most of the modern European peoples, and those who so depicted them were their coercive and uncomprehending foes. Our deliverance from this thralldom of an enemy's judgment abides in the monuments of the ancient Irish.

The magic password of the Arabian bade the rugged mountain open, and admitted him to the midst of glittering jewels. The knowledge of our old literature takes us into the heart of the Cimmerian darkness, and shows it full of glowing light, it takes us into the homes and minds of one of those great nations uncomprehended of the Romans, and through that one, enables us to see the great, passionate, pathetic, wild, and generous humanity of all.

Thus our ancient literature would be invaluable if for this reason alone, that it gives a new view-point and a new vista. Its importance is augmented in this, that its reckless sincerity stands the enduring evidence of a long-vanished stage of social and intellectual development, where the fiercer and finer powers, the softer and sterner emotions of an early mankind strive and commingle with dramatic effect. If such a deposit were not extant, European scholars might well desire to go as pilgrims, like the bereaved bards, to the grave of Fergus, son of Roi, with power to call him again on earth, that he might recite the famous Táin – the lost Epic of a lost World.

It is strange that words, which are such little things – a mere breath trembling for a moment in the air – should survive the mightiest monarch and outlast the lives of empires. The generations who uttered them are silent; the earth has grown over their homesteads, and forests have decayed above their cities. Yet out of the Dead Past speaks still the Living Voice. So, to-day, we may be illumined by the light of a star which perished a thousand years ago.

It has been said that the history of Ireland is dismal, a chronicle of defeats. But that is because writers generally make history a mere record of wars. The shadow of the swordsman obscures all else. The militant monarch or minister is always put in the foremost place and the highest position. The pigmy on a platform looks greater than the giant in his study – but only in the eyes of pigmies. Alexander's Empire died with him, and his satraps shared the spoil. Aristotle's sceptre is over us still.

There is a blindness which is worse than colour-blindness in the eyes which see physical, but which cannot perceive intellectual forces and effects: they will record that Roman power conquered Greece, but fail to recognise that Greek intellect conquered the conqueror. Our nation has had its changes of fortune. It has invaded others, and been itself invaded often – part of the penalty it paid for occupying the fairest isle of the old world, a penalty we might still pay had not

a new world opened wide its golden gates in the West. But our defeats have not been always disasters. What seemed to have no other end than the plunder of our wealth has resulted in the enrichment of our literature, the dissemination of our ideas, and the capture of the imagination of other nations. The code, which was devised to accomplish what the most ruthless savage never designed – the annihilation of the intellect of a most intelligent nation – studded the Continent with that nation's colleges and gave to its members the glory of being illustrious leaders of men in the greatest kingdoms of the world.

Last came the great dispersal, when the descendants of those who had taught Europe for three centuries, and generously welcomed all scholars – now made ignorant by law – were driven from their hospitable land by famine. They went forth, as it is said, hewers of wood and drawers of water. In other times and places it had meant extinction as slaves under feudal rule. But mark this! – they entered into the great family of a new people, whose fundamental principle of Democracy made them equal, and whose generous nature made them welcome. They have thus been brought to the very well-spring of the new forces which have been re-shaping human society and preparing the transformation of the world. In this incomparable enterprise they are themselves a foremost force, taking part in the intellectual work with the revived vitality of a race which has found its Land of Youth.

If we had a past of shame – were we members of a nation that had never risen or had deeply fallen – these should be incentives to brave hearts to achieve work for the credit of their race. It is otherwise with us, and we dare not stand still. The past would be our reproach, the future our disgrace. Not foreign force, but native sloth can do us dishonour. If our nation is to live, it must live by the energy of intellect, and be prepared to take its place in competition with all other peoples. Therefore must we work, with earnest hearts and high ideals for the sake of our own repute, for the benefit of mankind, in vindication of

this old land which genius has made luminous. And remember that whilst wealth of thought is a country's treasure, literature is its articulate voice, by which it commands the reverence or calls for the contempt of the living and of the coming Nations of the Earth.