

FOLKLORE AND THE ZEITGEIST.

By Pádraig Pearse.

From *An Claidheamh Soluis*, May 19, 1906.

We remember as a child sitting by a turf fire and listening to a grey-haired woman telling Irish folktales. From that gentle seanchaidhe we first learned how gracious and noble is Mother Éire, how sweet a thing is it to love her, how proud a service to toil and to suffer for her. In converse with her, too, we first realised that Éire has a voice and a speech of her own; from her we first learned to pronounce Irish words; from her we first heard the names of Cúchulainn and Fergus and Fionn, of Gráinne of the Fleets and the two mighty Aodhs; from her lips we first listened to the tale of

“Brian’s wisdom,
Eoghan’s genius, Sarsfield’s daring,
Emmet’s early grave, and Grattan’s
Life-long epic of devotion.”

She loved all who had striven for Ireland from the shadowy heroes of old to those of her own blood and ours who had died in '98 or been imprisoned in '67. Her heart had a corner for the Fianna of Fionn and another for the Fenians of John O'Mahony.

She died when we were an Intermediate schoolboy. A year later we were promoted to the Irish class and for the first time saw Irish words in print. Our texts – it was Junior Grade, 1894 – were “Laoi Oisín” and “Diarmaid agus Gráinne.” We remember the thrill of pleasure with which we heard the familiar names, the eagerness with which we read the familiar tales. The turf fire was back and the dead voice was speaking to us again. Not content to limit our reading to the two texts prescribed by the programme, we wandered further afield, - finding our way, greatly daring, into the National Library and making the acquaintance of An Craoibhin’s “Leabhar Sgéalaidheachta” and “Cois na Teineadh” and – later – of his “Sgéalaidhe Gaedhealach.” Here we were in the very heart of the land of mystery and romance on which so many years before that kindly hand had raised the curtain, bidding

us look with eyes of childish wonder. And in that land we strayed long and far; learning to know its broad highways and its quiet bóithríns, its shining spreading plains and its tangled enchanted woods. At recurring examinations we gained only respectable and never brilliant marks; but all the time we were learning to release ourselves as a child of our Mother and the heir of a tradition.

These recollections have come to us on sitting down to write an article on the Oireachtas folklore competitions. We hope they are not wholly irrelevant. In our mind at any rate they have a subtle connection with the theme. We never listen to a seanchaide by a fireside or at a Feis but all this comes back to us; we never open a book of folklore or read a manuscript folktale submitted to us for publication but years slip away and we are again seated on an earthen floor beside a fire where a kettle sings. And is not this part of the charm of the folklore for us all? It stirs a long-silent chord in our hearts; it awakens dead voices; it recalls mornings long ago on sunny heights and evenings in fireside ingles; it appeals to all that is most inborn, hereditary, primal in our being; it is the voice of our own folk speaking to what is of the folk of us – and there is a good deal of the folk in us all, “civilised,” “educated,” labelled and ticketed off by universities and examination-boards though we be. The folktale speaks the same language as the bird which sings in the blue, as the kine which low in the buaile, as the streamlet which babbles by the roadside, as the sparks which fly upward from a fire. The man for whom an old tale has no appeal is to be feared and pitied even as the man who is irritated by the prattle of children or repelled by the caress of a dumb animal. He is one apart; he is landless and kindless.

We have been re-reading An Craoibhin’s “Cois na Teineadh.” The Dedication and Preface, which were written in 1890, make strange reading today, - as indeed does nearly everything written about the Irish language and Irish literature before the era of the Gaelic League. Wrote An Craoibhin sixteen years ago:

“To the memory of those truly cultured and unselfish men, the poet-scribes and hedge-schoolmasters of the last century and the beginning of this – men who may well be called the last of the Milesians – I dedicate this effort to

preserve even a scrap of that native lore which in their day they loved so passionately, *and for the preservation of which they worked so nobly, but in vain.*"

Would An Craibhin write so today? Or would he commence a preface with these mournful words? –

"Irish and Scotch Gaelic folk-stories are, as a living form of literature, by this time pretty nearly a thing of the past. They have been trampled in the common ruin under the feet of the Zeitgeist, happily not before a large harvest has been reaped in Scotland, but, unfortunately, before anything worth mentioning has been done in Ireland to gather in the crop which grew luxuriantly a few years ago."

Since that was written, the strong arms of An Craibhin and others have grappled with the Zeitgeist, and lo! he has yielded up his spoil. Reverent hands have gathered up the fragments which he had trampled into the dust, piecing them together again cunningly and lovingly. Sixteen years ago An Craibhin could write with absolute truth that nothing worth mentioning had been garnered in of the once luxuriant crop of Irish folklore; today we can write with equally absolute truth that the mass of Irish folklore which has been recovered and is now preserved for all time either in print or in the MS. Collection of the Oireachtas Committee already ranks with the largest collections of national folklore in the world, and will probably be quite the largest ere the last scrap has been harvest. A bhuidheachas soin le Dia!

An Craibhin has published half-a-dozen volumes of folklore. Pádraig Ó Laoghaire has given us of the best of Béarra. Seosamh Laoide has rescued a fragment at least of the lore of Farney. Others, publishing the result of their gleaning either in smaller books and booklets or in the columns of the *Irisleabhar*, AN CLAUDHEAMH, and local newspapers, have probably doubled or trebled the harvest of the three main workers. But the amount of published Irish folklore forms only a fraction of the great body which has been saved from the Zeitgeist and of which the largest part is to be found in the piles of MS. accumulated by the Oireachtas Committee during the past nine years. All this will some day be sorted, catalogued, examined, and published. But that is a matter which can wait, and in fact must wait; the thing which cannot wait, which must not be allowed to wait, is the

rescue of the large mass of folklore still unrecorded. And here is a task in the accomplishment of which the Oireachtas Committee demands and is entitled to the help of everyone who is qualified to render help.

The work is pressing.

“For the folklorist the Gospel saying is... more pregnant with meaning than for any student of man’s history – ‘the night cometh when no man can work’”

For the seanchaidhes are passing from us, and with each one that goes down to his grave there disappears a fragment of as fair and noble an inheritance as was ever bequeathed to a race by its past. How many precious scraps of lore have been lost because someone omitted or was unable to commit them to paper on first hearing them, and on returning to look for them found that the seanchaidhe was dead! Think of Farney where An Laoideach gleaned to such purpose ten years ago; had he delayed his visit until to-day we should never have had “Sgéalaidhe Fearnmhaighe” or “Sgéalaidhe Oirghiall,” for to-day all the seanchaidhes are gone, and those who are in their places, even the Irish speakers, are dumb. Think of Roscommon, whose whole lore, with the exception of the fraction saved by An Craoibhin, has been lost within living memory. Think of Tirconnell, not a tithe of whose lore has been collected – some doubt whether it has any lore. Think of the Déise, where an Irish-speaking generation is dying out, and leaving behind it – nothing.

A Gael who lives in a district where Irish is vernacular or who during the summer will have an opportunity of spending a few weeks in such a district, could undertake no more thoroughly useful and meritorious a piece of work than the collection of the songs and stories of the district and their forwarding to the Oireachtas. He may happen to win a prize, but the winning of prizes is not the objective; the objective is the saving of the national lore, down even to the last shred, from that Zeitgeist to whom the Gaelic League has flung down a challenge.