

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRISH POET.

By Douglas Hyde.

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I am going to deal with the thing that is next to folklore in the shape of literature, and that is poetry. I will proceed to trace the evolution of poetry in Ireland. I am standing, perhaps, on the only soil in Europe with one exception where that could be done with certainty – where the history of poetry could be carried back for more than 300 years. There was a great amount of material to work on in the country. It has not been properly worked on, but the time would come when that would be the case.

In the Royal Irish Academy the catalogue of Irish manuscripts embraced thirteen volumes, containing 3,000 pages or more, and alphabetical notices of them occupied three large volumes. In the development of every nation, verse came before prose. When speaking of literature I include what has been memorised by human memory – I do not confine myself to what has been conveyed by pen to paper.

The earliest Irish poems were ascribed to Amergin, son of Milesius, amongst them being an “Incantation.” The first satires composed in Ireland were so old that the language employed in them was scarcely intelligible. There was nothing like rhyme in the early productions. They were nothing more than a sort of rhythmical prose. Up to the year 500 none of the verses was in rhythmic metre. St. Patrick was probably the first writer to whom an Irish piece could be ascribed with absolute certainty. The authenticity of St. Patrick’s Hymn could not be disputed. But there was no trace of rhyme in it.

However, immediately after his day, a simple kind of rhyme era was inaugurated. Four tracts had been preserved in which the system of educating poets before the Irish were disturbed by the Danes and the Norsemen was set forth. Some idea could be obtained from them of what Irish poetry and Irish poets were before Ireland was invaded by the Northmen. In no country on the earth, and by no race on the

globe, and, I might say, in any period of the world's history, was the art of poetry so perfect and so elaborate, and better remunerated than it was in Ireland at that time. If it could be proved that the Irish were the first to teach rhyme to the rest of Europe, then all they had ever done in literature would pale before that fact. Great scholars had proved that the art of rhyming was taught to Europe by the Celts.

Certain it was that no attempt whatever was made at rhyming, except in the case of the Irish language. In 650 a great elaborate and beautifully rhyming system prevailed amongst the Irish. It was most likely that this was developed from the well-known laws of Celtic phonology. Originally there were two classes of Irish poets – the File and the Bards – the former being the superior. In some cases their displays were rewarded by three cows being bestowed upon them, in addition to other marks of appreciation. The bards were divided into sixteen classes. The art of poetry was then cultivated with great assiduity.

King Cormac made a law divorcing the office of judge from that of poet. At that time, poets actually swarmed in the country – according to the old historians, there were 1,000 of them. At last the people got dog-tired of the poets. The productive classes would not stand persons of mere words quartering on them from May to November. They tried to rid themselves of the incubus. The last attempt to do so was in the sixth century. The poets would have been disposed of then if St. Columcille had not interfered and said to the King:

“I am a poet myself, and you must not interfere with them.”

This appeal was acceded to, and colleges in which history and other arts, including poetry, were taught, were established in the seventh century. The last of them was swept out of existence during the Cromwellian wars. Then, as now, many persons sought to enter what they considered honourable professions in preference to lucrative callings.

It was ultimately absolutely necessary to crush the audacity of the bards, who in the sixth century were almost harassing the country with kind of organised bands, levying a sort of literary blackmail. Woe

betide the man who did not comply with their demands because the poets at once satirised him. Satire was the one thing in primitive days in Ireland which no person could stand. A proverb was in existence which bore irrefragable testimony to the statement that numerous persons were satirised to death.

But vengeance was not infrequently wreaked on the poets. This was a great change from earlier days, when the person of a poet was regarded as sacred as that of a bishop or a cardinal. At the present day, when almost all the old traditions have died out in Ireland and have been replaced by the newspapers, I find the greatest horror of satire existing amongst the people.

On the advent of the Northmen, the bards who up to that period had continued to flourish in almost equal power and position with the dignitaries of the Church, suffered terribly. There was no city in Ireland which was not plundered at least several times by the invaders. The reign of the bards and other classes of Irish poets practically came to a close during the Danish invasion.

The audience will, from its composition, naturally like to know something of the way in which the ancient Irish poets treated their women, and how they looked upon the young ladies of that period – that would be the best test of the height to which their civilisation attained. Chivalric feeling relative to their womanhood distinguished the laws and accentuated the expressions and attitude of the early Irish. The Irish not only appreciated their women, but did so very highly from the very first. Thus the Arthurian romance had sprung from a Celtic origin.

I here pay a peaceful tribute to President Roosevelt for the manner in which he cultivated the study of and took the deepest interest in Irish literature. The Irish poets were undoubtedly the first in Europe to produce “nature” poetry. Sensibility to the charms of nature was almost unknown to the old Pagan world. But in Ireland, from the remotest period, the Celts seemed to have become perfectly intoxicated by views of the beauty of nature.

They had produced, from the earliest times, a marvellous amount of poetry in which their love of nature was amply borne testimony to.

(Much laughter was here evoked by the lecturer naively declaring that Nature and women were two different things.)

I maintain that if Irish literature were studied, English opinion about it would change. Most people appear to think that the bards were harpers or musicians; but they were nothing of the kind. The bard is no more a musician than was the Poet Laureate of England. When he first composed his poem, the aid of the harper was requisitioned to supply the music.

So far back as the first century, the Irish poets proceeded on acoustic principles. The bardic schools, down to the end of the sixteenth century, preserved these characteristics – sententiousness and compression as much as possible into the smallest space. Modern poets have lost this faculty. At the close of the 17th century, a new school sprang up, on which I hope to say something next day.