

The Hedge Schools of Ireland

By Aodh de Blácam, Irish Press, 2nd February 1935.

Away back in those days when the mariners of Kerry traded with France and Spain, there used to be competition amongst the ships for the honour of carrying a "Poor Scholar," - a lad who had learned his Latin in the schools of Munster and was making his way to the Continent to study for the Church. It was believed that no ship carrying a Poor Scholar would come to harm.

William Carleton (the greatest of our social historians) has described the journey of a Poor Scholar from Ulster to the South, and he has left, too, imperishable pictures of the old "hedge schools" in which half or wholly outlawed teachers imparted learning to the children of the poor. A splendid book now appears - "The Hedge Schools of Ireland," by Dr. P. J. Dowling (Talbot Press, 10/6 net), - in which a full account is given from Carleton and other authorities, of that unofficial educational system, which the race maintained throughout the Penal age.

Training for Exiles.

Dr. Dowling describes the first of these schools, meeting in the shadow of a hedge, and dispersing whenever some stranger passed, lest the presence of an illegal (Catholic) school be known. He goes on to describe the later schools, held in mud cabins, the shaggy old scholars who taught in them and the social regard in which those teachers were held; the curriculum, which included Greek, Latin and Mathematics, all taught with remarkable thoroughness. In part, the advanced learning was given as a basis for education for the priesthood, but Latin also equipped vast numbers of country lads for distinguished secular careers in France and Spain and Austria.

Is there any other example in history of a people thus maintaining a fine system of schools, without either wealthy patrons or State aid? – schools in which cottiers (as a dozen quotations from foreign observers prove) enjoyed culture of the level of the polite world?

“The People of Ireland,” wrote one observer in the Penal days, “are I may, *universally educated*.... I do not know any part of Ireland so wild, that its inhabitants are not anxious, nay, eagerly anxious, for the education of their children.”

It was the passion for learning that made the schools possible, inspired the teachers, and bore such notable fruits in the people.

Some Defects.

Dr. Dowling's book is one of the most valuable contributions to a true knowledge of the Irish past that has appeared in recent years. It has defects. Although scholarly in every line, it is unduly restricted; for Dr. Dowling has relied almost wholly on material from the South, and has missed such precious data as may be found in the life of Ó Doirnin, Mr. Henry Morris's works, and those examples of Northern hedge schools which Mr. Louis Walsh recently cited. The hurt that comes from this is, that we are not shewn how Protestants, as well as Catholics, benefitted by those humble academies, though Rev. Dr. Corcoran, in a Foreword, mentions the Catholic teacher in whose school Dr. Cooke, the “Presbyterian Pope,” was trained. We miss, in like manner, the link with Scotland, where a magnificent system evolved from the hedge schools.

Again, in his chapter on Gaelic poets who were hedge school masters, Dr. Dowling depends only on Munster, and seems to work at second hand; for he puts Donacha Rua, author

of the greatest of our exile poems, in a lower place than Merriman.

A. de B.