

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF IRISH LITERATURE.

By Eibhlín Nic Niocaill.

From *An Claidheamh Soluis*, June 12, 1909. From a paper read
before Cumann Naisiunta na Mac Leighinn.

There has been nothing more amazing in the recent past in Ireland than the growth of the Language Movement. Fifteen years ago, the people, who would not grant that the national language was doomed, were counted by units; to-day, there are thousands, even hundreds of thousands, who are determined that it shall not die. Yet it must not be supposed that the attitude of all those numbers towards the language is identical; as might be expected, the appeal of the movement to different minds varies considerably. Broadly speaking, its adherents may be divided into two classes; there are some who do not look beyond the *effort* to save the language; their hope is to see all Ireland united in this work, but they do not go on to ask themselves, 'What then?' There are others to whom the present struggle is but a passing phase, the sooner over the better; all their thoughts are centred on this goal, an Irish-speaking Ireland, holding her due place amongst the nations. To all but these, the idea of a future Irish literature is an absurdity; to them there is no subject of more absorbing interest.

Whether or not there will be an Irish literature in the future depends on the extent of the success of the language movement. If English remains, as it is at present, the medium of thought of the great majority in this country, then Irish literature will never be more than a forced growth. Work of genuine value may be produced here and there, but much cannot be expected from authors, writing in a language that is not the natural one for them for a public that will read their works mainly as a duty. With this thought, may dismiss the subject, as one that does not concern us of to-day; but others, recognising that the future is, to a large extent, in our hands, and proceeding rather by faith than by knowledge, have already set

themselves to lay the foundations of the literature, that they believe is to be.

There is a growing demand for Irish books, and these writers of to-day are creating a supply. It may be that little of what they produce will live; but they are doing necessary work, and that under hard conditions. For the present, he who writes in Irish must be content with a small circle of readers—a thing not easy for one who is conscious of literary ability. To such, the temptation to make use of a widely-known language, of which he has command, is one which only a strong purpose can overcome. Moreover, Irish is an imperfect instrument—not in itself, for it is a most expressive language, but in our imperfect knowledge of it, and in the fact that it has yet to be adapted to modern ideas. There are, as we have all probably experience, times when even the learner is astonished at the facility with which he can express himself in Irish; indeed, the Gaelic phrase seems to come to his mind sooner than the English, and to convey his meaning better. But, on the other hand, there are realms of thought where Irish fails us, or where we must wrestle with it, in order to bend it to our will. Every language is moulded, by the people that use it, to suit their needs. In general this process is gradual; but the growth of our language was interrupted, so that we have now to strive consciously to adapt it for the expression of our thought. There is, therefore, much weary journey-work to be done in the field of Irish writing; it augurs well for the future that men and women are found willing to undertake this work.

Till now, the full wealth of the Irish language has been at the disposal of few. There is, everyone knows, an extensive literature in Middle Irish, but it can be reached only by those who are competent to cope with its linguistic difficulties. For many years this literature has attracted the attention of philologists, and translations have been made from it into several foreign tongues. This country produced some few scholars worthy to take their place amongst the Celtologists of Europe, but by most of these modern Irish was utterly neglected. With the language revival, however, a new interest in this older literature has sprung up, and many are now devoting themselves to the study of Old and Middle Irish, whose zeal is not purely

philological. This fact is full of promise for the future. What with poetry, religious and secular, the heroic stories, the lives of saints, the homilies, the range of Middle Irish literature was wide, and its vocabulary very copious. Much may be expected from a generation of writers, who, to a knowledge of modern Irish works, and of the spoken language of the various provinces, add an acquaintance with any considerable portion of this older literature.

It is not only with a view to developing the language that these studies are important. We Irish of to-day are more in touch with the past of other nations than of our own; if we wish to preserve our national characteristics, we stand to gain much by making ourselves familiar with the way of thinking of our forefathers. For this reason, it is desirable that our older literature should be brought within the reach of all, who have the future progress of our race at heart. This can best be done by means of modernised versions—for these would be read eagerly by all who know the modern language. A little has already been done in this direction; but it is the general practice even for modern Irish scholars, who work on the old M.SS., to translate them into English. The loss to the language revival through this is manifold. In the first place, these English translations fail entirely to recommend themselves to many, who would delight in reading Irish versions of old texts. Moreover, the actual work of modernising Old and Middle writings would be of great service towards the widening and perfecting of the language. This, then, is one of the ways in which those, who are willing to work for the future, can prepare the way for the rise of a new literature. It demands, perhaps, more self-sacrifice than any other; for while those who produce original work may hope that their names will live, he who labours over the writings of another can have little expectation of winning fame by such work.

One of the outstanding facts with regard to the Irish literature of the past is the failure of our race in poetry. It is generally admitted that the bards, with their complicated metrical scheme, sacrificed sense to sound. Some hold that the revolution in poetical form in the 17th century heralded a new era, and that the poetry of the 18th century is all that could be desired. This is a matter of taste, and the humblest is free to have an opinion; for my own part, I would gladly exchange

all that I have ever read of Irish poetry for many a single short lyric in the English and German languages! This failure in the past does not prove that we can accomplish nothing in the future, for the causes of it are plain enough, and can be avoided now. But there is no use in our trying to force the growth of poetry. This is a mistake into which those who cherish hopes of a future literature might easily be led; they may think that it will not be complete if it can boast of no great poems, and they may set themselves deliberately to produce these. This cannot be done; and we can only trust, that if there is to be a new poetry, it will come without our taking thought. Above all, it must be spontaneous, and free from the artificiality that marred our poetry up to this.

With all the diffidence that ought to characterise the men on the fence, I venture to express my opinion, that even already a false start has been made in this branch of literature. It is customary to regard the metrical systems of the 18th century poets as the only possible ones for us; and a really beautiful poem might easily be condemned unread, if it was seen at a glance not to be in any of these recognised metres. Yet another Mary McLeod may arise, who will break with this system, as she did with that of the bards. It has not been proved that assonance is more suitable than rhyme for Irish poetry. Assonance had its day in other languages, and was discarded for rhyme; it may be that this will never happen in Irish, but it would be unwise to determine now that it is not to happen. With the rest of our past literature, the poets, earlier and later, should be studied. If their metres suit us, when the impulse to write poetry arises, we shall adopt them; but it would be fatal to set ourselves, against the dictates of our taste, to imitate them slavishly.

In the region of prose, too, the Irish writer of to-day is needlessly hampered. We are moderns, steeped in the modern literature of other nations; we cannot be satisfied with the literary forms that were in vogue centuries ago. The story, the novel, the drama of modern life, these are what we demand, and what our authors ambition to produce. Little has yet been accomplished in this direction, and progress will be slow under the present conditions. The whole Irish Renaissance is a new movement; it has not yet cast aside all the absurdities of

youthful zeal. Hardly less openly avowed than the principle, that we ought to support Irish manufacture, is the prejudice, that compels him who writes in Irish to deal with Irish subjects and personages. This is no slight imitation; for it confines the author, in so far as he deals with modern life in story or drama, to one class of the people of this country. It is strange, to how small an extent Irish has yet made its way into our social life. I suppose this is due to the fact that every gathering has its sprinkling of those who do not know it, so that politeness, perhaps overstrained, in this case, makes English the language of intercourse. Then, too, families are divided in the matter; where the younger generation can speak Irish, their parents often know none; where the husband knows it, the wife may not; so that there are very few homes, outside the native-speaking districts, where Irish has got a firm footing. The result is, that peasant life forms the whole theme of modern Irish fiction and drama. We are too conscious still with regard to the Irish language, to be able to accept the fact that people, who would not be speaking it in real life, are doing so in a story or on the stage; our train of thought would be continually interrupted by the improbability of the thing. Of course, the past offers a rich field to the dramatist and the novelist, and one that is beginning to be worked; but the appeal of the historical play or novel is never very wide, and work of this kind will not satisfy the growing demand for popular Irish literature. It may sound paradoxical, but, to my mind, little progress will be made, till our writers break completely with the convention that binds them to the choice of Irish subjects. Consider for a moment such a play as 'Arms and the Man'; in it most of the personages are Bulgarian; they talk English throughout, yet we are not troubled by that fact; it is covered by the 'suspension of judgment,' in virtue of which, alone, Coleridge says, drama is possible. Similarly, we might have plays and stories in Irish, dealing with English, French, American, *any* life; but try to represent middle-class life in this country, and at once the language question arises and spoils the effect.

There are people, who are very hostile to any innovation on a large scale in Irish literature; they maintain that we must let things take their course, and not overtax the capabilities of the language. We shall never achieve much, if we measure our work to suit the language,

instead of making it serve us. No language would ever have grown, if men had not forced it to express new ideas as they arose. Dante did not leave Italian as he found it, nor Chaucer English; while German was poor enough, till the writers of the 18th century had pressed it into their service. The best that they can do in literature—that must be the standard for Irish writers. If that best cannot be given in Irish, it would be better to let the language die. But, indeed, it is just because they believe that Irish will prove a better medium for us than another language could, that so many look forward to the rise of an Irish literature. Mazzini held that each nation stood for an idea, and that a nationality was worth preserving only so long as it could contribute something to the world's thought. We believe that we have something to contribute. The English language is already formed, and not by our nation; in Irish we have an instrument that we can mould for ourselves. To most, it is probable, those who look for the use of an Irish literature in the future are dreamers—but there have been prophetic dreams.