

# TRÉIŠIÒ ÒUR ÒTRÒM-ŠUAN.

By Eoin MacNeill.

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I impeach the whole body of the writers of Irish. I accuse them of indolence and of self-complacent incapacity. They never seem to ask themselves what a nation situated as ours is demands of its writers and has a right to expect from them. They are content with the pleasures of seeing their words in print and receiving the usual dole of futile praise. The general failing of their method is by this time evident. It has failed to produce a real zest for the reading of Irish, and that is the true test. Irish is read as a duty, and English writings, often very poor ones, are immediately resorted to for the mental stimulus that every reading person craves. Our writers do not realise the position.

About 300 years ago, when printing became general, the language of modern civilisation woke up. Till then they had been content with folklore, or with forms of literature that were closely akin to folklore. The literature of the working mind was monopolised by Latinists. One by one the different languages began to break the monopoly. Intellects were keen in those days, and it was clearly perceived that the new art of printing made it not only possible but imperative to write for the multitudes whom Latin could not reach. The vernacular languages set themselves to conquer the entire world of literature and thought.

Even Irish began. This was particularly the great achievement of Seathrún Céitinn, the clearest and most inseeing Irish mind of his time. Céitinn realised that the Middle Ages were come to an end, that the literary forms of the annals and the *uraiceach* were, as the Yankees say, back numbers, that a literature that was to hold its own must seize on the inheritance of Latin and *conquer the whole domain of the expression of the working mind*. Accordingly, he assayed for the first time to reduce the whole history of Ireland annalistic and legendary, to straightforward literary form. He also applied the same

straightforward literary form to the subjects that were then foremost in all men's thoughts, the great questions of Christian doctrine. He introduced logical and philosophical exposition of difficult matters directly from Latin into Irish, exactly what was being done in the other languages of civilisation.

The Latinity of his Irish has been censured. To some extent the censure may be just, but one would like to hear or read the trenchant terms that Céitinn would have applied to the doctrine, implied if not asserted, that the conversational forms of the traditional storyteller, forms quite familiar to him, were adequate for a theological treatise or for a scientific defence of the sources of Irish history.

Hardly had the victory of the modern languages over Latin been secured, when the whole situation began to take on a new phase. The world's industry had heretofore been based mainly on tradition and experience. The whole knowledge necessary to every craft had passed directly from the journeyman to the apprentice. Gradually the developments of physical science as well as of technical mechanics wrought a great revolution. I need not describe the change. It is enough to point out that 200 years ago industry was practically independent of written thought. Its basis was purely empirical and traditional. At the present day, every form of industry except that of the most primitive peoples has become intimately dependent on physical science. The quill that Céitinn held may have been shaped by himself from a feather plucked from a neighbour's goose. The pen in my hand has been manufactured by Galvani and Isaac Watt, by Kelly the steel-founder and Lord Kelvin, and by a host of other men, theoretical and practical, whose sole contact, however, with this pen itself had been *through vernacular literature*. No language that cannot make that sort of contact can ever hope to thrive in the world we live in. Man must earn his bread in the sweat of his brow, and since it has come to this, that literature has an essential function in the earning of every man's bread, people will throw away a language by whose literature they cannot live.

The forms of Irish literature, therefore, constitute no mere question of art or of aesthetics, though indeed even a treatise on mechanics may be written beautifully or otherwise. The question is

one of national life. There is not a single adult and rational speaker of Irish who does not know this. The conviction may be subconscious and unexpressed. It is none the less masterful. The bodach who says 'Ara what good is it?' much as we may dislike him, is, after all, the man who speaks out truly the conclusion from these hidden premises. The Irish language stands where Céitinn left it two and a half centuries ago. English, its sole rival on the ground, has completed the first conquest and the second. These facts constitute the one obstacle worth considering to the success of our aims—*the obstacle within the minds of the whole Irish-speaking population*. Reverse the position, suppose the Irish language to have command of the entire realm of literature and English to be still in the next stage to folklore, and half a million of Irish speakers would in one lifetime impose their language on four millions of English speakers. It is because they utterly fail to realise the situation that I charge the writers of Irish with self-complacent incapacity.

I charge them also with indolence. Because the work mainly of one writer has given practical force to the great truth that literature must have vernacular speech for its basis, the whole herd has rushed along the easy path of vernacular usage. Credit is actually claimed in proportion to the fidelity with which writers have acted the part of literary gramophones with chimney-corner records. They even wall themselves up in villages, and sedulously avoid adopting anything from the foreigners in the villages outside. This way is supposed to be natural and genuine, though the self-same writers, in obedience to a natural and genuine instinct which is universal in humanity, are often quite ready to adopt a word, a pronunciation, or a phrase *in English*, if they find it suitable, no matter whence it may come. Natural and genuine indeed! It is the most artificial humbug imaginable. The favourite practice is to raise up deliberate obstructions to every natural tendency towards development. It is seriously asserted that the ordinary Irish speaker has a deep-set loathing for all forms of Irish except those to which he has been brought up. This is not only untrue, but the contrary of the truth.

[The ordinary Irish-speaker has a]<sup>1</sup> keen instinctive delight in listening to unfamiliar linguistic forms, provided, in the first place, that they are not too remote to be assimilated, and in the second place that they are not grotesquely barbarous. Indeed on the latter point he might well be much more fastidious than he is. It is evident that in setting up this sort of orthodoxy the Irish writer is able to justify himself in his favourite easy attitude of doing nothing whatsoever for the development of Irish literature, and claiming admiration accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cartlann*: Error in the original scan.