

TRADITION, THE TYRANT.

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From *An Claidheamh Soluis*, June 3, 1899.

We hear a great deal now-a-days about Irish traditions. They are in the air—at least talk of them. But I have a suspicion that a great many honest people who acquiesce in all that is said about them, and thoroughly agree with the advisability of going back upon them, are wondering all the time at the back of their heads what in the world all the pother is about. It will be a long time before we get out of the habit of accepting things merely because they are bellowed from the rooftops. Fortunately, as the objects of the Gaelic League includes individual as well as general change, there will be in time an infallible check on this kind of supporter, for the humblest of its members can be readily judged by his works and not by his opinion. In the meantime there is evil to contend with that other movements have handed down. A rag-tag and bob-tail of supporters who don't know what they are supporting are more of a hindrance than a help.

One of the greatest reasons for the spread of the Irish language, it appears to me, is, that we may get the nation back into Irish tradition, and one of the most necessary things to be done, if English-speaking Irish people are to be induced to take the matter up seriously, is that enlightened and reasonable answers be supplied to the inevitable and natural question—what good will it all do? 'Our grand old tongue' is a cry with a glamour about it calculated to give one a thrill, but not to carry conviction. Common sense demands something more than that before it will consent to put its lazy self about for any league under heaven.

Out of the scores of reasons for the desirability of spreading Irish let us take this one—the getting back to our traditions—and examine it for what it is worth. On the surface traditions may appear airy things; in reality they are amongst the hardest facts and most potent forces in life. Of the things that go to form character they occupy a place in the foremost rank, and character—to put it on no higher level—is one of the greatest assets of a nation. The commonest Irish

mind appreciates the value of religion as a former of character, and if we put on for a moment the spectacles of the intelligent Pagan, religion will strike us as a great all-compelling tradition. Around national, as distinct from other types of tradition, there is—amongst every imaginative people at least—some of the sanctity of religion. Perhaps a few concrete illustrations of the power of tradition bring home its importance better than anything else. Self-preservation is, we are told, the first law of nature, and sometimes in times of danger its operation shows up human nature at its worst. The chivalry of France presented a pitiful picture some time ago when the great bazaar fire took the gilt off it, and sent it scrambling for a whole skin over the bodies of women. But if the instinct of self-preservation is great, it logically follows that a force that overcomes it must be greater. And tradition does it over and over again. Sea captains are not less fond of life than any other class of man, but the instinct of self-preservation is overborne by the great tradition of their order that the captain is the last man to leave the ship. Considerations of life, death, home, everything are put aside by the force of that great tradition, a force that is so strong that those subject to it might in many cases be suspected of going to their death almost from a carnal inclination; and if we enquire further into it we might find reason to believe that in some cases the supposed bravery was, in the last analysis, a kind of cowardice, the fear of breaking tradition being greater than the fear of death. The gilded youth of England who officer the English army are not as a class distinguished for brains or moral grit, but once they are in the field—let us admit it with generosity—they never give their country reason to blush for their conduct. Their country acclaims them heroes. But they are in most cases only noodles with a great tradition at their back, sometimes rising to it, at other times, when tempted to break through tradition and make a sprint for their lives, choosing the chance of death as the lesser of the two evils. The old aristocracy of England have kept themselves for centuries as a class intrinsically differing from the rest of their dull countrymen by force, principally, of the great tradition of *noblesse oblige*, and we see this all the more as since some of them have ventured outside their traditions, and have gone company-promoting and millionaire-hunting,

corruption has set in at once, and they have become indistinguishable from plain, vulgar John Bull.

America is a country which by the circumstances of its history has been denied many of the traditions that temper life in the older countries, and there is little to restrain the worshippers of the almighty dollar. Of the force of fashion, which is a kind of temporary tradition, we are all aware. And there are many people who would defy any other law, human or divine, before they would violate the rules of fashion. Some traditions are concrete things that can be described and expressed in words, others are subtle things none the less potent for good or evil on that account. Traditions are every where influencing us, giving us habits from which other traditions are begotten. They constitute the great unseen force behind a people, and anything that changes tradition fundamentally alters a people. When supporters of the Gaelic movement insist upon the value of tradition they are frequently put down as dreamers and utterers of airy nothings, whereas all the time they are the persons who are talking the solidest of common sense, and the self-styled practical men who vote all such considerations trash are the folk who are talking the nonsense.

I have no intention here of going into the comparative merits of English and Irish traditions; what I principally want to insist upon, is that both are tyrants capable of moulding us as easily as if we were potters' clay. The great question which the Gaelic movement asks is—Which tyrant will we elect to place our destinies under, the Irish or the English?

The Anglicisation of Ireland might be expressed as the going of the Gaelic mind under English tradition; and the stagnation, unreality, and vulgarity of Ireland is largely the result of despairing belated revolts against the tyranny of a tradition which it is nevertheless incapable of withstanding—the result of an impossible endeavour to mark time half-way. Outside the Gaelic tradition an Irishman is a mongrel, and usually a very vulgar specimen of that species, unless he goes like a consistent man, body and soul, into English traditions. I remember some years ago being at a small party in Dublin. The people were fairly wealthy, college and convent educated, cut off altogether from Gaelic traditions, but honestly

patriotic according to their twisted views. Inane sentimental songs, and 'highly respectable' manners were the order of the evening, until one girl, by way I presume, of a desperate kick at all this half-assimilated Saxon tom-foolery, broke out with a song, part of which ran something like this:—

‘And to show the English people she didn’t care a pin,
She drank water from the glass she should have washed her fingers in.’

This hideous piece of grossness has ever remained in my mind as a typical and inevitable picture of all attempts to be what is called ‘Irish,’ once we cut ourselves off from Gaelic traditions.

There are many great traditions of the Gael which stand out boldly by themselves, but one has not to go far into the Gaelic language before he discovers hosts of subtle influences which are felt, though they may defy definition. The early Irish records are steeped in that great longing of the Gael for knowledge for its own sake. The lyrics of the Munster Gaelic poets of this and the last century, and their lives—rascallions though many of them were—awaken dormant things in the Irish mind which materially affects its outlook on life. Cuchulain’s fight at the ford—the expression, doubtless, of the then natural ethics of fighting—had its history been the property of every Irishman, might have swept away much that was mean in our modern methods of carrying on our conflicts. However, this article is not intended to treat of Irish traditions in detail, but only let me say again, to attempt to show that traditions are tyrants, and that a movement which points a way to revolutionise traditions, points a way to alter the very face of a nation. And will not this be admitted to be at least one common-sense answer to the question—‘What good will it all do?’

Out of the Gaelic traditions, no cultivated society—as we understand the term in modern days—has ever had a chance to develop. The Gaelic-speaking peasant cannot fairly be taken as a sample, if we are to judge traditions by their fruits. For he is ignorant, often ashamed of his language, broken-spirited, undeveloped, and has been surrounded for generations by men of his own nation who despised him. But even take him as he is with all his imperfections

upon him, as he looks out at you from his field with his spade, his clay pipe and his flannel jacket, and is he not a gentleman, a man in whom a woman of the finest cultivation and sensibility may find a congenial spirit? Can this be said of the other product, with all its advantages of intermediate education and refined surroundings, the English-traditioned patriot, the rebel spouter, the well-dressed bar-lounging jackeen of the Irish cities and towns?