

The Poem-Book of The Gael

Translations from Irish Gaelic Poetry into
English Prose and Verse

Selected and Edited by

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"An air is more lasting than the voice of the birds,
A word is more lasting than the riches of the world.'

The truth of this Irish proverb strikes us forcibly as we glance through any such collection of Gaelic poetry as this, and consider how these lays, the dates of whose composition extend from the eighth to the present century, have been preserved to us.

On the border of some grave manuscript, such as a Latin copy of St. Paul's Epistles or a transcript of Priscian, a stray quatrain may be found jotted down by the tired scribe, recording in impromptu verse his delight at the note of a blackbird whose song has penetrated his cell, his amusement at the gambols of his cat watching a mouse, or his reflections on a piece of news brought to him by some wandering monk, about the terror of the viking raids, or a change of dynasty " at home in Ireland. "

Several of our Ossianic poems are taken from a manuscript of lays collected in 1626-27 in and about the Glens of Antrim, and sent out to while away the tedium of camp life to an Irish officer serving in the Low Countries, who wearied for the poems and stories of his youth. The religious hymns of Murdoch O'Daly (Muredach Albanach), called " the Scot " on account of his affection for his adopted country, though he was born in Connaught, are preserved in a collection of poems gathered in the Western Highlands, many Irish poems, even from so great a distance as Munster, being found in it.

The Saltair na Rann or " Psalter of the Verses, " the most important religious poem of ancient Ireland, is preserved in one copy only. It seems as though a miracle had sometimes intervened to guard for later generations some single version of a valuable tract at home or abroad ; but it is a miracle which we could have wished to have taken place more often, when we reflect upon the large number of manuscripts forever lost to us.

Many of the most beautiful of the ancient poems, as well as of the popular songs, are anonymous; they are frequently found mixed up with material of the most arid description, genealogies, annals, or miscellaneous matter. It is easier to guess from the tone of the poems under what mood of mind they were composed than to tell exactly who wrote them. Even when they come down to us adorned with the name of some well-known saint or poet, we have an uncertain feeling about the accuracy of the ascription, when we find a poem whose language cannot be earlier than the tenth or eleventh century confidently connected with a writer who lived two or three centuries earlier. In some cases, no doubt, the versions we possess, though modernised in language and rhythm, are in reality old ; in others the ascription probably bears witness to the desire of the author or his public to win esteem for his work by adorning it with some famous name. Some of these poems, of which only one copy has come down to us,

were, however, well known in an earlier day, and are quoted in old tracts on Irish metric as examples of the metres used in the bardic schools. It is evident that though standards of taste may change, the recognition of what is really beautiful in poetry remains as a settled instinct in man's nature. Many of those poems which now appeal most strongly to ourselves took rank as verses of acknowledged merit nearer to the time of their composition. This we can deduce from their use as examples worthy of imitation in these mediaeval Irish text-books, where the names of songs we still admire are quoted as specimens of good poetry.

It is remarkable that a very large proportion of fine poetry comes to us from the period of the Norse invasions, a time which we are accustomed to think of as one continuous series of wars, raids, and burnings ; but which, if we may judge by what has come down to us of its verse, shows us that the Irish gentleman of that day had ideas of refinement that raise him far above the mere fighting clansman ; his critical view of literature was a severe one. The fine freedom shown in many of these poems is surprising, both as regards the sentiments and the metres. They possess a mastery of form that argues a high cultivation, not only of the special art of poetry, but of the whole intellectual faculties of the writers.

Some of these poems are strangely modern, even *fin de siècle* in their tone. The poem of the " Old Woman of Beare " has often been compared to Villon's " Regrets de la Belle Heulmière ja parvenue a viellesse, " or to Béranger's " Grand'mère. " But the Irish poem is far more artistically wrought than either of these comparatively modern poems. For in the ancient verses, the old woman is set, a lonely and forsaken figure, against the background of the ebbing tide, and the slow throbs of her heart, worn with age and sin, beat in unison with the retreating motion of the wave. There is also a further significance in the poem which we must not miss. It is the earliest of the long series of allegorical songs in which Ireland is depicted under the form of a woman ; though, unlike her successors of a later day, she is here represented, not as a fair maiden, a Grainne Mhaol, or Kathleen ni Houlahan, or Little Mary Cuillenan, but as an aged joyless hag, forlorn and censorious, bemoaning the loss of bygone pleasures, and the gravity of her nun's veil. The " Cailleach Bheara, " the " Hag " or " Nun of Beare " is known in many place-names in Ireland. It is on Slieve na Caillighe, or the " Hill of the Hag " or " Nun, " in Co. Meath that the great cairns and tumuli of Lough Crew are found ; it was evidently, like the neighbourhood of the Boyne, a place of pagan sanctity ; and such names as Tober na Callighe Bheara, the " Well of the Hag of Beare, " are found in different parts of the country. The " Hag of Beare " seems to be symbolic of pagan Ireland, regretting the stricter regime of Christianity, and the changes that time had brought about. The curious legend which prefaces the poem suggests the same idea. She is said to have seen seven periods of youth, and to have outlived tribes and races descended from her. For a hundred years of old age she wore the veil of a nun. " Thereupon old age and infirmity came upon her. " We catch the same note of regret for the days of paganism through many legends and poems. It is mystical and veiled in such stories as that of " King Murtough and the Witch-woman " ; it is fierce, but also often touched by the grotesque, in the innumerable colloquies between Patrick and Oisín (Ossian), the last of the ancient pagan heroes. But in all this there is a note of apology. It is not so outspoken in its revolt against the new system of life and thought as are the Norse chronicles and the Icelandic Sagas. After all, Christianity was an accomplished thing ; quietly but persistently it took its place, sweeping into its fold chiefs and common folk alike. No resistance could stop this universal progress. And the literary man or the peasant, dwelling on his early legends, the outcome of a state of thought passed or passing away, dared only half-heartedly bemoan the former days, when wars and raids, the " Creach " and the " Tain " were the highest way of life for a brave man, and no Christian doctrine of forgiveness of enemies and charity to foes had come in to perplex his thoughts and confuse their issues. The Raid remained, it was an essential part of actual life ; and burnings and wars went on as before, but they were no longer, theoretically, at least, mat-

ters to win praise and honour, they were condemned beforehand by the Christian ethic. A chief, to hold his own, must still throw open doors of hospitality to his tribe, must dispense largesse to all-comers, must gather about his board the neighbours and dependents in riotous assemblies and festivals. But all this the Christian monk and priest looked upon with suspicion ; they bade him fill his thoughts with a future Kingdom, rather than with the earthly one to which he had been born, and to keep his soul in humble readiness by prayers and fastings, by seclusion and self-sacrifice. The great disjuncture is everywhere apparent ; chiefs are seen flying from their plain duties to their clans in order to win a heavenly chiefdom, not of this world ; kings retire into hermitages, and whole villages take on the aspect and system of life of the monastery. To escape a network of religious service so closely spread throughout the country was impossible ; all that the half- convinced could do was to relieve his soul in legend and song and jest. Hence the large amount of this literature of protest, coming to us curiously side by side with poems breathing the very spirit of religious devotion, the work of peaceful recluse or retired monk.

For the movement had its other aspect. If the warrior or chief resigned much in becoming a Christian monk, there is no doubt that he gained as well. Contemporaneous religious poetry in the Middle Ages is elsewhere overshadowed by the cast of theologic thought. The "world" from which the saint must flee is no mere symbol, denoting the perils of evil courses ; it is the actual visible earth, its hills and trees and flowers, and the beauty of its human inhabitants that are in themselves a danger and a snare. St. Bernard walking round the Lake of Geneva, unconscious of its presence and Wind to its loveliness, is a fit symbol of the tendency of the religious mind in the Middle Ages. Sin and repentance, the fall and redemption, hell and heaven, occupied the religious man's every thought ; beside such weighty themes the outward life became almost negligible. If he dared to turn his mind towards it at all, it was in order to extract from it some warning of peril, or some allegory of things divine. In essence, the " world " was nothing else than a peril to be renounced and if possible entirely abandoned.

But the Irish monk showed no such inclination, suffered no such terrors. His joy in nature grew with his loving association with her moods. He refused to mingle the idea of evil with what God had made so good. If he sought for symbols, he found only symbols of purity and holiness. The pool beside his hut, the rill that flowed across his green, became to his watchful eye the manifestation of a divine spirit washing away sin ; if the birds sang sweetly above his door, they were the choristers of God ; if the wild beasts gathered to their nightly tryst, were they not the congregation of intelligent beings whom God Himself would most desire ? The friendly badgers or foxes of the wood that came forth, undismayed by the white or brown-robed figure who seemed to have taken up his lasting abode amongst them, became to his mind fellow-monks, authorised members of his strange community. Amongst his feathered and furred associates, he read his Psalms and Hours in peace ; sang his periodic hymn to St. Hilary or St. Brigit, and performed his innumerable genuflexions and " cross-vigils. " Here, from time to time, he poured forth in spontaneous song his joy in the life that he had elected as his own. When King Guaire of Connaught stands at the door of the hermitage in which his brother Marvan had taken refuge from the bustle of court life, and asks him why he had sacrificed so much, Marvan bursts forth into a poem in praise of his hermit life, and the King is fain to confess that the choice of the recluse was the wiser one ; when St. Cellach of Killala is dragged into the forest by his comrades and threatened with death, not even the sight of the four murderers lying at his feet with swords ready drawn in their hands to slay him can prevent him from greeting the Dawn in a beautiful song.

The saint who, like St. Finan, lived shut up within his cell, in many cases lost his mental balance, and de-generated into a mere Fakir, winning heaven by the miseries of his self-imposed mortifications ; but the monk who trusted himself to untrammelled intercourse with

nature, preserved his underlying sanity. For whether or no the hundreds of daily genuflexions were performed, the patch of ground around the solitary's cell must be ploughed or sown or reaped ; the apples must be gathered or the honeysuckles twined. The salmon or herring must be netted or angled for. Thus nature and its needs kept the hermit on the straight and simple paths of physical and mental healthfulness, however he might try to escape into a wilderness of his own imaginings.

The early poetry, we feel, is on the whole joyous ; whether pagan or Christian in tone, it arises from a happy heart. The pagan is more robust, more vigorous ; the Christian gentler and more reflective ; but alike they are free from the mournful note of despair that throws a settled gloom over much of the later literature.

The Ossianic poems have quite a distinctive tone ; in them we catch the abounding energy belonging to the days of the hunt of the wild native boar or stag, when all the country was one open hunting-ground, fit for men whose ideal was that of the sportsman and the warrior. Besides romantic tales, we have a whole body of poetry, loosely strung together under the covering name of Oisín, or Ossian, and usually ascribed to him or to Fionn mac Cumhall, his father and chief, dealing with the themes of war and of the chase. They are often in the nature of the protest of the fighting and hunting-man against the claims of religion. He is perpetually proclaiming that the sounds and sights of the forest and seashore are more dear to him than any others, and when he is called upon to give the first place to the duties of religion, placed before him, as it usually is, in its most enfeebling aspect, he raises the stout protest that the hunting-horn has greater attractions for him than the tinkling bell which calls to prayer.

“ I have heard music sweeter far
Than hymns and psalms of clerics are ;
The blackbird's pipe on Letterlea,
The Dord Finn's wailing melody.

The thrush's song of Glenna-Scál,
The hound's deep bay at twilight's fall,
The barque's sharp grating on the shore.
Than cleric's chants delight me more. ”

There is the ring of the obstinate pagan about such verses ; and many poems are wholly occupied by an unholy wrangling between the representative of the old order, Oisín, and the representative of the new, St. Patrick. The poems themselves probably date from a far later period than either.

More healthy are the true hunting songs. Many of these are in praise of the Isle of Arran, in the Clyde, a favourite resort during the sporting-season both for the Scottish and Irish huntsman. In the poem we have called “ The Isle of Arran, ” from the “ Colloquy of the Ancient Men, ” the charm of the Isle is well described. We have in it the same pure joy in natural scenery that we find in the poems of the religious hermits, but the tone is manlier and more emphatic.

Occasionally a fiercer note creeps into the hunter's mood. The chase of the boar and deer was not without its dangers. Winter, and the unfriendly clan hard by, or the lean prowling wolf at night, were real terrors to the small companies encamped on the open hill-side or in the forest. Though the warrior in peaceful times loved the chase of swine and stag, his hand had done and was always ready to do sterner work when opportunity offered. The poem “ Chill

Winter ” has a note of almost savage exultation ; the old fighter turns from his present perils and discomforts to remember the warrior onslaughts which had left the glen below him silent, and its once happy inhabitants cold in death ; colder, as he gladly reflects, than even he himself feels on this chill winter's night. It is the voice of the ancient warrior, who thought no shame of slaying, but thanked God when he had knocked down his fellow. Whether he, in his turn, were the undermost man, or whether he escaped, he cared not at all.

Two difficulties face the modern reader in coming for the first time upon genuine Irish literature, whether poetry or prose. The first is the curious feeling that we are hung between two worlds, the seen and the unseen ; that we are not quite among actualities, or rather that we do not know where the actual begins or where it ends. Even in dealing with history we may find ourselves suddenly wafted away into some illusory spirit-world with which the historian seems to deal with the same sober exactness as in detailing any fact of ordinary life. The faculty of discerning between the actual and the imaginary is absent, as it is absent in imaginative children ; often, indeed, the illusory quite overpowers the real, as it does in the life of the Irish peasant to-day.

There is, in most literatures, a meeting-place where the Mythological and the Historic stand in close conjunction, the one dying out as the other takes its place. Only in Ireland we never seem to reach this point ; we can never anywhere say, “ Here ends legend, here begins history. ” In all Irish writing we find poetry and fact, dreams and realities, exact detail and wild imagination, linked closely hand in hand. This is the Gael as revealed in his literature. At first we are inclined to doubt the accuracy of any part of the story ; but, as we continue our examination, we are surprised at the substantial correctness of the ancient records, so far as we are able to test them, whether on the historical or on the social side. The poet is never wholly poet, he is also practical man ; and the historian is never wholly chronicler and annalist, he is also at the back of his mind folklorist, lover of nature, dreamer. It is the puzzle and the charm of Ireland.

A good example of this is the very beautiful anonymous Irish poem, rich in poetic imagery, addressed to Ragnall or Reginald, son of Somerled, lord of the Isles from 1164-1204. This poem, written for an historical prince, begins with a description of the joys of the fairy palace, “ Emain of the Apples, ” whence this favoured prince is supposed by the poet to have issued forth :

“ Many, in white grass-fresh Emain,
Of men on whom a noble eye gazes
(The rider of a bay steed impetuously)
Through a countenance of foxglove hue.
Shapely, branch-fresh.

“ Many, in Emain of the pastures,
From which its noble feast has not parted,
Are the fields ploughed in autumn
For the pure corn of the Lord's Body. ”

The poet's mind wanders from the ancient Emain, capital of Ulster, to the allegorical Emain, the dwelling of the gods or fairy-hosts, who were thought of as inhabiting the great tumuli on the Boyne ; again, he transplants his fairy-land to the home of Ragnall, and seems to place it in Mull or the Isle of Man, which was indeed the especial abode of Manannan, the Ocean-god and Ruler of Fairy-land.

“ What God from Brugh of the Boyne,
Thou son of noble Sabia,
Thou beauteous apple-rod
Created thee with her in secret ?

“ O Man of the white steed,
O Man of the black swan.
Of the fierce band and the gentle sorrow,
Of the sharp blade and the lasting fame.

“ Thy fair side thou hast bathed,
The grey branch of thy eyes like summer showers,
Over thy locks, O descendant of Fergus,
The wind of Paradise has breathed. ” [1]

We recognise that this is fine poetry, but we feel also that it needs a specialised education thoroughly to understand it. The world from which it hails is not our world, and to comprehend it we must do more than translate, we must add notes and glossary at every line ; but no poetry, especially poetry under the initial disadvantage of a translation, could retain its qualities under such treatment.

In all the ancient verse we meet with these obstacles. Even much of the most imaginative Ossianic poetry becomes too difficult from this point of view for the untrained reader.

Take the fine poem detailing the history of the Shield of Fionn. Poetic addresses to noted weapons are common enough, and are not confined to Irish literature ; but the adventures of this shield pass beyond the ordinary uses of human battles, and enter the realm of mythology. The very name given to it, the " Dripping Ancient Hazel," carries us into a world of poetic imagination.

“ Scarce is there on the firm earth, whether it be man or
woman, one that can tell why thy name abroad
is known as the Dripping Ancient Hazel.

“ ‘Twas Balor that besought Lugh before his beheading :
‘Set my head above thy own comely head and
earn my blessing.’

“ That blessing Lugh Longarm did not earn ; he set up
the head above a wave of the east in a fork of hazel
before him.

“ A poisonous milk drips down out of that hardened
tree ; through the baneful drip, it was not slight,
the tree split right in two.

“ For full fifty years the hazel stood, but ever it was a
cause of tears, the abode of vultures and ravens.

“ Manannan of the round eye went into the wilderness
of the Mount of White-Hazel ; there he saw a
shadeless tree among the trees that vied in beauty.

“ Manannan sets workmen without delay to dig it out of
the firm earth. Mighty was the deed !

“ From the root of that tree arises a poisonous vapour ;
there were killed by it (perilous the consequence)
nine of the working folk.

“ Now I say to you, and let the prophecy be sought out :
 Around the mighty hazel without reproach was
 found the cause of many a woe.

“It was from that shield that Eitheor of the smooth
 brown face was called ‘ Son of Hazel,’ — for this was
 the hazel that he worshipped.” [2]

Or take again the strange mythological poem of the “ Crane-bag,” made out of the skin of a wandering haunted crane, which had once been a woman; condemned for “ two hundred white years ” to dwell in “ the house of Manannan,” *i.e.* in the wastes of the ocean, ever seeking and never finding land. When the wanderings came to an end, and the unhappy Crane-woman died, Manannan (the Ocean-god) made of her skin a bag into which he put “ every precious thing he had ; the shirt of Manannan and his knife, the girdle of Goibniu (the Vulcan of Irish legend) ; the king of Scotland's shears, the king of Lochlann's helmet, and the bones of the swine of Asal — these were the treasures that the Crane-bag held. . . . When the sea was full, its treasures were seen in its midst ; when the fierce sea was on ebb, the Crane-bag was empty.” The story has the impress of great age, and manifold changes ; it belongs to the period when the gods were not yet transformed into human beings, but were still primaeval elemental powers, impersonations of fire and light and water, and the wisdom that is above mankind. But the link is lost, and the story remains a suggestion only, vague and indistinct. As an image of the hollow ocean, holding the treasures of the Sea-god, the idea is, however, full of force and beauty.[3]

The second difficulty, which is closely connected with the first, lies in the retention of the ancient and unfamiliar nomenclature ; the old geographical and family names, which have dropped out of actual use, being everywhere found in the poetry.

Scotland is still Alba in Irish, as it was in the sixth century ; Eire (gen. Éirinn) is the ordinary name for Ireland, not only in poetry, as is commonly supposed, but in the living language of the country. But it has besides an abundance of specially poetic names, such as Inisfail, “ the island of Destiny, ” Banba, Fodla, &c., connected with early legends, and these, if we are to understand the poetry, we must accustom ourselves to. England is still to-day the land of the Saxons to the Gael, and its inhabitants are the “ Sassenachs ” ; the Irishman persists in disregarding the coming of the Angles. We may talk of the extinction of the Gaelic tongue, but in his poetry, as in every place-name of stream or hill or townland all over the country, it is about us still. In the poetry we are back in Gaelic Ireland ; the old tribal distinctions, the old clan names, meet us on every page. What does the modern man know of Leth Cuinn or Leth Mogha, the ancient divisions of the North and South, or of the stories which gave them birth ? What of Magh Breagh or Magh Murtheimne ? What of Emain Macha and Kincora ? Who, again, are the Clann Fiachrach or the Eoghanacht, or the Children of Ir or Eiber ? Even before the much later titles of Thomond and Desmond, of Tyrconnell and Tyrowen he is somewhat at a loss.

But to the bard the past is always present, the ancient nomenclature is never extinct. The legend which caused the River Boyne to be called “ The fore-arm of Nuada's wife,” or the tumuli on its banks to be thought of as the “ Elfmounds of the wife of Nechtan,” are familiar to him ; and to enter into the spirit of the mythological poetry we must know something of Irish folklore and tradition. Many of these expressions have a high imaginative significance, as when the sea is called the “ Plain of Ler” (the elder Irish Sea-god), or its waves are “ the tresses of Manannan's wife” or the “ Steeds of Manannan.”

Of the large body of bardic poetry we have been unable to give an adequate representation, partly from considerations of space, but also because we are not yet, until a larger quantity of this poetry has been published, able to estimate its actual poetic value. Much fine poetry by the historic bards undoubtedly exists, but we have as yet only a few published fragments to choose from. The first specimen we give, Teigue Dall O'Higgin's appeal to O'Rourke of the Bulwarks (*na murtha*), must stand as an example of much similar poetry in and about his own day.

The call to union against England or against some local enemy sounds loud and constant in the bardic poems. There is much anti-English poetry ; poetry which has for its object the endeavour to unite for a single purpose the chiefs who had spUt up the provinces into small divisions under separate leaders, each fighting for his own hand.

To stir up the lagging or too peaceful chief was one of the prime duties of the bard ; to address to him congratulations on his accession, or to bewail him when he died, was his official function ; and to judge by the quantity of paper covered with these laudatory effusions and elegies, he performed his task with punctilious care. It was likely that he would do so, for the fees for a poem that gave satisfaction were substantial. We miss the family bard in these days ; there is no one at hand to praise indifferently all that we do.

The bardic poetry attracted the genius of Mangan, and his “ Farewell to Patrick Sarsfield” and O'Hussey's “ Ode to the Maguire,” are not only fine poetry, but excellent representations of two of the finest of the bardic poems. Elsewhere in his poems, we have usually too much Mangan to feel that the tone of the original is faithfully conveyed. His soaring poem, “ The Dark Rosaleen,” can hardly be said to represent the Irish “ Roisin Dubh,” of which, for purposes of comparison, we give a literal rendering ; beautiful as Mangan's poem is, it has to our mind lost something of the exquisite grace of the original.

It may be well to indicate here the relations between Mangan's version and the original in the poem in which he keeps most strictly to the words of the bard. “ O'Hussey's Ode to the Maguire,” that fine address of the Northern bard, O'Hussey, to his young chief, whose war-like foray into Munster in the depth of winter filled his mind with anxiety and distress. A literal translation of the opening passage reads as follows :

“ Too cold for Hugh I deem this night, the drops so
heavily downpouring are a cause for sadness ;
biting is this night's cold — woe is me that such is
our companion's lot.

In the clouds' bosoms the water-gates of heaven are
flung wide ; small pools are turned by it to seas,
all its destructiveness hath the firmament spewed out.

A pain to me that Hugh Maguire to-night lies in a
stranger's land, 'neath lurid glow of lightning-
bolts and angry armed clouds' clamour ;

A woe to us that in the province of Clann Daire (South-
west Munster) our well-beloved is couched, betwixt
a coarse cold-wet and grass-clad ditch and the
impetuous fury of the heavens.” [4]

But it is not, after all, the verses of the bards, even of the best of them, that will survive. It is the tender religious songs, the passionate love-songs, the exquisite addresses to nature ; those poems which touch in us the common ground of deep human feeling. Whether it came to us

from the sixth century or from the sixteenth, the song of Crede for the dead man, whom she had grown to love only when he was dying, would equally move us ; the passionate cry of Liadan after Curithir would wring our hearts whatever century produced it. The voice of love is alike in every age. It has no date.

Having written so far, we begin to wonder whether it was wise or necessary to set so much prose between the reader and the poems which, as we hope, he wishes to read. In an ordinary anthology, the interruption of a long preface is a mistake and an intrusion, for, more than any other good art, good poetry must explain itself. The mood in which a poem touches us acutely may be recorded, but it cannot be reproduced in or for the reader. He must find his own moment. For the most part, these Irish poems need no introduction. We need no one to explain to us the beauty of the lines in the " Flower of Nut-brown Maids " :

“ I saw her coming towards me o'er the face of the
mountain,
Like a star glimmering through the mist” ;

or to remind us of the depth of Cuchulain's sorrow when over the dead body of his son he called aloud :

“ The end is come, indeed, for me ;
I am a man without son, without wife ;
I am the father who slew his own child ;
I am a broken, rudderless bark
Tossed from wave to wave in the tempest wild ;
An apple blown loose from the garden- wall,
I am over-ripe, and about to fall;”

or to tell us that the “ Blackthorn,” or “ Donall Oge,” or “ Eileen Aroon,” are exquisite in their pathos and tenderness. But there are, besides these enchanting things, which we are prepared to expect from Irish verse, also things for which we are not prepared ; unfamiliar themes, treated in a new manner ; and to judge of these, some help from outside may be useful. The reader who does not know Ireland or know Gaelic, is ready to accept softness, the almost endless iteration of expressions conveying the sense of woman's beauty and of man's affection, in phrases that differ but little from each other ; what he is not prepared for is the sudden break into matter-of-fact, the curt tone that cuts across much Irish poetry, revealing an unexpected side of life and character. Even the modern Irishman is tripped up by the swift intrusion of the grotesque ; the cold, cynical note that exists side by side with the most fervent religious devotion, especially in the popular poetry, displeases him. He resents it, as he resents the tone of the “ Playboy of the Western World ” ; yet it is the direct modern representative of the tone of mind that produced the Ossianic lays.

We find it in all the popular poetry ; as an example take the argument of the old woman who warns a young man that if he persists in his evil ways, there will be no place in heaven for such as he. The youth replies :

“ If no sinner ever goes to Paradise,
But only he who is blessed, there will be wide empty
places in it.
If all who follow my way are condemned
Hell must have been full twenty years and a year ago,

And they could not take me in for want of space.”

The same chill, almost harsh tone is heard in the colloquy between Ailill of Munster and the woman whom he has trusted on the night after his death,[5] or in the poem, “ I shall not die for you ” (p. 286), or in the verses on the fairy-hosts, published by Dr. Kuno Meyer, where, instead of praise of their ethereal loveliness, we are told :

“ Good are they at man-slaying,
Melodious in the ale-house,
Masterly at making songs,
Skilled at playing chess.” [6]

Could anything be more matter-of-fact than the clever chess-playing of the shee-folk and their pride in it ?

A collection of translations must always have some sense of disproportion. It is natural that translators should, as a rule, have been attracted, not only to the poems that most readily give themselves to an English translation, but to those which are most easily accessible. The love-songs, such as those collected by Hardiman and Dr. Douglas Hyde, have been attempted with more or less success by many translators, while much good poetry, not so easily brought to hand, has been overlooked. Dr. Kuno Meyer's fine translations of a number of older pieces, which came out originally either in separate publications,[7] or in the transactions of the Arts Faculty of University College, Liverpool, have now been rendered more accessible in a separate collection ; but the English ear is wedded to rhyme, and a prose translation, however careful and choice, often misses its mark with the general reader. Long ago, Miss Brooke (in her *Reliques of Irish Poetry*) and Furlong (in Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy*) essayed the translation of a number of the longer " bardic remains " ; and these earlier collectors and translators will ever retain the gratitude of their countrymen for rescuing and printing, at a time when little value was placed upon such things, these stores of Irish song. But the translations suited better the taste of their own day than of ours ; we cannot read them now, nor do they in the slightest way represent the verse they are intended to reproduce. Naturally, too, it is easier to give the spirit and language of a serious poem than that of a humorous one in another tongue, so that the more playful verse has been neglected.

It may be thought that this book is overweighted by religious and love poems ; but in a collection essentially lyrical, religion and love must ever be the two chief themes. In Ireland, the inner spirit of the national genius ever spoke, and still speaks, through them.

Among the people of the quiet places where few strangers come, and where night passes into day and day again to night with little change of thought or outward emotion, simple sorrows and simple pleasures have still time to ripen into poetry. The grief that came to-day will not pass away with a new grief to-morrow it will impress its groove, straight and deep, upon the heart that feels it, lying there without hope of a summer growth to hide its furrow. The long monotonous days, the dark unbroken evenings are the nurseries of sorrow ; the white open roads are the highways of hope or the paths for the wayfaring thoughts of despair. The stranger who came one day comes again no more, though we watch the long white track never so earnestly ; the boy or girl who went that way to foreign lands has not thrown his or her shadow across the road again. Where the turf fire rises curling and blue into the air, where the young girl stands waiting by the winding “ boreen,” where the old woman croons over the hearth, there we shall surely find, if we know how to draw it forth, that a well of poetry has been sunk, and that half-unconsciously the thought of the heart has expressed itself in simple verse, or in rhythmic prose almost more beautiful than verse. The minds that produced the

touching melodies that wail and croon and sing to us out of Ireland, have not the less expressed themselves in melodious poetry. Here, if anywhere, we may look to find a style unspoiled by imitation, and a sentiment moving because it is perfectly sincere. It is thus that such poems as “ Donall Oge” or the “Roisin Dubh” or “ My Grief on the Sea” come into existence.

Where the outward distractions of life are few, the grave monotony of sea and moor and bog-land, the swirl of cloud and mist, and the loneliness of waste places sink more deeply into the mind. The visible is less felt than the invisible, and life is surrounded by a network of fears and dreams to which the town-dweller is a stranger. To-day, in the Western Isles of Ireland and Scotland, the huntsman going out to hunt, the fisherman to fish or lay his nets, the agriculturist to sow or reap his harvest, and the weaver or spinner to wind his yarn, go forth to their work with some familiar charm-prayer or charm-hymn, often beautifully called “ the Blessings,” on their lips. The milkmaid calling her cows or churning her butter, the young girl fearful of the evil-eye, and the cottager sweeping up her hearth in the evening, laying herself down to sleep at night, or rising up in the morning, soothe their fears or smooth their way by some whispered *paider* or *ortha*, a prayer or a verse or a blessing. The deep religious feeling of the Celtic mind, with its far-stretching hands groping towards the mysterious and the infinite, comes out in these spontaneous and simple ejaculations ; I have therefore endeavoured to bring together a few others to add to the groups gathered by Dr. Hyde in the west of Ireland and by Dr. Carmichael in the Western Hebrides ; but in their original Gaelic they are the fruit of others’ collections, not of my own.[8] They are the thoughts of such humble people as the poor farm-servant who “ had so many things to do from dark to dark ” that she had no time for long prayers, and knew only a little prayer taught her by her mother, which laid “ our caring and our keeping and our saving on the Sacred Trinity. ”

I desire to inscribe here my sincere gratitude to the living authors and authoresses who have kindly given me permission to use their work, and my gratitude to those authors who have gone, that they have left us so much good work to use. Especially I desire to thank my friends, Mr. Alfred Perceval Graves and Mr. Ernest Rhys, for permitting the use of unpublished poems.

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[1] Printed in Skene's *Celtic Scotland*, iii. Appen. 2, p. 410, from a seventeenth century copy belonging to William Hennessy, compared with the copy in the *Book of Fermoy*.

[2] *Duanaire Finn*, edited by John MacNeill, pp. 34, 134 (Irish Texts Society, 1904).

[3] For this poem see *Duanaire Finn*, edited by John MacNeill (Irish Texts Society, 1904), pp.21, 118.

[4] O'Giady's *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, p. 451,

[5] Dr. Kuno Meyer's *Ancient Irish Poetry* (Constable, 1911), p. 9.

[6] *Ancient Irish Poetry*, p. 19,

[7] *King and Hermit* (1901) ; *Liadan and Curithir* (1902) ; *Four Songs of Summer and Winter* (1903) ; all published by D. Nutt.

[8] Chiefly of Dr. Michael Sheehan's collections in Co. Waterford, and those made by Mr. Fionan M'Collum and others in West Kerry (see Notes).

The poem-book of Gael.

Translations from Irish Gaelic poetry into English prose and verse (1912)

Author: Hull, Eleanor, 1860-1935

Subject: Irish poetry; English poetry — Translations from Irish

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/poembookofgaeltr00hullrich>

The Sons of the Gael Are in exile and mourning, Worn, weary, and pale As spent pilgrims returning; Or men who, in flight From the field of disaster, Beseech the black night On their flight to fall faster; Or seamen aghast When their planks gape asunder, And the waves fierce and fast Tumble through in hoarse thunder; Or men whom we see That have got their death-omen,- Such wretches are we In the chains of our foemen! Our courage is fear, Our nobility vileness, Our hope is despair, And our comeliness foulness. There is mist on our heads, And a cloud chill and hoary Of black sorrow, sheds An ecli