

## THE KELTIC BARDS

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HE PAINFUL PEACE of the penal era was a greater tragedy to the literature of the Gael than had been the series of ruinous wars of the past. The laws that struck at the mind and the heart were more deadly than the lance aimed at the flesh. With education forbidden to the entire race, and teaching a capital offense, there appeared to be very little hope of literary activity. The majority of the population were adherents to the proscribed faith, and they were also speakers of the Gaelic tongue, with the result that their language was penalized with their religion. Well-to-do persons could defy the law and send their children to the schools of the Continent. The poorer classes had to rely on the hedge-schools for their learning. These hidden schools, conducted also in defiance of the law by masters with a price upon their heads, were the sole survivors of the great scholastic establishments that flourished at an earlier age. Here to some extent the traditions of classical learning were maintained. Here also, and here alone, the literature, history, legends and language of the Gael were cultivated. In these outlawed centers of learning the humble folk got the remains of the native culture, while the wealthy returned from foreign schools with a foreign education.

The literary instinct which had flourished during the wars of conquest and spoliation asserted itself once more in the midst of persecution. There was a scarcity of serious literature. The creative genius of a down-trodden and hopeless race burst forth into song. A vast amount of the works of the bards has been lost. Deprived, in their hidden retreats, of the advantages of the printing press and other conveniences, their poems were preserved only in the lasting memories of the peasants, or in the manuscripts copied in country cottages by loving hands. Many of these poems have been discovered recently in the hill country, and some of them have been published.

A goodly number of the poets were masters of the various hedge-schools. They were wandering or roving teachers, which accounts for the finding of their works scattered over the whole country. With Gaelic and its graceful idioms peculiarly suited for poetry, Ireland was accustomed to ballads long before that dark night

of agony which set in upon her in the penal era. Since it was treason to love their native land, the poets adopted allegory, such as we find in "Dark Rosaleen." They sang of Erin as the "Dark Little Rose," the "Coolin," the "Drimmin Dubh Dheelish," the "Shan Van Vocht," and under a host of other names. The poems themselves are on every subject imaginable. Love, war, religion, controversy, all had a place in the ballad. The polemical ballad was in high favor. The Church was persecuted with a fierce hatred and the men of Ireland loved and clung to Her the more for that very persecution. Countless ballads were written in her behalf, painting her sufferings. The majority of this type of ballad were rather absurd; still they were sung, and kept the subject ever present in the hearts of the people. Of the religious type, the controversial was, perhaps, the most welcomed. It gave scope to the bard for a display of biblical learning and a very wide range to his invective. The Saxon "bodachs" who usurped the rights of the Irish Church and State were bitterly satirised. The people took great delight in the verbal spanking administered to heresy. [Love songs and humorous verse and descriptions of local scenes were all treated with a high perfection of melody.]

The poetry of the penal days has an interest aside from a solely literary one. The picture of social life and the mental outlook of the people have here a portrayal altogether different from that of the English orator or writer. This poetry indicates a national consciousness common to north, south, east and west which refused to die in spite of the many wounds inflicted upon it. Frequent references to the literature and mythology of the Latin and Greek show that the tradition of the old scholarship was still kept alive in the hedge-school. The classical literature of the Gael was also cultivated as is evident from the constant stream of references to mythology, ancient legends, and history. These references, devoid of any explanation, assume that they were immediately grasped and understood by the hearers. These allusions, literary and historical, and the characters of legend and truth, are interwoven in such a fashion that the bards of Erin cannot be truly appreciated without a grasp of the early literature and history of the land.

Every section of the country gave birth to one or more of these poets. The south was more prolific than the rest of the land and more faithful in preserving the fruits of their labor. Every corner of the country sang these songs and committed them to memory. Under the guiding hand of God they have been the instruments of safeguarding the faith and nationality of a race throughout centuries of persecution such as a race never before suffered and survived. In

every county of Munster there flourished legions of poets of greater or lesser merit.

Second only to Munster in the number of poets and the faithful preservation of their names and works, is that section which has been termed "South Ulster." The Gaelic literary tradition was kept flourishing here up to the nineteenth century. Here the Gaelic language was kept alive between the old Pale of the south and the new Plantation of the north.

The people of the west had their quota of bards who expressed the feelings of that section in verse. Connacht has been less kind to the bards than the rest of Ireland. Though the greater portion of its poetry has been retained in oral tradition, the names of the authors are almost entirely lost to us. A manuscript from Connacht is considered a rare treasure.

Among the poets of the various sections, a spirit of intimacy seems to have prevailed. Poems are addressed to other writers as brother bards. Periodic gatherings called Bardic Sessions were held in various sections of the country. At these sessions only poets of accepted merit were admitted. These assemblies lasted in various forms down to the second decade of the seventeenth century. Recitations were held during these meetings and votes were taken on the versions presented. Variations from the original and accepted theme were frowned upon and the strict traditionalism of the bardic order forced the speaker back to the words of the original rann.

In pre-Christian as well as in Christian times, the ballad was the delight of the Irishman. Each bard strove to excel in his art. The bard was usually well educated for his work in life and the calling was considered as a dignified and important one. The bard was well received and amply rewarded wherever he went. This was only natural for every Gael is a poet of sorts at heart. Four out of every five men you meet with in Ireland will be poets. The fifth, in all probability will be a Saxon. As in every other profession, so in the rhyming circle, there is always to be found in every parish a rhymers superior to his fellows.

Every nation owes a great debt to poetry. Ireland is especially indebted to the street ballad. The songs of Homer made for a free Greece even more than the might of the phalanx. The ballad of Spain kept patriotism at a burning pitch even under the domination of the Moor. The ballad has done more for Ireland than for even Spain or Greece. Spain, like Ireland was invaded by a foreign foe; but that foe, though infidel, was less savage and less destructive than the pre-tentious christian seeking to "civilize" Ireland. The Moor was a pa-

tron of learning and fostered the arts and sciences in the many schools he founded throughout Spain. The English fostered little more than the destruction of schools, the outlawry of language, and the capture of priests and teachers. The Irish mother taught her little ones the ballads which told of the nation and the nation's faith, which her own mother in a similar way had taught to her. The song lived, though the lips that first uttered it were now silent. The magical effect of the ballad never lost its power. Generation after generation was swayed by the charm of its appeal. The ferocity of its invective, the pathos of its love, and the wild agony of its wail, continued to exercise the same undying effect on the mass of the people.

The might of the ballad was well understood by the sage who gave voice to the famous saying, "Let me have the making of the people's ballads, and I care not who makes their laws." Never was this saying better exemplified than in the case of Ireland. With the aid of the ballad her faith was preserved and her nationality was perpetuated. When these cherished gifts are again threatened the spirit of her bards will again break forth into song. The voice of the bard will ever echo the cry of "Eire Slainte geal go brath."