

IRISH NATIONAL TRADITION

BY

ALICE STOPFORD GREEN

Reprinted from "History," July, 1917

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

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THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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SECTION 10

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

IRISH NATIONAL TRADITION

MANY different definitions of "nationality" are current in England. The trend of thought and action for the last 250 years has been turned in a special direction, in which the expansion of an Empire has overspread the idea of a nation. The term has been obscured or forgotten, till under stress of war, and amid the cries of nationalities in extremity, it has been found necessary to find a definition; and arguments have been hurried forward to show that a nation is based on race, dynasty, geography, economics, religion, social equality, the stage of civilization, accepted political form, and so on. None of these definitions spring out of intimate experience. They are matters of the head, not of the heart. Perhaps they all contain some of the truth. It may indeed be that there are in effect as many meanings and purposes of "nationality" as there are "nations." "In my Father's house are many mansions," and the peoples may have found various roads leading to the hopes and the obligations of a nation. In each we must seek a separate value. What then is the value of Irish nationality? Which of these definitions will comprise it? Has it any real foundation? Here a problem is presented, unique, without parallel in Europe, a problem which can still fire the heart and enlarge the imagination.

To understand what the problem is we have to escape from the whole range of the English ideas which have been around us from our childhood and to enter into another world. Take a single illustration. A writer in the *Round Table* of September, 1916, observes that it is patent to every foreigner and to every colonial that the British are not a "nation" in the same sense as the French, and the reason he gives is "that in Britain the revolution of social equality has never yet been made." The remedies proposed are the organization of industry, the settlement of problems between capital and labour, and the general improvement of education. His lesson apparently is that by combining French equality with German organization the British

“nation” would find its completion. The remedies are practical and, so to speak, external, without reference to the spiritual life and tradition of a people.

Such a notion of national life, political, industrial, and advantageous, could not arise, nor could it be understood among the Irish. Here we come at once on the main dividing line between the genius of the English and the Irish peoples, and the inspiration of their national life. The English by political instinct, and by outward circumstances, found in the State their unity. In a centralized country powerful rulers like Henry II., Henry VIII., Elizabeth, Cromwell, could by their direction of its internal policy and its external relations affect the character of the country and determine its future. So completely has the political ideal dominated general thought, that it does not seem to the English possible to conceive of a “nation” save under a fixed political form. The idea of a common literary tradition formed no essential part of their national faith. No need of it was ever felt. It is significant that not till 1900 did England require that her children should be taught the history of their country. English literature, if it was one of the glories of the English people, was never their binding force. While England was being hammered and trampled into a political unity, every district within it retained its separate literary existence. Local traditions went hand in hand with local dialects, so that an expert can easily tell whether a MS. is of the north, middle, or south: and the various dialects remained indeed so different that English poems have been translated from one into another. Literature was always free, ready to assimilate from every side, to develop local peculiarities, to express individual eccentricities or aspirations, to take its own way. Such freedom has given it a various excellence and a great bravery. It has never known the rule of the schools, and by that very fact it has not been the possession of any caste or class. Still less has it laid hold of the heart of the people or become their pride. It is the creation of the few, and judged by the few.

If we turn to Ireland, on the other hand, we find a country where for some 1,500 years, as far back as historic knowledge can reach, one national force has overshadowed and dominated all others. It has been the power of a great literary tradition. Political power was not centralized, and no single man was in a position to determine what the people should think, believe, or do. But in the learned tradition of the race there was a determined order. In their intellectual and spiritual inheritance

was the very essence of national life, the substance of its existence, the warrant of its value, the assurance of its continuity.

The contrast is profound between the two conceptions of the soul of a people, the vital force of a nation's growth. It is vain to ignore the difference. There is however no need to decry either the English or the Irish mode of development, the one or the other, any more than it is necessary to compare the importance of sea or mountains in the structure of the globe. Each has its own significance. Each reaches out of infinity and goes back to it again.

The subject of Irish tradition and culture is still so unexplored that the best scholar feels least inclined to dogmatise. Certainly none can ever venture again to dogmatise in the old harsh and vulgar sense of contempt. There is in Ireland a fine and fascinating literature which, because it has never been studied as European literatures have been studied, has been ignorantly assumed to be of merely "barbaric" interest. This judgment was never one of competent knowledge; and when the political reasons which gave it a false authority have ceased a finer understanding will take its place. New secrets will be yielded up to scholars. In European literature there will perhaps be no study so alluring to the really original mind as this region, where scarcely a path is trodden by more than a solitary worker, and where the adventurer of ingenious intelligence will find rising before him hope beyond hope of intellectual reward. The latest research points to lines of thought which have been too long obscured. No doubt much will be corrected or enlarged in detail, but there are general considerations which cannot be dismissed as having no validity.

Ireland was not only to itself but to the whole mediæval world the island of romance. Romance hung about its obscure origins. Where the first settlers came from we do not know. Possibly the belief in their Spanish descent sprang, like so many Irish origins, from a literary soil—perhaps from a single sentence of Orosius writing in the fourth century, that "From the Castle of Brigantia Ireland could be seen." The Irish bards took up the story from here or elsewhere. "In a clear winter's night," was their common report, "Ireland was first seen from Spain." The early maps of Western Europe gave some support to the view, for in these the coasts of Spain approached so near to Ireland that it seemed but a stone's throw across. In any case, from one reason or another, in all the succeeding centuries both Irish and Spaniards did believe in this brotherhood. Out of this belief

grew the extraordinary excitement on both sides of the Irish Sea when the Spanish Armada coasted along the Irish shores, and among English and Irish the cry arose that the brothers of the Irish had come to bring them help—possibly the most remarkable instance known of the power of literary tradition.

At the first knowledge we have of it Irish literature is already a conscious national art, in which scholars recognize "the earliest voice from the dawn of Western European civilization, the most primitive and original among the literatures of Western Europe." The historic life of Irish people began when the latest Celtic settlers, afterwards known as the Milesians, established their dynasties at Tara, Allen, and Cashel, between the first and the fourth centuries. The later history of the island was foreshadowed in the story of these new dynasties. Unlike Roman or English conquerors in Britain, they did not seek to create a new nation by obliterating the older race and the older life to replace it by their own civilization and law. Their great work was to gather up the ancient pieties of the inhabitants, and by uniting their own traditions with those of the subject races to form a body of epic material valid for all the peoples old and new of the island. It is probable, though we have no certain proof, that centres of learning had existed in pre-historic times. But if we may judge by what happened in later wars, when Schools were scattered the guardians of old lore sought shelter in the refuges of the defeated peoples, among tillers of the ground and wandering cattle-herds. Here there lingered on remnants of oral tradition, partly based on historical events, partly the universal folk-tale motives, and partly perhaps indigenous inventions, mythological or other, of the Irish themselves; and these the new *literati* collected to add to their own legends and memories in founding a national history and literature. To give form and authority to fragments of oral tradition they used the fiction of calling up heroes of the past to recite the ancient history of the island. Thus there could be no "settling of the manor of Tara" till Fintan, the sage saved from the Flood, had been summoned from the recesses of Kerry to recount to the nobles assembled on the Hill the conquests and wars of Ireland, its races and laws since the Deluge; and so "he ended his life and his age." "The place where he is buried is uncertain however." So also the warriors Oissin and Cailte were maintained for centuries in the sorrow and gloom of extreme old age till St. Patrick could hear with rapture their tales of the mighty hunting and fighting of Fionn and his Fiana. We can dimly follow the work

of bringing the old world into the new age in the story of the young hero Cuchulainn—the epic of the Táin-Bó-Cúailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley). The Milesian collectors of the old pagan story explained the gaps and imperfections of their record by the supposition of an original epic tale which through lapse of time had lost its first perfection, degenerating into disconnected fragments; and by the fiction of old manuscripts long ago stolen and carried oversea. They therefore called up Fergus from the tomb to tell the tale again, as having been an actor in the war, with friends in both camps, and so best fitted to give a full and unbiassed story. Thus the Táin that has come down to us is, from the literary point of view, the creation of these Milesian *literati*; and the form they gave to it, and to other creations of the Ulster cycle, became the model on which all later compilers of tradition worked. The Táin, with its fore-tales, took its place as the classical epic of the country. When other provinces gave a literary form to their own heroic legends they followed the example of the Ulster makers of the Irish prose epic. “Every people might well envy the Irish the possession of her sagas,” according to Windisch. “This at least is certain, that neither the Germans nor the Slavs are able to produce any such living pictures out of their wild heroic pre-historic times as can the Irish.”

Thus Irish nationality was born. It was no mere device of literary concoction and invention. There was the spirit of a nation's life in the ending of race inequality, and a union of all the peoples in equal dignity. Old sagas were woven together, and stories, dates, and genealogies were harmonized and synchronized and fitted into an ordered scheme, in which by a series of learned figments and invented names the dynasties and aristocracies were grafted into the descent and succession of Milesius of Spain. The *Lebor Gabála* (the Book of Invasions), which worked into one framework the histories, real or imagined, of the various racial elements that made up the whole complex of the Irish nation, was as it were the national epic of the united peoples. The genealogies compiled by the Wise Men, and recited at the general assemblies of the tribes, became the foundation of a common history. Elaborated by the official scholars, and accepted by the leading dynasties as the basis of Irish life, the theory was established of a single people, united in the pride of a common heroic ancestry.

The writing down of Irish legend and history and poetry may have begun in the seventh or eighth century, but some scholars

would date it even earlier. From this time we can clearly trace the continuous working of the same deep instinct, as the literary tradition gathered up and moulded into national form the history, geography, law, language, and religion of the island. Every part of the inheritance was swept into the common circle. For a thousand years Irish literary tradition was preserved in an unbroken series of manuscripts by the schools of the learned men, until the destruction of their corporate existence in the wars of the seventeenth century, when the work was taken up by scattered students, who in their poverty and humiliation carried on the task of copying and writing for another two hundred years. Such a manuscript record is without a parallel in Europe. It surely marks a singular quality in the race, worthy of our remembrance and our honour.

It is in the manuscript tradition that we must seek for the civilization of Ireland, and for its soul. "If ever the idea of nationality," writes a leading Irish scholar, "becomes the subject of a thorough and honest study, it will be seen that among all the peoples of antiquity, not excluding the Hellenes and the Hebrews, the Irish held the clearest and most constant and conscious grasp of that idea, and that their political divisions, instead of disproving the existence of the idea in their minds, immensely strengthen the proof of its existence and emphasize its power." He notes one significant fact. "Though pride of race is evident in the dominant Gaelic stock, their national sentiment centres, not in the race, but altogether in the country, which is constantly personified and made the object of a sort of cult." The beauty of Ireland moved the affections of its inhabitants—the marvellous quality of her light, the lines of the granite mountains, the wonder of the ancient trees, the "cool flowers" of the mountain in the early morning, the "grey dew" of autumn, the murmur where the spring and the broad lake met, the thickets and the gushing waters, the animals and birds, and the enveloping tide of the ocean. The description of the high, or noble, places was a part of the very earliest literature. In the tale of the boy Cuchulainn faring to his first expedition, he asks the name of every mountain and "white cairn," and his charioteer tells him of every chief fort between Tara and Kells, the meadows and their fords, their famous places and their dwellings. Chiefs on their rounds were accompanied by their poets to celebrate tree and mountain and lake that had seen the wonders of the old Ireland. In the poems of the Fiana the praise of the heroes has to pause while the bard recites the glories of cataract and flood

and field, perhaps some 200 of them in a breath, after which he leaves the rest to "wiser men" than he. Fintan of the Deluge standing on Tara told in turn the fame of every province, its chief places, and what it contributed to Ireland—her knowledge, teaching, and eloquence from the West; her battles, contentions, assaults, and haughtiness from the North; her prosperity, supplies, good manners, and splendour from the East; her music, her wisdom and learning, her code, her poetical art from the South. The island was to its inhabitants a subject of absorbing interest, and its geography was studied as keenly as its history. Keating in the seventeenth century rebuked Stanihurst for not seeing that "Ireland was a kingdom apart by herself, like a little world." The old affection survives in the common colloquialisms. Where an Englishman would say "I don't know in the world," the Irish phrase is more of home: "I don't know in Ireland who did it," or "he must go off as fast in Ireland as his feet would carry him." The name of the country, one and undivided, was very old. It occurs in its Latin form in the Confession of St. Patrick; and the passionate intensity of the Old Irish, like that of a modern idealist Sinn Feiner, rings out in a poem written in those times of national construction before 1000 A.D.: "God's counsel concerning virgin Erin at every time is greater than can be told."

The first Irish manuscripts, even the pagan legends, came from the scholars of the Christian monasteries—the most famous among them at Clonmacnois on the Shannon; Armagh by the royal site of Emain Macha; Monasterboice near the Boyne, where possibly the Táin took shape; and at a later period Tallaght near Dublin, rival of Armagh as a centre of learning, national and ecclesiastical—a curious foreshadowing of later conflict between the Primate of Armagh and the Archbishop of Dublin. As the Milesian dynasties spread their power westward over Connacht, northward into Donegal, and south through Munster, secular and religious learning went together. Missionaries who brought the Latin alphabet found in Ireland a language already formed and cultivated, both in prose and poetry, and ready to be enriched with the new classical and theological learning. They recognized the power of the native tradition and speech, and in the monasteries the national influence was prominent. By the middle of the eighth century the Irish language (contrary to the custom of other countries) was used for religious instruction, and to some extent in the services of the Church. In the early religious literature of Ireland the series of prayers and private devotions had a unique character, and exercised an influence outside the limits

of Ireland. The number of these that has come down to us in prose and verse shows the intensity of the personal religion of the people, which could find its appropriate expression only in their native language. Till the fourteenth century there is no gravestone of an Irishman, saint or scholar, inscribed in Latin, according to the usage in other countries, but always in Irish.

The making of the nation was marked from 700 A.D. to 1000 A.D. by an outburst of learning, and of fine literature. In those centuries all the great lines of tradition were laid down. It is throughout dominated by the deep consciousness of Ireland, and the fundamental union of the country. The ancient Laws bear their striking witness. The oldest fragments, which date at latest from the eighth century, are derived neither from Rome nor from the Canon law, but refer wholly to Irish life. From first to last the law-books, such as the *Senchus Mór* and the *Lebor Acaill*, give one law for the whole country—a law in which there is no trace of provincial difference of custom. Here Ireland stood alone even among Celtic countries, for in Wales, of one-third its size, the four provinces had all their own separate laws. The Irish code was far from being backward as to land or property or social life. Perhaps the Law of Adamnan in the eighth century is the earliest code for the protection of women, as Adamnan's mother Ronan was the earliest, and perhaps the most resolute, of the claimants of women's equal rights to justice.

It is no less memorable that just as the Brehon Laws are the laws of Ireland without distinction of province or district, so the Irish Chronicles from first to last are histories, not of provinces or districts, but of Ireland as a whole. As an Irish scholar puts it, "We see an Irishman writing the history of his country during the years in which the Church of Canterbury was founded, and from that time we can trace an early succession of Irish histories—the Book of Cuanu about 629, the 'Old Irish Chronicle' about 680-702, the Lecan-Ballymote synchronic history in 742, and the contemporary annals during the eighth and succeeding centuries, down to the work of the Four Masters."

The same popular instinct of a common life may be traced in the Ossianic cycle of tales and poems which contain the glorious legend of Fionn and his Fiaña. Each territory celebrated the fame of its own heroes and local war-bands. From perhaps the fifth century these stories were carried through the country; the tales of one province were recited in another, and as they passed through the island they became part of the common story of the race, and from the ninth century began to enter into its written

literature. The record of gallant deeds and of tragic doom, growing with every new generation for centuries to come, remained the entertainment and the pride of the whole people.

The saints no less than the local warriors claimed their place in the common tradition. A Féilire of about 800 A.D., which has been attributed to St. Aengus, gave along with the recognized Continental saints the festivals also of the saints of Ireland. Henceforth, as with the heroes, so the genealogies of Irish saints were preserved, and the praise of their deeds; and the holy men of every part of the island became a part of the national inheritance of the country.

But above all the national instinct of the Irish is expressed in the history of their language. The honour they gave to the speech handed down to them, and their jealous care for its protection, are unmatched in Europe. While Continental peoples were still shaping their languages, Irish had already taken a standard form. The rules of literary art, beginning with traditions handed down at least from the eighth century, were formulated in the striking grammatical treatises of the Middle Ages which Professor Bergin is now printing in *Eriu*. "With a keen interest in their own language," he says of the native grammarians, "which was rare at that time in Europe, and a diligence and ingenuity which the great Indian scholars would not have despised, they had studied and expounded in minute detail the usages of the literary dialect." In the Bardic schools poetic style was guarded with exceeding vigilance. From the epic of Cuchulainn onwards prose was used as the language of narrative. Whether it was from the early influence of Latin prose writers, or from some instinctive rejection of the conventional system of verse for an epic tale, the Irish broke off from the European custom where epics (except the Scandinavian sagas) have all metrical form, and remained constant to their own prose tradition. In the Schools of the learned no word of local use was allowed which could betray whether the writer spoke after the Ulster manner or that of Munster. The literature of the race could have but one noble form, free of all provincialism, the noblest Irish of the fathers and the highest inheritance of the sons—the language of Ireland one and indivisible.

The maintenance of art and learning by the Bardic Schools was established as an essential part of the tribal organisation. They formed in fact an endowed national university. The trained Professors were versed in the huge store of native learning, many of them seem to have been well acquainted with the

voluminous Latin literature of that time, some probably knew French and English, and it is likely that some had studied or travelled on the Continent. As their service was a national service, so for them there were no political barriers. A poet could join the court of any chief, and could change his post from one province to another. Men of learning in Ireland were not stinted in public fame and honour. The names of poets have been preserved to us, but prose writers remained for the most part the anonymous ministers of the national tradition; though we may still hope that sympathetic students, noting the predilections of the chroniclers for their own people and countryside, may be able to trace their place of work, and the family of which they came. The authority of the whole learned caste rested on their literary discipline. No separate school ever broke from the national tradition. No magnate arose to impose an arbitrary will. Doubtless among a people of such intellectual vivacity there were scholars witty, daring, and ironical, who escaped the bounds of discipline; but the revolutionaries themselves had trained minds, and their satire was neither ignorant nor vulgar.

The dignity of Irish literature was thus nourished from a double source, the pride of Nation and the pride of Art. It entered into the thought and life of the whole people. Poets and historians in ancient Ireland did not write in towns. They had known the excitement of the chase and the toils of war; and some of their vivid national tales, remembered almost verbatim, passed into popular folk-lore. There still remain portions of 130 songs composed before the year 1000 A.D. Poets, possibly outside the order of the bards, possibly bards in moments of unofficial freedom, have left intimate descriptions of the common beauties of wood and field such as are not to be found in the early literature of any other country. However haughty were the aristocrats of knowledge, with neither respect nor condescension for the vulgar, the Irish, through the organization of their common life and by their own lively intelligence, were probably nearer to an intellectual democracy than any other mediæval people. In the tribal gatherings, in the "never-ending entertainment" of fairs and festivals such as those at Tara and Carman, or in the splendid assemblies of the learned at the chiefs' courts, the people could hear the choicest art of the country, the old romantic tales, the precepts of the Ancients, the history of places, the laws, the wisdom of the scholars with their riddling dialogues and glossaries, and the music of the chief harpers and pipers. In such assemblies they shared, not only

in the gaiety of the crowd, but in the majesty of learning and the solemnity of art, and a race quick in ear and understanding was accustomed to the sense of order, rhythm, and melody, and to the habit of critical judgment as to form and style.

Irish civilization was thus from the beginning marked by intellectual passion. Political authority was divided and hazardous, but there was no division in the soul of the country. The schools of learning might justly claim that, as Mr. Robin Flower has pointed out, while England had as yet no stable tradition to guide the poets of Elizabeth's time in their new ventures, "in Ireland, on the other hand, an old and honoured tradition gave the poets a firm and steady grasp of style." The learned class might boast, too, that they had been the creators of a national outlook on life, and had united the races of Ireland in a literary tradition to confront other States built on other lines. Sprung from the soul of a people they might assert that they in their turn had so trained and fortified that soul, and so furnished it with a literature and a historical memory, that the national life could only be extinguished with the race.

Every attempt, in fact, at temporal conquest was met by a revival of the inherited Irish tradition as the stronghold of national existence. In the ninth and tenth centuries, when Danish invaders were seen in every harbour, when ancient Schools lay in ruins with Armagh and Clonmacnois, Irish literature was broadened and enriched by an admirable company of poets and scholars. When the two hundred years' struggle was closed by the triumph of Brian Boru at Clontarf, and by the absorption of the Danes into the general Irish life, there followed an outburst of national artistic enterprise throughout the whole island—churches of a new architecture, new round towers, crosses carved beyond the skill of European sculptors, gold and enamel work which are the wonder of later times. Literature did not lag behind. There were histories of the great conflict, such as the "Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh" (War of the Gael with the Gall), attributed to Mac Liag, the chronicler of Brian Boru; and the later rival Saga of Cellachan of Cashel. The topographical tracts and poems of the provinces, all that might give to the island majesty, beauty, or traditional renown, were woven together into the great Dindshenchas, the classical account of the island and its high places. The old sagas were studied anew, and large collections of materials compiled by the learned for use in the elaboration of these stories. Leinster with "her supplies, her splendour, her abundance, her dignity, her householding," was

pre-eminent too in the ardour of her scholars. They have left us the "Leabhar na hUidhre" (the Book of the Dun Cow), the Oxford MS. called Rawlinson B. 502, and the Book of Leinster. The history of the text of the Táin is typical of their activity. In the first MS. we possess of the epic, preserved in the "Leabhar na hUidhre," there is an attempt to be comprehensive, to collect from various MSS. every possible variant in text and incident, and in this honest effort a composite text without definite artistic form was drawn up. The text thus arrived at was then taken in hand by a scholar who set himself to make a continuous consistent story in a uniform style. In the Book of Leinster we have this version, probably written in the eleventh to twelfth century at Clonmacnois.

But the strength of Irish culture could only be measured when it had been fairly matched with a continental civilization. The coming of the Normans was the great test of what it could give and receive. After that invasion the new society was French throughout—as we may see not only from the de Lacys and de Courcys, but from any group of names taken at hazard from the records of the thirteenth century—William de Valence, Hamo de Valoignes, Nicholas de Verdun, Stephen de Nevein, Walter Aleman, Robert de Vavasour, Geoffrey de Costentin, Ralph de Trubleville, Giffard de Poitou, Richard Earl of Poitou, Peter de Genève, John le Fleming, Oliver de Aspreville. Such names tell their tale of the continental life now planted on Irish land. The Norman-French, however, did not come as strangers. They knew Ireland well. Their adventurers had in 1014 joined the Danish host at Clontarf—John the Baron, and Richard, and perhaps Robert of Melun, and the French Goistelin Gall. There are indications of active trade between Ireland and France; and the influence of the Cistercian revival and French intercourse can still be traced along the Shannon and on the Boyne in new forms of architecture and ornament brought from oversea. Irish scholars actively carried on their literary labours, as we may see in such MSS. as the Book of Hy Many and in the bardic poems. But the Irish welcomed the new learning. The fabliaux and moral tales carried by wandering Franciscans became part of the popular tradition. It is possibly in this period that Irish scholars made translations of Latin epics famous abroad, such as the *Æneid*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Statius' *Thebaid*; but while they translated they remained faithful to the literary tradition of their people, and turned the epics from Latin poetry into Irish prose. Romances, lyrical songs, scientific treatises, were carried to Ire-

land by travellers, scholars, merchants, professors of the arts and sciences, but the literature that came underwent an Irish change : the translators left on it the mark of a new individuality.

It is evident that the Norman settlers found a civilization and culture into which they could adapt themselves. Among the French newcomers were men belonging to a society as refined and educated as any of their day. "Citizens of the world," they had no contempt for any good literature, wherever they found it, and the history of the Normans in Ireland is the history of a fusion of two cultures whose leaders met on equal terms. The great house of the Fitzgeralds—Earls of Desmond and Earls of Kildare—became the natural link between the literature of the Continent and of Ireland. They married into all the great Irish families, O'Neills, O'Donnells, O'Carrolls, O'Conor Falys, and so on, and (what was far more significant) they put their sons to fosterage with the leading Irish chiefs. Not only did they welcome to their courts the Irish *literati*, but they themselves became skilled in the poetry of their new country. Gerald, called the Rhymer, fourth Earl of Desmond and Lord Justice of Ireland in 1367, who "had Irish learning and the professors thereof in greatest reverence of all the English in Ireland," was a composer in the Irish style as well as in the French. The Irish on their side were proud of lords who boasted descent from the Gherardini of Florence, and to whom the bards gave the glorious name of "Greeks"; while the Fitzgeralds, "to increase the joy" of their Florentine house, wrote to them, not of Irish "barbarism," but of the splendour of their establishment, offering them noble Irish gifts. The Normans, in fact, inaugurated a generous intellectual comprehension, in which there was room for both Celtic and Continental culture. Then followed a time of great activity. Irish chiefs gathered into "books" poems addressed by bards to their ruling house—collections which were unhappily destroyed in the later ruin of the princely families. The earliest which remains goes back to some time before 1343. Scholars made similar "books" of the works of one or of two famous bards; so that the collection of Tadg O'Higgin's poems (+1448) gives a more complete record than exists of any poet in England before the time of Elizabeth. There were collections of Irish lore in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries by bardic families attached to the courts of the tribal chiefs as historians, poets, or brehons; and the results of their extraordinary labours may be seen in the great series of "bibliothecæ" which distinguish this time, such books as the

"Yellow Book of Leacan," the "Great Book of Leacan," the "Book of Ballymote," the "Leabhar Breac," the "Book of Lismore," the "Oxford MS. Laud 610," the "Liber Flavus Fergusiorum," and others still undescribed. Marks of a widening civilization are evident in a very noble architecture, in medical science, in astronomy, in foreign travel and education, in skilled manufactures, and in Continental trade. Into the great Norman castles, and into the houses of the Irish chiefs, along with Genoa velvets and Flemish tapestries and French architecture came the romantic lyrics of the Continent—a new Irish literature which has been first revealed in *Dánta Grádha* by Thomas O'Rahilly, with an illuminating preface by Robin Flower. The Irish were prepared to welcome "the learned and fantastic love poetry which was first shaped into art for modern Europe in Provence, and found a home in all the languages of Christendom wherever a refined society and the practice of poetry met together." French themes were adapted and imitated with the skill and dignity proper to scholars for whom the Irish tongue, in its wealth, its melody, its rhythm and delicate finish, could rival any language in the world. Like every other intellectual movement, the romantic influence spread over the country, taking in the peoples old and new—Fitzgeralds and Burkes of the south and west, along with MacCarthy Mór of Munster, and Manus O'Donnell of Tir-Connell, and Irish bards, Mac Muireadhaigh, O'Cleirigh, Mac an Bhaire, and other unnamed poets. But while they wrote in the spirit of the French models, the Celtic tradition asserted its literary mastery. Throughout Europe the romantic literature of Provence carried its own lyric methods. But in Ireland, as in Wales, there was a tradition of skilled artists who could apply native measures to the new themes. Whether the love-songs were composed by lords of the old race or the new, they were according to Irish rules and fashion. Here the value of a long tradition of art was shown in the perfection of the Irish verse, where every word and every rhyme had its absolute value, and there was a certainty and mastery beyond the reach of the earlier English poets of the Italian style, Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

The Norman-French may claim the credit of the only effort ever made to offer to the Irish equal terms of intellectual partnership, to accept an Irish civilization as valid, and to lead the way to a fraternal union. They saw "Ireland a nation," and felt its essential trouble with alien and distant governors: "You hear of our case as in a dream, and feel not the smart that vexeth

us." A race of lively intellectual curiosity, of European culture, and of political capacity, they had an instinct for the civilizing movements, literary, social, commercial, in which peoples could unite. No such opportunity of national Home Rule, of internal and external compromise and peace, ever occurred in Ireland before or since. Unhappily to the state-craft of Westminster and Dublin Castle a national union of the peoples of Ireland, even in alliance with England, seemed a "degenerate," "barbarous," "beastly," and "rebellious" notion of civilization. Their policy was for conquest and ownership. They proposed to secure English authority by driving wedges of foreign power between old kingdoms, splitting up and isolating ancient territories, fostering jealousies, encouraging tribal wars. Also by the abolition of Irish names, speech, dress, literature, and law, the island was to be turned into a West Britain with no tradition of its own.

The effect of artificial political dissensions may be traced in the fifteenth century. It seems that the renown of provincial heroes spread with greater difficulty into the common fame of the country. Local triumphs in Munster were in part veiled from Ulster; and historians and warriors won mainly the acclamations of their own territories. None of the later tales have entered like the older ones into the possession of the whole people as their own. The unity of Irish thought was shaken. Norman civilization was itself brought to an end by a course of "strong government"—the hanging by Henry VIII. of the house of Kildare, the wholesale poisoning and destruction of the Desmonds under Elizabeth, and the subtle ruin of the Ormonds by James I. A double conquest, of the Irish and of the land, was to be the boast of the Tudors and the pride of the Stuarts. The policy which we know as *Staats-Kultur* was the resolute work of the seventeenth century. Irish life was to be destroyed by rooting out every centre of learning, and degrading every professor of the old literature. Deprived of their intellectual leaders, and plunged into an abyss of scorn and solitude, teachers and people were to be cut off from remembrance of ancient inheritance, tradition, and dignity. English political ascendancy would then have a clear field. The last representatives of the old aristocratic culture made their heroic rally in defence of the Irish tradition. Wise Men of the law hid in their bosoms the genealogies and tenures of their tribes. In huts and cottages where the friars of Donegal fled from their ruined monastery the famous "Annals of the Four Masters" were compiled. Keating, of Norman descent, writer

of the "History of Ireland," was driven for shelter to the recesses of the Galtees, even now so solitary and difficult of access. The chief poets, in the "Contention of the Bards," awoke the ancient history of the Milesian kings. Scholars driven oversea, or hidden in forest and bog at home—exiles in their own land, or exiles abroad—"and I in gloom and grief: and during my life's length unless only that I might have one look at Ireland"—all were united in the same task. While Colgan at Louvain wrote the "Acts of the Saints of Ireland," Duaid MacFirbis and O'Flaherty in Connacht made collections of the laws and glossaries and histories of the tribes, and Lynch in "Cambrensis Eversus" took up his learned defence of the Irish against the age-long slanders of their enemies. It was the last supreme effort of the Learned. The three wars of subjection in the seventeenth century broke their great endeavour. National culture was snapped in that century of massacre and confiscation. The Schools were scattered, and the powerful bardic order cast from their high estate to wander as outcasts and vagabonds—proud aristocrats whose only shelter was now among the cottages of the despised race of the earth-tillers.

With the extirpation of the Norman-French houses all understanding of Irish culture or learning ceased. Spenser arrived in Ireland while Irish poets were writing romantic lyrics that Sidney and his literary group might have owned with pride; but neither to Spenser nor his fellows did it occur that among the barbarous Irish there was any science, art, or civilization. To a country of long literary tradition no ruler was ever henceforth sent who had any understanding of the people's intellectual and artistic record. If a rare example was found of an Englishman who showed the "Norman" spirit in dealing with Ireland, such as Bedell, Protestant bishop of Dromore, he might win honour from the "natives," but the hostility of the Government left him powerless. The willing ignorance of the rulers, the violence of the Castle, their narrow political outlook, left England without power to create a new civilization or intellectual tradition. Little came across St. George's Channel to touch the Irish intelligence. The hurrying race of planters and speculators, the rough immigrants of every degree brought with them no intellectual curiosity—buccaneers and fighters, needy younger sons, adventurers, mining sharpers, exploiters of cheap labour, lawyers and bailiffs. To them there was no appeal in a literary tradition. Nor did the Irish scruple to mock at the "rabble dregs of the manifold coarse trades which . . . have jumped across from

London hither into this land," nor cease from their mirth and wonder at the strange patronymics of the new people—Tinker and Tailor and Tucker, and the like.

English ignorance of Irish life hardened in the centuries of military ascendancy. The Irish themselves, however, were not forgetful of their hereditary tradition. Scholars drew together in those days of disaster for encouragement and aid, contributing, as their forerunners had done a thousand years before, their own local materials to the common stock. A poem by Tadhg O'Neachtain (printed in "Gadelica," I., 158) gives a list of twenty-six scribes in Dublin who about 1728, in the worst years of the penal times, gathered from the counties of Roscommon, Kildare, Dublin, Meath, Longford, Westmeath, Clare, King's County, and other parts of all the four provinces—ten from Leinster, six from Connacht, five from Munster, one from Ulster, four not localized; a proportion which must not be taken as necessarily representing the distribution of scholarship at the time; it would be unfair to Munster, and to Ulster, where the counties of Down, Louth, Armagh, Monaghan, and Fermanagh were brimful of poets and scribes. In the surviving manuscripts of the Dublin group there is evidence of the borrowing from one to another of texts which seem to be of local origin and local interest.

The vitality of the poetic art was shown, too, in the growth of a new popular poetry. The archaic laws of the bardic schools fell away, but there remained the old artistry and skill in words and rhythm, an intricate system of assonance, and a perfection of form which must have been long practised, and could not have grown up in a few years. In the eighteenth century Irish poets seized on the melodies which the planters had brought over, threw away the foreign words, and fitted their own poems in the Irish rhythm to every intricacy of the new music, with the same infinite ingenuity with which older poets had adapted translations and imitations. Ireland was still the theme of their sorrows and their love.

There were no printing-presses for the world of the poor and proscribed. But after the destruction of the Bardic order the manuscript tradition was still maintained for two hundred years through the indomitable fidelity and the amazing activity of the disinherited and broken scholars and their successors. Europe has no such story. When poetry and learning ceased to be a profession those who preserved some remnant of the old tradition earned a living as schoolmasters, or clerks in protestant churches, or inn-keepers, or worked as ploughmen, smiths, tailors, or day-

labourers, or as soldiers and sailors. But always and everywhere they copied manuscripts. "Irishian," those who could write as well as read their language, carried on the work. Students read the manuscripts by the light of brushwood thrown on the turf. Those who could not read might still hear at the wide hearth of the cottage, in the circle of wool-carders, or at wakes, the old men who recited stories of the ancient heroes; and listeners who had never seen a MS. could relate to a new fireside the great romantic tales, without omitting one adventure, and giving them for the most part in the very words of the written versions. Down to the middle of the nineteenth century the boundaries of ancient tribe-lands were kept in mind and could be traced by the peasants. As we know from the story of O'Donovan, a father on his deathbed would repeat to his sons, as the priceless heirloom of the dying, the line of their descent from the ancient race. The Irish tradition still exalted the people in their sorrows. Recitations of the old literature preserved among the poorest a rich vocabulary and dignity of common speech. In the barrenness of their destitution the people were nourished by an imaginative poetry, a heroic history, and an admirable music. Nothing is more extraordinary or more pathetic than the regard for learning which had been implanted in the Irish mind. Lord Palmerston in 1808 wrote of his Irish-speaking tenants in county Sligo: "The thirst for education is so great that there are now three or four schools upon the estate. The people join in engaging some itinerant master; they run him up a miserable mud hut on the roadside, and the boys pay him half-a-crown, or some five shillings, a quarter. They are taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, and what, from the appearance of the establishment, no one would imagine, Latin, and even Greek."

Since the Great Famine the stream of tradition runs in rivulets instead of the broad current. In their tragic history there was no ruin more fatal than that shattering of the Irish race. "They all seem downcast here," said a friend of mine to an old man in Mayo—"What is the matter?" "I suppose," said he, "'tis the Famine and the National schools took the heart out of the people." But through all calamity Irish tradition still carries the dignity of an ancient inheritance. An old man of 105, Colum Wallace, died in a workhouse in the early years of the twentieth century. He had once built his own house, which seemed to a neighbour worthy to enter into the tradition of Irish art since the first famous builder of the seventh century, Goban Saer: "It is through no exercise of magic it was made, but by

skilful work of hands—a pleasant little branch of the Goban Saer—Colum is behind it.” It was as if an English peasant had gone to Beowulf to find his prototype. No spectator will ever forget the scenes universal in Ulster, when after mass the whole congregation pass into the churchyard, and prostrating themselves on the graves of their ancestors renew that ancient tie of race and national aspiration. “They loved Ireland insanelly. They loved the very name”; so an Irish girl said of the young men shot at Eastertime, 1916. The words might have been said of the scholars of Ireland 1,000 years ago.

Down to our own day the literature of the last centuries has been left unexplored. It has been thought unworthy of the care of great libraries, or the attention of writers; and in current histories, however excellent in their English studies, the mass of the Irish population still remains falsely pictured as a dark and threatening sea of barbarism, its turbulent surface only broken from time to time by storms of “rebellion.” No true history of Ireland can be written which does not recognize the Irish sources. In that land we still feel the remnant of the old notion of “Staats-Kultur.” The dead hand of the mediæval statesman still lies on the country. It has not served England, any more than it has served Ireland. Statesmen have forgotten to reckon with the power of a thousand years of national tradition, and its hidden forces of spiritual resistance. Such a tradition has left its mark on the soul of Ireland. The flame of national faith still burns, and breaks out we know not how. It is a tradition, not of hunger and profit, but of national union in the land of their love. Often in the nineteenth century there has been manifested that secret and astonishing force which in times of crisis seems to swing the whole population into one long disciplined line of defence, patient of hardship, obedient to command, intent upon the vision of hope. Even the sternly practical Parnell felt the deep enthusiasm of the crowd when he summoned them to “Keep the fires of the nation burning.” No economic gain, no material civilization, and no mere cunning political system alone will allay the unrest and trouble of the country. Every live people that exists must desire to have something of its own, and is jealous for the honour of the fathers who have founded its spiritual tradition. There is no essential hostility in such a desire; in fact hostility, which is engendered by intellectual repression, disappears with intellectual freedom. If Irish history has been given a false political character by writers working only on English State documents, students of Irish civilization can show

that there is a larger outlook, and can teach us that Irish nationality was at all times the least aggressive and the most hospitable in the world. The dream of a union of the peoples of Ireland in a joint inheritance of the past, and promise of the future—this was the dream for which the Irish have stood against trappings and settlements for 1,000 years, in “the service of a nation without a flag.” To this dream they remain true. So in Ireland we say to the sower of the seed of life, and to the reaper of the harvest, “God bless the work.”

Alice Stopford Green

NOTE.

It is a misfortune that much of what is most characteristic in Irish literature has been published in out-of-the-way places, in periodicals, and the Proceedings of learned societies, or in limited editions long since out of print. This creates a difficulty in recommending books to students anxious to get at the real facts. Moreover, the results of the last decade, most fruitful of all in the interpretation of Irish literature, have not been made available in any accessible form. This is a pressing need of the near future.

For an introduction to the study of the literature Dr. Hyde's “Literary History of Ireland” (Fisher Unwin, 1906) may be used with advantage. It should be supplemented, if possible, by O'Curry's “Manners and Customs,” and “MS. Materials of Irish History,” vast collections of material, uncritically put together, but none the less of fascinating interest. For those who read French a great deal of interesting matter is to be found in D'Arbois de Jubainville's “Cours de la Littérature Celtique.” The article on “Irish Literature” in the “Encyclopædia Britannica” may also be consulted.

For the material civilisation of Ireland Joyce's “Social History” is of considerable interest. A cheaper, handier, and better illustrated book is G. Coffey's “Guide to the Antiquities in the Royal Irish Academy.” Romilly Allen's “Celtic Art” has many excellent illustrations.

As for the literature in the strict sense, the best book for giving an idea of the beauty of the older Irish poetry is Kuno Meyer's “Ancient Irish Poetry,” a precious collection, which also has the advantage of cheapness. For the later bardic poetry Quiggin's “Prolegomena to the Study of the Later Irish Bards” (Proceedings of the British Academy, Vol. 5) gives a good account.

A livelier and more human picture of these men and their poetry is presented in a lecture by Prof. Bergin printed in the *Ivernian Journal*, 1913, pp. 153, 203. The love poetry composed by the bards and their patrons among the nobility is described in the Introduction to Thomas F. O'Rahilly's "Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry, 1916."

The beautiful collection of folk poetry in Hyde's "Love Songs of Connacht" should also be read, and for the religious poetry of the people his "Religious Songs of Connacht" is indispensable.

These books will give a very fair idea of the charm and range of Irish verse.

For prose the matter is more difficult, for though a great deal has been published and translated, it is hard to come by. Those who can get access to O'Grady's "Silva Gadelica" should read it carefully. It contains a great variety of texts magnificently translated. Miss Hull's "Cuchulainn Saga" contains translations of some of the most important texts of the Ulster Cycle by various scholars, but it is out of print and only to be had in libraries. Leahy's "Heroic Romances of Ireland" (1905, 1906) is still procurable, and contains many interesting tales. P. W. Joyce's "Old Celtic Romances" has a good variety of texts. Lady Gregory's books, "Cuchulainn of Muirthemhne" and "Gods and Fighting Men," are accessible books, and give a good idea of the matter, if not of the manner, of the old tales. The chief epic of the Irish, the "Táin Bó Cuailgne," has been translated by Prof. Dunn of Washington, and this should be read carefully.

These books are mostly concerned with the Ulster Cycle. For the other tales those who have the opportunity should read in the *Revue Celtique* Whitley Stokes's masterly translations of such tales as the "Bruiden Da Derga" (Vol. XVII., p. 9; XXIII., p. 88); the "Voyage of Mailduin" (IX., p. 447; X., p. 50); and "The Battle of Moytura" (XII., p. 52).

For the Ossianic Cycle the best introduction is Meyer's "Fianaigecht" (Todd Lecture Series, XVI.) and J. MacNeill's "Duanaire Finn" (Irish Texts Society, Vol. VII.), where the latest research on the subject is described. The "Agallamh na Senoireach" in "Silva Gadelica" should be carefully read, if possible. The volumes of the Ossianic Society's Proceedings also contain many interesting texts. The "Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne" has been reprinted by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (ed. S. H. O'Grady). MacPherson's "Ossian" should be avoided.

Finally, Geoffrey Keating's "History of Ireland" (published

with translation by the Irish Texts Society, ed. P. Dinneen) is indispensable as showing the way in which a patriotic Irishman of the early seventeenth century nurtured in the bardic lore of his country represented to himself the history and tradition of Ireland before the Norman invasion. It is the more interesting as Keating was himself of Norman descent, and is concerned to defend Ireland against the aspersions of the English writers of the day.

