



A Ballad History of Ireland

Of course the first *object* of the work we project¹ will be to make Irish History familiar to the minds, pleasant to the ears, dear to the passions, and powerful over the taste and conduct of the Irish people in times to come. More *events* could be put into a prose history. Exact dates, subtle plots, minute connections and motives rarely appear in Ballads, and for these ends the worst prose history is superior to the best ballad series; but these are not the highest ends of history. To hallow or accurse the scenes of glory and honour, or of shame and sorrow; to give to the imagination the arms, and homes, and senates, and battles of other days ; to rouse, and soften, and strengthen, and enlarge us with the passions of great periods; to lead us into love of self-denial, of justice, of beauty, of valour, of generous life and proud death ; and to set up in our souls the memory of great men, who shall then be as models and judges of our actions—these are the highest duties of history, and these are best taught by a Ballad History.

A Ballad History is welcome to childhood, from its rhymes, its high colouring, and its aptness to memory. As we grow into boyhood, the violent passions, the vague hopes, the romantic sorrow of patriot ballads are in tune with our fitful and luxuriant feelings. In manhood we prize the condensed narrative, the grave firmness, the critical art, and the political sway of ballads. And in old age they are doubly dear; the companions and reminders of our life, the toys and teachers of our children and grandchildren. Every generation finds its account in them. They pass from mouth to mouth like salutations; and even the minds which lose their words are under their influence, as one can

¹ It had been proposed in the *Nation*, by another contributor, to write ballads on the great events in our annals and collect them into a "Ballad History of Ireland." [note in the original]

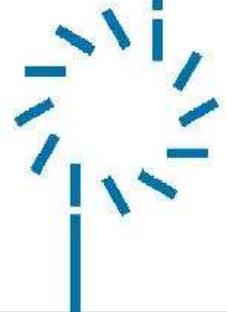
recall the starry heavens who cannot revive the form of a single constellation.

In olden times all ballads were made to music, and the minstrel sang them to his harp or screamed them in recitative. Thus they reached farther, were welcomer guests in feast and camp, and were better preserved. We shall have more to say on this in speaking of our proposed song collection. Printing so multiplies copies of ballads, and intercourse is so general, that there is less need of this adaptation to music now. Moreover, it may be disputed whether the dramatic effect in the more solemn ballads is not injured by lyrical forms. In such streaming exhortations and laments as we find in the Greek choruses and in the adjurations and caoins of the Irish, the breaks and parallel repetitions of a song might lower the passion. Were we free to do so, we could point out instances in the *Spirit of the Nation* in which the rejection of song-forms seems to have been essential to the awfulness of the occasion.

In pure narratives and in the gayer and more splendid, though less stern ballads, the song-forms and adaptation to music are clear gains.

In the Scotch ballads this is usual, in the English rare. We look in vain through Southey's admirable ballads—"Mary the Maid of the Inn," "Jaspar," "Inchkape Rock," "Bishop Hatto," "King Henry V. and the Hermit of Dreux"—for either burden, chorus, or adaptation to music. In the "Battle of Blenheim" there is, however, an occasional burden line; and in the smashing "March to Moscow" there is a great chorus about—"Morbleu ! Parbleu ! What a pleasant excursion to Moscow."

Coleridge has some skilful repetitions and exquisite versification in his "Ancient Mariner," "Genevieve," "Alice du Clos," but nowhere a systematic burden. Campbell has no burdens in his finest lyric ballads, though the subjects were fitted for them. The burden of the "Exile of Erin" belongs very doubtfully to him.





Source: Thomas Davis, *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 201-207

Macaulay's best ballad, the "Battle of Ivry," is greatly aided by the even burden line; but he has not repeated the experiment, though he, too, makes much use of repeating lines in his Roman Lays and other ballads.

While, then, we counsel burdens in Historical Ballads, we would recognise excepted cases where they may be injurious, and treat them as in no case essential to perfect ballad success. In songs, we would almost always insist either on a chorus verse, or a burden of some sort. A burden need not be at the end of the verse; but may, with quite equal success, be at the beginning or in the body of it, as may be seen in the Scotch Ballads, and in some of those in the *Spirit of the Nation*.

The old Scotch and English ballads, and Lockhart's translations from the Spanish, are mostly composed in one metre, though written down in either of two ways. Macaulay's Roman Lays and "Ivry" are in this metre. Take an example from the last—

Press where ye see my while plume shine, amid the ranks of war,
And be your Oriflamme to-day the helmet of Navarre.

In the old ballads this would be printed in four lines, of eight syllables and six alternately, and rhyming only alternately, thus—

Press where ye see my white plume shine,
Amid the ranks of war,
And be your Oriflamme to-day
The helmet of Navarre.

So Macaulay himself prints this metre in some of his Roman Lays.

But the student should rather avoid than seek this metre. The uniform old beat of eight and six is apt to fall monotonously on the ear, and some of the most startling effects are lost in it. In the *Spirit of the Nation* the student will find many other ballad metres. Campbell's metres, though new and glorious things, are terrible traps to imitation, and should be warily used. The German ballads, and still more, Mr. Mangan's translations of them, contain

great variety of new and safe, though difficult metres. Next in frequency to the fourteen-syllable line is that in eleven syllables, such as "Mary Ambree," and "Lochinvar"; and for a rolling brave ballad 'tis a fine metre. The metre of fifteen syllables, with double rhymes (or accents) in the middle, and that of thirteen, with double rhymes at the end, is tolerably frequent, and the metre used by Father Prout, in his noble translation of "Duke D'Alençon," is admirable, and easier than it seems. By the way, what a grand burden runs through that ballad—

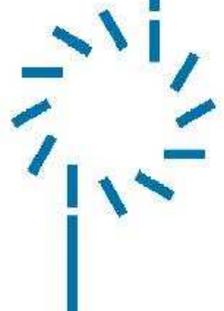
Fools ! to believe the sword could give to the children of the Rhine,
Our Gallic fields—the land that yields the Olive and the Vine !

The syllables are as in the common metre, but it has thrice the rhymes.

We have seen great materials wasted in a struggle with a crotchety metre; therefore, though we counsel the invention of metres, we would add that unless a metre come out racily and appropriately in the first couple of verses, it should be abandoned, and some of those easily marked metres taken up.

A historical ballad will commonly be narrative in its form, but not necessarily so. A hymn of exultation—a call to a council, an army, or a people—a prophecy—a lament—or a dramatic scene (as in Lochiel), may give as much of event, costume, character, and even scenery as a mere narration. The varieties of form are infinite, and it argues lack of force in a writer to keep always to mere narration, though when exact events are to be told that may be the best mode.

One of the essential qualities of a good historical ballad is truth. To pervert history—to violate nature, in order to make a fine clatter, has been the aim in too many of the ballads sent us. He who goes to write a historical ballad should master the main facts of the time, and state them truly. It may be well for those perhaps either not to study or to half-forget minute circumstances until after his ballad is drafted out, lest he write a



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Source: Thomas Davis, *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 201-207

chronicle, not a ballad; but he will do well, ere he suffers it to leave his study, to reconsider the facts of the time or man, or act of which he writes, and see if he cannot add force to his statements, an antique grace to his phrases, and colour to his language.

Truth and appropriateness in ballads require great knowledge and taste.

To write an Irish historical ballad, one should know the events which he would describe, and know them not merely from an isolated study of his subject, but from old familiarity, which shall have associated them with his tastes and passions, and connected them with other parts of history. How miserable a thing is to put forward a piece of vehement declamation and vague description, which might be uttered of any event, or by the man of any time as a historical ballad. We have had battle ballads sent us that would be as characteristic of Marathon or Waterloo as of Clontarf—laments that might have been uttered by a German or a Hindu—and romances equally true to love all the world over.

Such historical study extends not merely to the events. A ballad writer should try to find the voice, colour, stature, passions, and peculiar faculties of his hero—the arms, furniture, and dress of the congress, or the champions, or the troops he tells of—the rites wherewith the youth were married—the dead interred, and God worshipped; and the architecture—previous history and pursuits (and, therefore, probable ideas and phrases) of the men he describes.

Many of these things he will get in books. He should shun compilations, and take up original journals, letters, state papers, statutes, and cotemporary fictions and narratives as much as possible. Let him not much mind Leland or Curry (after he has run over them), but work like fury at the Archaeological Society's books—at Harris's *Hibernica*, at Lodge's *Desiderata Curiosa Hibernica*, at Stafford's *Pacata*, Spencer's *View*, Giraldus's *Narrative*, Fynes Moryson's *Itinerary*, the Ormond Papers, the State Papers of Henry the Eighth, Stafford's and Cromwell's and Rinuccini's Letters, and the correspondence and journals, from

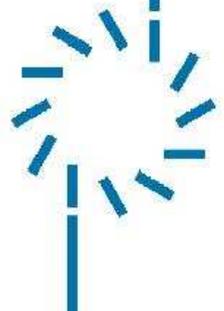
Donald O'Neil's letter to the Pope down to Wolfe Tone's glorious memoirs.

In the songs, and even their names, many a fine hint can be got; and he is not likely to be a perfect Balladist of Ireland who has not felt to tears and laughter the deathless passions of Irish music.

We have condemned compilations; but the ballad student may well labour at Ware's *Antiquities*. He will find in the *History of British Costume*, published by the Useful Knowledge Society, and in the illustrated work now in progress called *Old England*, but beyond all other books, in the historical works of Thierry, most valuable materials. Nothing, not even the *Border Minstrelsy*, *Percy's Relics*, the *Jacobite Ballads*, or the *Archaeological Tracts*, can be of such service as a repeated study of the *Norman Conquest*, the *Ten Years' Study*, and the *Merovingian Times of Augustine Thierry*.

We know he has rashly stated some events on insufficient authority, and drawn conclusions beyond the warrant of his promises; but there is more deep dramatic skill, more picturesque and coloured scenery, more distinct and characteristic grouping, and more lively faith to the look and spirit of the men and times and feelings of which he writes, in Thierry, than in any other historian that ever lived. He has almost an intuition in favour of liberty, and his vindication of the "men of '98" out of the slanderous pages of Musgrave is a miracle of historical skill and depth of judgment.

In the Irish Academy in Dublin there is a collection (now arranged and rapidly increasing) of ancient arms and utensils. Private collections exist in many provincial towns, especially in Ulster. Indeed, we know an Orange painter in a northern village who has a finer collection of Irish antiquities than all the Munster cities put together. Accurate observation of, and discussion on, such collections will be of vast service to a writer of historical Ballads.



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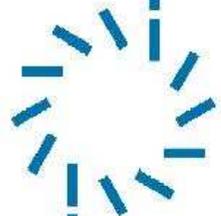
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Topography is also essential to a ballad, or to any Historian. This is not only necessary to save a writer from such gross blunder as we met the other day in Wharton's Ballad, called "The Grave of King Arthur," where he talks of "the steeps of rough Kildare," but to give accuracy and force to both general references and local description.

Ireland must be known to her Ballad Historians, not by flat, but by shaded maps, and topographical and scenic descriptions; not by maps of to-day only, but by maps (such as Ortelius and the maps in the State Papers) of Ireland in time past; and finally, it must be known by the *eye*. A man who has not raged on our hills, panted on our mountains, waded our rivers in drought and flood, pierced our passes, skirted our coast, noted our old towns, and learned the shape and colour of ground and tree and sky, is not master of all a Balladist's art. Scott knew Scotland thus, and moreover he seems never to have laid a scene in a place that he had not studied closely and alone.

What we have heretofore advised relates to the Structure, Truth, and Colouring of ballads; but there is something more needed to raise a ballad above the beautiful—it must have Force. Strong passions, daring invention, vivid sympathy for great acts—these are the result of one's whole life and nature. Into the temper and training of "A Poet" we do not presume to speak. Few have spoken wisely of them. Emerson, in his recent essay, has spoken like an angel on the mission of "The Poet." Ambition for pure power (not applause); passionate sympathy with the good, and strong, and beautiful; insight into nature, and such loving mastery over its secrets as a husband hath over a wife's mind, are the surest tests of one "called" by destiny to tell to men the past, present, and future, in words so perfect that generations shall feel and remember.

We merely meant to give some "Hints on the Properties of Historical Ballads"—they will be idle save to him who has the mind of a Poet.



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