



## Ballad Poetry of Ireland<sup>1</sup>

How slow we have all been in coming to understand the meaning of Irish Nationality!

Some, dazzled by visions of pagan splendour, and the pretensions of pedigree, and won by the passions and romance of the olden races, continued to speak in the nineteenth century of an Irish nation as they might have done in the tenth. They forgot the English Pale, the Ulster Settlement, and the filtered colonisation of men and ideas. A Celtic kingdom with the old names and the old language, without the old quarrels, was their hope; and though they would not repeat O'Neill's comment as he passed Barrett's castle on his march to Kinsale, and heard it belonged to a Strongbownian, that "he hated the Norman churl as if he came yesterday;" yet they quietly assumed that the Norman and Saxon elements would disappear under the Gaelic genius like the tracks of cavalry under a fresh crop.

The Nationality of Swift and Grattan was equally partial. They saw that the government and laws of the settlers had extended to the island—that Donegal and Kerry were in the Pale; they heard the English tongue in Dublin, and London opinions in Dublin—they mistook Ireland for a colony wronged, and great enough to be a nation.

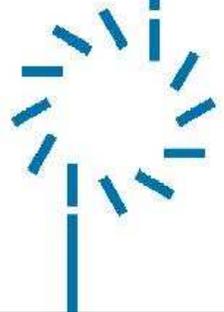
A lower form of nationhood was before the minds of those who saw in it nothing but a parliament in College Green. They had not erred in judging, for they had not tried to estimate the moral elements and tendencies of the country. They were as narrow bigots to the omnipotency of an institution as any Cockney Radical. Could they, by any accumulation of English stupidity and Irish laziness, have got possession of an Irish government, they would soon have distressed every one by their

laws, whom they had not provoked by their administration, or disgusted by their dulness.

Far healthier, with all its defects, was the idea of those who saw in Scotland a perfect model—who longed for a literary and artistic nationality—who prized the oratory of Grattan and Curran, the novels of Griffin and Carleton, the pictures of Maclise and Burton, the ancient music, as much as any, and far more than most, of the political nationalists, but who regarded political independence as a dangerous dream. Unknowingly they fostered it. Their writings, their patronage, their talk was of Ireland; yet it hardly occurred to them that the ideal would flow into the practical, or that they, with their dread of agitation, were forwarding a revolution.

At last we are beginning to see what we are, and what is our destiny. Our duty arises where our knowledge begins. The elements of Irish nationality are not only combining—in fact, they are growing confluent in our minds. Such nationality as merits a good man's help, and wakens a true man's ambition—such nationality as could stand against internal faction and foreign intrigue—such nationality as would make the Irish hearth happy and the Irish name illustrious, is becoming understood. It must contain and represent the races of Ireland. It must not be Celtic, it must not be Saxon—it must be Irish. The Brehon law, and the maxims of Westminster, the cloudy and lightning genius of the Gael, the placid strength of the Sasanach, the marshalling insight of the Norman—a literature which shall exhibit in combination the passions and idioms of all, and which shall equally express our mind in its romantic, its religious, its forensic, and its practical tendencies—finally, a native government, which shall know and rule by the might and right of all; yet yield to the arrogance of none—these are components of *such* a nationality.

But what have these things to do with the "Ballad Poetry of Ireland"? Much every way. It is the result of the elements we have named—it is compounded of all; and never was there a book fitter to advance that perfect nationality to



<sup>1</sup> *Ballad Poetry of Ireland*—Library of Ireland, No. II. Thirty-nine editions of the *Ballad Poetry* have been published by Messrs. James Duffy & Sons. [original note to this review article]



Source: Davis, T., *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 192-200

which Ireland begins to aspire. That a country is without national poetry proves its hopeless dulness or its utter provincialism. National poetry is the very flowering of the soul—the greatest evidence of its health, the greatest excellence of its beauty. Its melody is balsam to the senses. It is the playfellow of childhood, ripens into the companion of his manhood, consoles his age. It presents the most dramatic events, the largest characters, the most impressive scenes, and the deepest passions in the language most familiar to us. It shows us magnified, and ennobles our hearts, our intellects, our country, and our countrymen—binds us to the land by its condensed and gem-like history, to the future by examples and by aspirations. It solaces us in travel, fires us in action, prompts our invention, sheds a grace beyond the power of luxury round our homes, is the recognised envoy of our minds among all mankind and to all time.

In possessing the powers and elements of a glorious nationality, we owned the sources of a national poetry. In the combination and joint development of the latter we find a pledge and a help to that of the former.

This book of Mr. Duffy's, true as it is to the wants of the time, is not fortuitous. He has prefaced his admirable collection by an Introduction, which proves his full consciousness of the worth of his task, and proves equally his ability to execute it. In a space too short for the most impatient to run by he has accurately investigated the sources of Irish Ballad Poetry, vividly defined the qualities of each, and laboured with perfect success to show that all naturally combine towards one great end, as the brooks to a river, which marches on clear, deep, and single, though they be wild, and shallow, and turbid, flowing from unlike regions, and meeting after countless windings.

Mr. Duffy maps out three main forces which unequally contribute to an Irish Ballad Poetry.

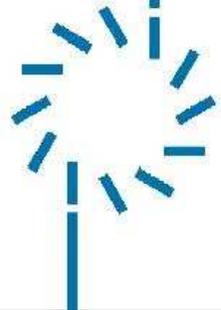
The *first* consists of the Gaelic ballads. True to the vehemence and tendencies of the Celtic people, and representing equally their vagueness and extravagance during slavish times, they nevertheless remain locked from the middle and upper classes

generally, and from the peasantry of more than half Ireland, in an unknown language. Many of them have been translated by rhymers—few indeed by poets. The editor of the volume before us has brought into one house nearly all the poetical translations from the Irish, and thus finely justifies the ballad literature of the Gael from its calumnious friend:—

"With a few exceptions, all the translations we are acquainted with, in addition to having abundance of minor faults, are eminently un-Irish. They seem to have been made by persons to whom one of the languages was not familiar. Many of them were confessedly versified from prose translations, and are mere English poems, without a tinge of the colour or character of the country. Others, translated by sound Irish scholars, are bald and literal; the writers sometimes wanting a facility of versification, sometimes a mastery over the English language. The Irish scholars of the last century were too exclusively national to study the foreign tongue with the care essential to master its metrical resources; and the flexible and weighty language which they had not learned to wield hung heavily on them,

'Like Saul's plate armour on the shepherd boy,  
Encumbering, and *not* arming them.'

If it were just to estimate our bardic poetry by the specimens we have received in this manner, it could not be rated highly, lint it would manifestly be most unjust. Noble and touching, and often subtle and profound thoughts, which no translation could entirely spoil, shine through the poverty of the style, and vindicate the character of the originals. Like the costly arms and ornaments found in our bogs, they are substantial witnesses of a distinct civilisation; and their credit is no more diminished by the rubbish in which they chance to be found than the authenticity of the ancient *torques* and *skians* by their embedment in the mud. When the entire collection of our Irish



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Source: Davis, T., *Prose Writings: Essays on Ireland*, London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1889, 192-200

Percy—James Hardiman—shall have been given to a public (and soon may such a one come) that can relish them in their native dress, they will be entitled to undisputed precedence in our national minstrelsy."

About a dozen of the ballads in the volume are derived from the Irish. It is only in this way that Clarence Mangan (a name to which Mr. Duffy does just honour) contributes to the volume. There are four translations by him exhibiting eminently his perfect mastery of versification—his flexibility of passion, from loneliest grief to the maddest humour. One of these, "The Lament for O'Neil and O'Donnell," is the strongest, though it will not be the most popular, ballad in the work.

Callanan's and Ferguson's translations, if not so daringly versified, are simpler and more Irish in idiom.

Most, indeed, of Callanan's successful ballads are translations, and well entitle him to what he passionately prays for—a minstrel of free Erin to come to his grave,

And plant a wild wreath from the banks of the river,  
O'er the heart and the harp that are sleeping for ever.

But we are wrong in speaking of Mr. Ferguson's translations in precisely the same way. His "Wicklow War Song" is condensed, epigrammatic, and crashing as anything we know of, except the "Pibroch of Donnil Dhu."

The *second* source is—the common people's ballads. Most of these "make no pretence to being true to Ireland, but only being true to the *purlieus* of Cork and Dublin;" yet now and then one meets a fine burst of passion, and oftener a racy idiom. The "Drimin Dhu," the "Blackbird," "Peggy Bawn," "Irish Molly," "Willy Reilly," and the "Fair of Turloughmore," are the specimens given here. Of these "Willy Reilly" (an old and worthy favourite in Ulster, it seems, but quite unknown elsewhere) is the best; but it is too long to quote, and we must limit ourselves to the noble opening verse of "Turloughmore"—

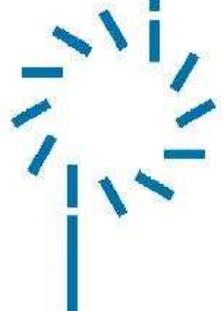
Come tell me, dearest mother, what makes my father stay,  
Or what can be the reason that he's so long away?  
Oh! hold your tongue, my darling son, your tears do grieve me sore;  
I fear he has been murdered in the fair of Turloughmore.

The *third* and principal source consists of the Anglo-Irish ballads, written during the last twenty or thirty years.

Of this highest class, he who contributes most and, to our mind, best is Mr. Ferguson. We have already spoken of his translations—his original ballads are better. There is nothing in this volume — nothing in *Percy's Relics*, or the *Border Minstrelsy*, to surpass, perhaps to equal, "Willy Gilliland." It is as natural in structure as "Kinmont Willie," as vigorous as "Otterbourne," and as complete as "Lochinvar." Leaving his Irish idiom, we get in the "Forester's Complaint" as harmonious versification, and in the "Forging of the Anchor" as vigorous thoughts, mounted on bounding words, as anywhere in the English literature.

We must quote some stray verses from "Willy Gilliland":—

Up in the mountain solitudes, and in a rebel ring,  
He has worshipped God upon the hill, in spite of church and king;  
And sealed his treason with his blood on Bothwell bridge he hath;  
So he must fly his father's land, or he must die the death;  
For comely Claverhouse has come along with grim Dalzell,  
And his smoking rooftree testifies they've done their errand well.  
His blithe work done, upon a bank the outlaw rested now,  
And laid the basket from his back, the bonnet from his brow;  
And there, his hand upon the Book, his knee upon the sod,  
He filled the lonely valley with the gladsome word of God;  
And for a persecuted kirk, and for her martyrs dear,



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And against a godless church and king he spoke up loud and clear.

'My bonny mare! I've ridden you when Claver'se rode behind,  
And from the thumbscrew and the boot you bore me like the  
wind;  
And, while I have the life you saved, on your sleek flank, I swear,  
Episcopalian rowel shall never ruffle hair!  
Though sword to wield they've left me none—yet Wallace wight I  
wis,  
Good battle did, on Irvine side, wi' waur weapon than this.'—

His fishing-rod with both his hands he griped it as he spoke,  
And, where the butt and top were spliced, in pieces twain he broke;  
The limber top he cast away, with all its gear abroad,  
But, grasping the tough hickory butt, with spike of iron shod,  
He ground the sharp spear to a point; then pulled his bonnet  
down,  
And, meditating black revenge, set forth for Carrick town.

The only ballad equally racy is "The Croppy Boy," by some anonymous but most promising writer.

Griffin's "Gille Machree"—of another class—is perfect—"striking on the heart," as Mr. Duffy finely says, "like the cry of a woman;" but his "Orange and Green," and his "Bridal of Malahide," belong to the same class, and suffer by comparison with Mr. Ferguson's ballads.

Banim's greatest ballad, the "Soggarth aroon," possesses even deeper tenderness and more perfect Irish idiom than anything in the volume.

Among the Collection are Colonel Blacker's famous Orange ballad, "Oliver's Advice" ("Put your trust in God, my boys, but keep your powder dry"), and two versions of the "Boyne Water." The latter and older one, given in the appendix, is by far the finest, and contains two unrivalled stanzas—

Both foot and horse they marched on, intending them to batter,  
But the brave Duke Schömberg he was shot, as he crossed  
over the water.

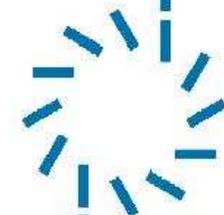
When that King William he observed the brave Duke  
Schömberg falling,  
He rein'd his horse, with a heavy heart, on the Enniskilleners  
calling;  
'What will you do for me, brave boys ; sea yonder men  
retreating,  
Our enemies encouraged are—and English drums are beating';  
He says, ' My boys, feel no dismay at the losing of one  
commander,  
For God shall be our King this day, and I'll be general under.'

Nor less welcome is the comment—

"Some of the Ulster ballads, of a restricted and provincial spirit, having less in common with Ireland than with Scotland; two or three Orange ballads, altogether ferocious or foreign in their tendencies (preaching murder, or deifying an alien), will be no less valuable to the patriot or the poet on this account. They echo faithfully the sentiments of a strong, vehement, and indomitable body of Irishmen, who may come to battle for their country better than they ever battled for prejudices or their bigotries. At all events, to know what they love and believe is a precious knowledge."

On the language of most of the ballads Mr. Duffy says—

"Many of them, and generally the best, are just as essentially Irish as if they were written in Gaelic. They could have grown among no other people, perhaps under no other sky or scenery. To an Englishman, to any Irishman educated out of the country, or to a dreamer asleep to impressions of scenery and character, they would be achievements as impossible as the Swedish *Skalds* or the *Arabian Nights*. They are as Irish as Ossian or Carolan, and unconsciously reproduce the spirit of those poets better than any translator can hope to



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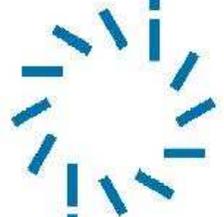


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do. They revive and perpetuate the vehement native songs that gladdened the halls of our princes in their triumphs, and wailed over their ruined hopes or murdered bodies. In everything but language, and almost in language, they are identical. That strange tenacity of the Celtic race, which makes a description of their habits and propensities when Caesar was still a Proconsul in Gaul true in essentials of the Irish people to this day, has enabled them to infuse the ancient and hereditary spirit of the country into all that is genuine of our modern poetry. And even the language grew almost Irish. The soul of the country stammering its passionate grief and hatred in a strange tongue, loved still to utter them in its old familiar idioms and cadences. Uttering them, perhaps, with more piercing earnestness, because of the impediment; and winning out of the very difficulty a grace and a triumph."

How often have we wished for such a companion as this volume! Worse than meeting unclean beds, or drenching mists, or Cockney opinions, was it to have to take the mountains with a book of Scottish ballads. They were glorious, to be sure, but they were not ours—they had not the brown of the climate on their cheek, they spoke of places afar, and ways which are not our country's ways, and hopes which were not Ireland's, and their tongue was not that we first made sport and love with. Yet how mountaineer without ballads any more than without a shillelagh? No; we took the Scots ballads, and felt our souls rubbing away with envy and alienage amid their attractions; but now, Brigid be praised! we can all have Irish thoughts on Irish hills, true to them as the music, or the wind, or the sky.

Happy boys! who may grow up with such ballads in your memories. Happy men! who will find your hearts not only doubtful but joyous in serving and sacrificing for the country you thus learned in childhood to love.



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