

Source: 'Gaelic Prose Literature' (Read in March, 1897), in: *Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse* ("Songs of the Irish Rebels, Anthology Specimens, Lectures on Gaelic Topics"; Dublin: Phoenix, n.d.), 163-215

Gaelic Prose Literature

I

A great deal, Mr. Chairman, has, within the last few years, been said and written about the ancient literature of the Gael. In Ireland, in Great Britain, and on the Continent, a small but earnest band of workers is engaged in opening up to the world the vast literary treasures of the Irish language. In spite of this, however, the melancholy fact remains, that, to most people, our literature—prose and poetry—is still a *terra incognita*; a region as dark and unexplored as the heart of Africa. Hence, as might naturally be expected, we constantly find two very different opinions expressed by two very different classes of people. First, we have the assertion of ignorant and self-important critics of the "up-to-date" school, that the literature existing in the Gaelic language is of an utterly worthless type—that it consists of a few odd songs written by disreputable and half-educated poets, and of certain crazy old tales about Fenians, giants, reptiles, and so forth. On the other hand, we have the far more plausible and far less erroneous belief of enthusiastic Gaelic students, that the Irish language possesses the grandest, the most ancient, the most extensive literature in the world. Now, the truth of the matter is simply this: there are, at the present day, several nations possessing a literature more extensive possibly of a higher *absolute*, though certainly not of a higher *relative*, degree of excellence than Gaelic literature; but the statement is strictly and undeniably true that Ireland possesses a more ancient, a more extensive and a better literature, *wholly of native growth*, than any other European country, with single exception of Greece.

It is impossible, of course, to determine precise date at which our forefathers first commenced to commit tales and poems to writing. We know that they possessed *some* books at least, before the arrival of St. Patrick; but it is highly probable that these were derived either from St. Patrick's predecessors in Ireland from communication, commercial or otherwise with the Christians of

the Continent. It is true that many of our existing romances are, incidents and tone, completely pagan; that these existed, in some shape or other, long before the time of St. Patrick is absolutely certain; that they existed in a written form is, at least, possible. We may conclude, then, that Irish literature, using "literature" in the strict sense of the word, dates from the fourth or fifth century of the Christian era.

The way in which our early literature was produced and propagated is a remarkable one. Handed down by word of mouth for centuries, it was at length committed to writing—sometimes by the professional bards themselves, more frequently, perhaps, by the humbler scribes, lay and ecclesiastical. The service rendered to Gaelic literature by these latter is indeed immense: in the quiet shelter of great monastic establishments, or under the friendly protection of powerful chiefs, these old Gaelic scribes lived and died; their cunning pens it was that illuminated the pages of our priceless manuscript-books, and that gave to the world the vast stores of Gaelic literature, which having survived the ravages of Dane, and Norman, and Cromwellian, are scattered to-day through the libraries of Europe, from the Liffey to the Tiber, from the Tiber to the Neva.

Eire has long been celebrated as the "Land of Song." It is hence somewhat remarkable to find that prose has played a more important part in the early literature of Ireland than in that of any other country. Our great national epics—including, of course, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, which is recognized as emphatically *the* national epic—are all in prose.¹ There exists, then, in the Irish language, a most valuable, a most extensive, and a most unique prose literature. It is in this uniqueness, indeed, that the chief charm of Gaelic prose lies. There is absolutely nothing like it in the world's literature. When the student enters its wide realms he finds himself in a new world, surrounded by a new atmosphere, new characters, new

¹ It is probable, however, that they were *originally* poetry.



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incidents, new modes of thought. The nearest approach to our older romance-literature is perhaps to be found in those splendid old sages of the Nordland, which are lately becoming so popular amongst English scholars. It is well known indeed, that some of the Scandinavian epics are directly borrowed from our Gaelic epics—style, characters, incidents, and all.

Speaking very broadly, Gaelic prose may be divided into two great chronological divisions. The former, extending up to the sixteenth, a period of over a thousand years, was the reign of the bards—and a long, glorious and prolific reign it was; the latter, which includes the last three centuries, is a period of decline, fall, and finally, of resurrection.

The former of these two divisions should probably be subdivided into two, ancient and mediaeval. The former would embrace a period extending from the fifth century to the twelfth the latter from the twelfth to the sixteenth. The prose styles of these two periods are very different: that of the former is severe, unadorned, unencumbered by unnecessary words; the latter, on the contrary is marked by a ponderous, ornate, multi-adjectival style, often extremely interesting, but sometimes degenerating into bombast.

For the purpose of this lecture I shall consider these two divisions as one, the later being, as a matter of fact, merely the developed of the earlier.

It is to this period then—the reign of the bards, as I call it—that I shall almost entirely confine my attention. The amount of literature which was produced during this thousand years or so is simply incredible; by far the greater part of it has perished, but there still remains enough to fill some 1,400 printed volumes, and to keep the Celtic scholars of Europe busied in editing and publishing the next two centuries. Yet, in the face of these facts, we frequently hear educated Irishmen assert that the Irish language has produced no literature! "O tempora! O Mores!"

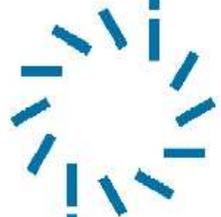
This enormous mass of prose may again be sub-divided into numerous classes: history, biography, historic-romance, and fiction, or romance undiluted. The first of these divisions

however, can scarcely come under the head of “literature,” being, for the most part, mere annals, or compilations of dates and facts; the second, that of biography, is mostly of a hagiological kind: it deals, that is, with the lives of the early Irish saints, and though most valuable and interesting in itself, and frequently of a high degree of literary excellence, it has not the claims to popularity amongst general readers that the latter two classes have.

We now come to the romantic prose literature of Ireland, part of it a mixture of genuine history and fiction, much of it, no doubt, fiction pure and simple. There is no literary production of any age or nation so entrancing, and, if I might use the word, so *refreshing*, so *bracing*, as these romantic prose-works; they have an atmosphere of old-world quaintness and freshness about them, they are pervaded poetic magic and glamour peculiarly their own; the poet, or the scholar, or the antiquarian, finds in them a wealth of beauty of imagination, of historic lore, which he can find nowhere else. Yet, in spite of all this, there is almost a universal opinion—which exists even amongst lovers of the language—that Gaelic romantic prose is of the driest and most uninteresting character. How this absurd misconception has grown up, and holds ground. I am positively unable to conceive—unless, indeed, it be due to the nature of the works generally elected as text-books, or to the bad and unreadable translations which editors of such works conceive themselves bound to make.²

Our historic-romantic literature deals with many personages and events, but the larger part of it can be grouped into three great cycles: the mythological cycle, the early heroic

² Absolutely the best living translator of romantic Gaelic prose is Rev. Dr. Hogan, S.J. His translation of *Cath Rois na Riogh* is scholarly, accurate, and withal a splendid piece of English prose. The fault of most translations from the Gaelic is that they are too literal; the spirit of a work *cannot* be preserved in a word-for-word translation. Who would think of putting into the hands of a student a word-for-word translation of, say, a Greek or Latin classic or of a modern French or German work?



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cycle (which centres round Cúchulainn and the knights of the Craobh Ruadh), and the later heroic cycle (which circles round Fionn, the son of Cumhal, and the Fianna Eireann). Some of the tales, at least as we have them at present, are mere fragments; most of them, however, are sagas of considerable, indeed, sometimes of almost appalling length. In the later romances we find the very first examples of that form of literature which exerts such a potent influence to-day—the novel. The *Toruightheadh Dhiarmuda agus Ghráinne*, is neither more nor less than a novel—a novel with a regular and most artfully-contrived, yet perfectly natural, plot. It is, as a matter of fact, one of the greatest and one of the most interesting historical novels ever written.

Of the three cycles, the mythological is, of course, the oldest; whilst the second or Red-Branch cycle is the finest from a literary point of view. As the three, however, as far as style and incidents are concerned, are perfectly similar, it will be sufficient for me to make a few general remarks on their character, illustrating by one or two extracts.

The first point that strikes the reader of Gaelic prose, and particularly of this special kind, is its wonderful descriptive power. Irish, from its copiousness and expressiveness, is, perhaps, better adapted for description than any other language. It is especially rich in beautiful and sonorous epithets, and many of these are so delicately shaded in meaning that, though their signification and application are perfectly clear in Irish, yet they must frequently be rendered by the same word in English.³ It is by piling up such epithets as these that the really marvellous descriptive effect I have alluded to is obtained.

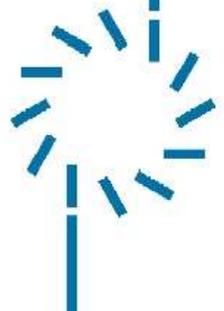
There are two scenes in the description of which our old storytellers particularly excel, and they are constantly recurring in our romantic literature—a battle and a sea voyage. To select the most suitable specimen of a battle piece where there is so large a

field of choice is somewhat difficult. I shall begin, however, with the *Tain Bó Cuailgne* itself—one of the oldest, and certainly the finest and most important of the epic-romances of the Red-Branch cycle. Here is Sullivan's translation of a portion of the "Fight at the Ford" between Cúchulainn and his friend Ferdiaid:—

"So close was the fight they made now that their heads met above and their feet below and their arms in the middle over the rims and bosses of their shields. So close was the fight they made that they cleft and loosened their shields from their rims to their centres. So close was the fight which they made that they turned and bent and shivered their spears from their joints to their hafts! Such was the closeness of the fight which they made that the Bocanachs and Bananachs and wild people of the glens and demons of the air screamed from the rims of their shields, and from the hilts of their swords, and from the hafts of their spears. Such was the closeness of the fight which they made that they cast the river out of its bed and out of its course, so that it might have been a reclining and reposing couch for a king or for a queen in the middle of the ford, so that there was not a drop of water in it unless it dropped into it by the trampling and the hewing which the two champions and the two heroes made in the middle of the ford. Such was the intensity of the fight which they made that the stud of the Gaels darted away in fright and shyness, with fury and madness, breaking their chains and their yokes, their ropes and their traces, and that the women and youths and small people and camp-followers, and non-combatants of the men of Eire broke out of the camp south westwards."

Here is another description of a single fight translated by Father Hogan from the *Cath Rois na Riogh*, or "Battle of Rosnaree." This battle was fought on the Boyne about the first year of the Christian era, and the saga describing it is, both in its older and more modern forms, quite pre-Christian in tone and texture. Cúchulainn had been inflicting heavy slaughter on the men of Leinster, or, as a Gaelic bard would put it in

³ There are many Irish words which absolutely defy translation into English: Miss Norma Borthwick ("Aodh Ruadh") in her prize essay in Gaelic at the recent Oireachtas instances, amongst others, "flaitheamhail" and "tráithnín".



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euphemistic-poetic language, *he had been playing the music of his sword on them*, when he approached the ring of battle in which he saw the diadem of the high-king, Cairbre Nia Fear himself: after an interchange of defiances:—

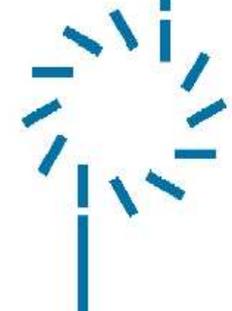
"Those two smote each other, and each of them inflicted abundance of wounds on his opponent, and they plied furious, angry, truly grim, effort-strong strife against each other, and they quickened hands to smite fiercely and feet to hold firm against the oncome of the fight and of mutual wounding. Howbeit, stout were the strokes and fierce the live-wounds, strong were the good thrusts, earnest was the hard fighting, and stern were the hearts, for it was a smiting of two brave champions, it was a lacerating of two lions, it was a madness of two bears; two bulls on a mound and two steers on a ridge were they at that time."

There is a vigorous description of a general conflict in the Fenian saga, the *Cath Finntrágha*, in some respects one of the finest, though not one of the most ancient of our historic-romantic tales. The following is a close translation of portion of it:

Thereafter those two equally eager and equally keen armies poured forth against each other like dense woods, with their proud noisy strokes, and spilling a black deluge, actively, fiercely, perilously, angrily, furiously, destructively, boldly, vehemently, hastily; and great was the grating of swords against bones, and the cracking of bones that were crushed, and bodies that were mangled, and eyes that were blinded, and arms that were shortened to the back, and mother without son, and fair wife without mate. Then the beings of the upper regions responded to the battle, telling the evil and the woe that was destined to be done on that day, and the sea chattered telling the losses, and the waves raised a heavy woeful great moan in wailing them, and the beasts howled telling of them in their bestial way, and the rough hills creaked with the danger of that attack, and the woods trembled in wailing the heroes, and the grey stones

cried from the deeds of the champions, and the winds sighed telling the high deeds, and the earth trembled prophesying the heavy slaughter, and the sun was covered with a blue mantle from the cries of the grey hosts, and the clouds were shining black at the time of that hour, and the hounds and whelps, and crows and the demoniac woman of the glen, and the specters of the air, and the wolves of the forest howled together from every quarter and every corner round about them, and a demoniacal devilish section of the race of tempters to evil and wrong kept urging them on against each other.

The description of a field of battle has always been a favourite theme with poets, and many is the example of such a description we have, from the battle-scenes of the Prince of Poets, down to Tennyson's splendid lay, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." But it is no exaggeration to say that no great writer, either in prose or poetry, has succeeded in painting a more *vivid*, a more *realistic* picture of a battle-scene than the pictures of the unknown writers of these passages. It should be noticed that most writers describe only the bright side of a battle: they paint its "pride, pomp, and circumstance," but they leave out all mention of its more disagreeable details. Gaelic writers on the contrary, are admirably true to nature: they describe the glory of a battle-field with the greatest enthusiasm, but they also depict its horror. We hear not alone the wild, inspiring slogan and the ringing cheer of victory, but also the agonized shriek of the wounded, and the fearful moan of the dying; not alone the clang of steel on shield and hauberk, but the thud of the fallen champion, and the crushing of his limbs beneath the rush of feet. I would have no hesitation whatever in placing some of these passages, for realistic effect, beside any passage not merely of Scott, Macauley, or Tennyson, but of Homer himself. I purposely compare this descriptive prose with the descriptive poetry of other nations; for, though



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nominally prose, it is, in reality, poetry. It may be accurately described as poetical prose, or prose-poetry.

The Gael being notoriously a non-seafaring race, it is rather striking that one of the great fortes of Gaelic writers should lie in the description of the changing moods of the ocean. This remarkable circumstance is probably to be explained by that innate love of nature which is so peculiarly Celtic. Everyone must have noticed how in the extracts I have read the Celtic nature-love, and the Celtic belief in nature's influence over, and sympathy with, man so frequently appear. Almost all the similes of a Gaelic writer are drawn from nature, and particularly from the phenomena connected with the ocean. In the "Battle of Moyrath," for instance, we are told that on conveying of certain news to him "the stern steadfast heart of Conall started from the mid-upper part of his chest like the noise of a sea-green wave against the earth." In the "Battle of Ventry," it is said of two warriors as they fought that one would think that the "bank overflowing, white-foaming curled wave if Cliodhna, and the long-sided steady wave of Rudhraighe had arisen to smother one another." In the Battle of Rosnaree" the march to battle of the men of Ulster is described as "like the tide of a strong torrent belching through the top of a rugged mountain, so that it bruises and breaks what there is of stones and trees before it." In the "Pursuit of the *Giolla Deacair*" Diarmuid's rush on his foes "under them, over them, and through them" is compared to that of "hawk through flight of small birds, or wolf through sheep-flock," or to "the weighty rush of a mad swollen stream in spate that over and adown a cliff of ocean spouts."

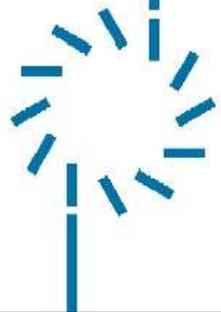
When we consider this intense love of nature which characterizes the Celt, we cannot wonder that Gaelic writers should especially delight in describing a thing so vast, so powerful, and so mysterious as the ocean. Here is Mr. O'Grady's translation of the description in *Tadhg Mac Céin* of the sailing of Tadhg and his companions:

Forth on the vast illimitable abyss they drive their vessel accordingly over the volume of the potent and tremendous deluge, till at last neither ahead of them nor astern could they see land at all, but only colossal ocean's superficies. Further on they heard about them concert of multifarious unknown birds, and hoarse booming of the main ; salmons iridescent, white bellied, throwing themselves all around the *currach*; in their wake, huge bull-seals thick and dark, that ever cleft the flashing wash of the oars as they pursued them, and following these again great whales of the deep. So that for the prodigiousness of their motion, fashion, and variety, the young men found it a festive thing to scrutinize and watch them all, for hitherto they had not used to see the diverse oceanic reptiles, the bulky marine monsters.

Here is a description of a storm, taken from the *Cath Finntrágha*:

Then arose the winds, and grew high the waves, so that they heard nothing but the furious mad sporting of the mermaids, and many crazy voices of the hovering terrific -birds above the pure green waters that were in uproar. There was no welcome forsooth, to him who got the service and attendance of that angry, cold, and deep sea, with the force of the waves, and of the tide, and of the strong blasts; nor was the babbling of those watery tribes pleasant with the creaking of the ropes that were lashed into strings, and with the buffeting of the masts by the fierce winds that shivered them severely.

The extraordinary fertility of language displayed in all these descriptive passages is one of their chief characteristics. Gaelic writers delight in heaping up epithet on epithet, comparison on



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comparison. These epithets and comparisons exhibit the greatness boldness and vigour, and sometimes they almost startle one with their peculiar vehemence; but they are always, above all things, appropriate, and convey to the reader's mind a most vivid—in some cases an almost too vivid—picture of what the author is describing. These writers have all a vast range of vocabulary, and it is no uncommon thing to find twenty or thirty adjectives, all of different meaning, but all most applicable, qualifying the same noun. These strings of adjectives are introduced chiefly for the sake of alliteration, which is as prominent a feature of Gaelic prose as it is of Gaelic poetry. All the passages I have quoted are, in the original Irish, full of alliteration and similar effects. Now, this brings home two facts to us: first, the extraordinary plasticity of the language which allows all this, and, secondly, the prodigious amount of labour and pains which must have been bestowed by the authors on these passages.⁴

Gaelic prose-works are emphatically, and in the fullest sense of the words, works of art,—art the most wonderful, the most consummate and the most finished.

Whilst admiring these alliterative "runs" descriptive passages, as such, we cannot admit that their perpetual recurrence is an abuse. The inflated style which marks our romantic tales from the twelfth century onwards stands alone in literature. It is not found in our oldest romances, and there is nothing like it, as far as I am aware, in any other European literature. How it was introduced into Gaelic prose is, however, by no means difficult to conceive. We must never forget that our prose epics were origin-

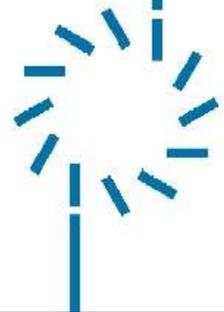
⁴ The labour required to produce an effective alliterative passage in Irish is, however, by no means so great as we might imagine. Modern English, as everyone knows does not at all lend itself to alliteration with the facility of Irish. When we attempt to form a continuous alliterative sentence in English we almost always produce nonsense of the "four fat friars fanning fainting flies" type. The genius of Irish, on the contrary, peculiarly fits it for alliteration. I have frequently heard Irish speakers produce fine alliterative sentences quite unconsciously, and we know that Gaelic poets, even of the second or third rank, can dash off alliterative stanzas extemporarily.

ally intended not to be written, but to be *recited*. The bards, of course, did not learn them off *in extenso*; indeed no human being—not even an Irish bard—could possibly learn by heart three hundred and fifty prose tales of such length as the great majority of our romances. In all probability the bard learned only the *outline* or *skeleton* of each story, and this outline he filled in extemporarily with his own words whilst in the act of reciting. We can easily conceive how a bard possessing an enormous command over language would revel in rolling forth to his astonished hearers a long list of alliterative adjectives and compound words. Afterwards, when the tales came to be written down, this turgid style was not unnaturally retained; and succeeding writers imitated, and even outdid the extravagance of the bardic language. This is why the later romance is the more turgid and ornamental, as a rule, in its style. Any attempt to revive this inflated style in modern Irish prose would, of course, be absurd. Such a sentence, for instance, as "Wrathful, horrid, wrathful-gloomy, ungentle, very-angry, unfriendly, was the keen angry, very fiery look that each of them cast on the other from the flashing of the intent-ruinous eyes, under the soft brinks of the frowning, wrinkled cluster-brows" (which occurs in the *Cath Rois na Riogh*), might be very effective when thundered forth by a bard to an audience of chiefs and gallowglasses, but in a modern composition it would be intolerable.

When this fondness for adjectival ornamentation is kept in restraint nothing can surpass our mediaeval romantic tales in simple dignity of style. All the declamation on earth would fail to produce the touching effect of the old storyteller's description of the death of the children of Tuireann⁵ :—

"When Brian heard that he went back to where his two brothers were, and he lay down between them; and his soul

⁵ The chaste simplicity which distinguishes the "Fate of the Children of Tuireann" is admirably preserved throughout Mr. O'Duffy's translation.



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went forth from him and from his two brothers at the same time."

Equally touching is the death of Tuireann himself: "After that lay, Tuireann fell on his children, and his soul went from him; and they were buried immediately in the same grave."

For simplicity and pathos I have never read a passage equal to these, unless, perhaps, it be the description of the death of Diarmuid in the "Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne."

The *purely* fictitious prose tales found in our manuscripts are almost always of a humorous nature. Commenting on this Tomás Ó Flannaghaile has the following very trenchant remarks:

It has been seen sometimes asserted—by those who new nothing about the subject—that the ancient and mediaeval Irish *had no humour!* the inference being, we suppose, that we only acquired that faculty after we had been brought into close connection with the intensely humorous English people, and had learned their language—the doings of that people in Ireland during the last three hundred years especially humorous and playful, and so highly adopted to develop in us a playful and light-hearted disposition! As a matter of fact, however, half of the modern so-called 'Irish Humour' is nothing but a caricature of the Irishman's manners or a burlesque of his English dialect. Unfortunately, it is not Englishmen only who find such things immensely funny —many of our own countrymen, too, consider them prime subjects for ridicule. The more English some of us are the more we think we are entitled to make game of those who are less English but more Irish; for your Cork man laughs at the Kerry man, the Carlow man at the Cork man, the Dublin man at the Carlow man, and the Saxon at us all.

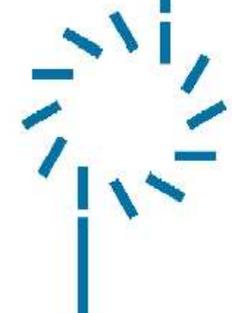
As a specimen of genuine Gaelic humorous prose Mr. O'Flannaghaile quotes a tale from the introduction to *Silva Gadelica*, it is translated from an Irish manuscript in the British Museum—

Three penitents resolved to quit the world for the ascetic life, and so sought the wilderness. After exactly a year's silence the first said, "Tis a good life we lead." At the next year's end the second answered, "It is so." Another year being run out, the third exclaimed, "If I cannot have peace and quite here I'll go back to the world!"

A Munster folk-tale very similar to this » quoted by Mr. O'Flannaghaile from the *Gaelic Journal* for August, 1894 :—

The hero of it was *Michael na Buile*, 'Michael of the Madness,' or 'Mad Mick.' Now, there is a beautiful valley in Kerry, some miles to the West of Tralee, and it is called '*Gleann na nGealt*' or Madmen's Glen,' and thither the crazy used to resort to drink its wholesome waters and to eat its cresses. So Mad Mick went to try the waters and the cresses, and to get rest for his poor head. One day a stray cow found her way into the glen, and her lowing might be heard for miles around, but though the glen was full of madmen no one spoke. But at the end of seven years, an old man more acute of hearing than the rest cries out, 'Is that a cow I heard?' Seven years after this a young man answering cries, 'Where did you hear her? ' And now, at the end of another seven years, Mick, unable to stand the noisy conversation any longer, cried out, 'The glen is bothered with ye!' And then Mad Mick quitted *Gleann na nGealt*, bothered entirely with the noise and brawling of that same glen.

The powers of description to which I have alluded in connection with the heroic tales are quite as evident in the humorous ones. The following, for example, is Mr. O'Grady's translation of the description of the *Giolla Deacair* and his steed. Owing to the translator's mannerisms it is not, perhaps, quite



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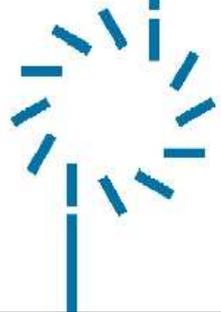
so racy as it might be⁶ A Fiann had been placed on guard by Fionn :—

Nor had he been long so when out of the eastern *airt* directly he marked draw towards him a ruffian, virile indeed, but right ugly, a creature devilish and misshapen, a grumpy-looking and ill favoured loon, equipped as thus: a shield that on the convex was black and loathly-coloured, gloomy, hung on his back's expanse; upon his dingy, grimy left thigh, all distorted, was a wide-grooved and clean-striking sword; struck up his shoulders he had two long javelins, broad in the head, which, for a length of time before, he had not raised in fight or melee; over his armature and harness was thrown a mantle of a limp texture, whilst every limb of him was blacker than a smith's coal quenched in cold ice-water. A sulky, cross-built horse was there, gaunt in the carcase, with skimpy grey hind-quarters shambling upon weedy legs, and wearing a rude iron halter. This beast his master towed behind him, and how he failed to drag the head from the neck, and this from the attenuated body, was a wonder, such plucks he communicated to the rusty iron halter, and sought thus to knock some travel or progression out of his nag. But a greater marvel yet than this it was that the latter missed of wrenching from his owner's corporal barrel the thick, long arms of the big man: such the sudden stands

and stops he made against him, and the jibbing. In the meantime, even as the thunder of some vast, mighty surf was the resonance of each ponderously lusty, vigorous whack, that with an iron cudgel, the big man laid well into the horse, endeavouring, as we have said, thus to get some travel or progression out of him.

This strange cavalier came to the presence of Fionn and, after some altercation with Conán *Maol*, or "Bald Conán," he asked and obtained leave to let his horse loose." The big man," pursues the storyteller, "pulls the rough iron halter which was round the horse's head, and the creature started off, rushing with mighty swift strides till it reached the Fianna's horse-troop," which, it seems, "he began to lacerate and kill promptly; with a bite he would whip out the eye of one of them, with a snap he would snip off the ear of the second, and yet another's legs would fracture with a kick." The Fianna, of course, were scarcely disposed to stand this. "Take thy horse out of that, O big man!" cried Conán. "I swear by the divisions of heaven and earth that, had it not been on the security of Fionn and the Fianna thou hast let him free, I would dash his brains out." "I swear by the divisions of heaven and earth," said the big man, "that take him out of that I never will." Conán himself then succeeded in recapturing the animal, and, on Fionn's advice, he mounted him in order to gallop him to death over hills and hollows. But in spite of all Conán's endeavours, the animal obstinately refused to stir. Fionn was thereupon struck with the idea that it would be necessary to place on the steed's back the lumber of men that would weigh exactly as much as his master. So no less than thirteen men mounted behind Conán, and the horse, curiously enough, lay down under them and got up again. The *Giolla Deacair*, not relishing the treatment his faithful nag received, after reciting a lay to Fionn, "weakly and wearily" departed; but when he had reached the top of a hill, he grit up his coat tails, "and away with him with the speed of a swallow or a roe-deer, or like a

⁶ Mr. O'Grady constantly goes out of his way to find some odd-looking English word or phrase to translate a quite simple Irish expression. "*Buailios do phreib é,*" for instance, he renders, "*impinges upon him with a kick;*" "*ocus do bhrised cos eich eile*" he elaborately translates, "and yet another's legs would fracture with a kick;" This stilted style of translation is calculated to give the barbarian quite a false notion of Irish prose. There is, however, no doubt about the fact that "*Silva Gadelica*" is one of the monumental books of the century. In his *Teanga Thioramhuil na hÉireann*, Mr. O'Neil Russell expresses the regret that the language of the tale is not easier to be understood by those who have not had opportunity and time to study our older literature. This is scarcely to the point, for Mr. O'Grady's object in "*Silva Gadelica*" is to give some idea, not of modern but of *mediaeval* Irish prose. And, after all, the language of the tales is not so very difficult; an ordinary reader of Irish can certainly understand it as easily as an ordinary reader of English can understand the language of the *Faerie Queene*.



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Source: 'Gaelic Prose Literature' (Read in March, 1897), in: *Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse* ("Songs of the Irish Rebels, Anthology Specimens, Lectures on Gaelic Topics"; Dublin: Phoenix, n.d.), 163-215

vociferous March wind on the ridge of a mountain." When the horse saw this, he immediately started after master, with Conán and the thirteen men on his back. Fionn and the Fianna "guffawed with a shout of mockery flouting Conan," who "screamed and screeched for help." Ultimately, however, the Fianna deemed it advisable to start in pursuit, and they followed the steed over hill and glen till they reached sea; here, one of them succeeded in catching the steed by the tail, but he, Conán, and the thirteen men were dragged into the sea, and the Fianna had to pass through many a marvellous adventure before they recovered them again. I would advise everyone that possibly can to read this truly splendid tale in the original.

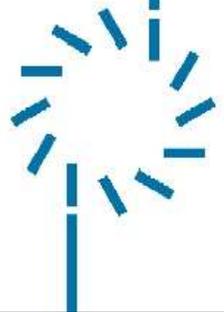
In these stories we find, as the critic already quoted says, "the true Irish extravagance, the true Irish love of the incongruous—the genuine article, independent of brogue or burlesque." It is in this love of the fantastic, or incongruous, that Celtic humour peculiarly consists. The Celt is famous throughout the world for his wit; but it is in humour that he is pre-eminent. And Celtic humour, be it remarked, though sometimes broad enough is, as a rule, of an exceedingly subtle and delicate kind, so that it is not everyone who can appreciate it.

What an extraordinary and melancholy fact it is that we do not know the authors of any of the works we have been considering. They exist, splendid, beautiful, and unique; they have come down to us, almost the only thing that remains of our glorious past; but the oft-repeated question "Who wrote them?" is a question no man can answer. Powerful and judicious must have been the minds that conceived these grand old tales, skilful must have been the hands that wrote them. But their authors have long since been mouldering in the quiet obscurity of ruined abbeys, and history records not their names. These men wrote not for gain, they wrote not even for the nobler reward of glory, but they wrote out of pure and spontaneous love for literature itself. What a mighty race they were, those Gaelic bards of old! Honour to their memory! Oblivion has hitherto been their portion; but they have one consolation, for, though their names have been forgotten,

their works, which are their second and greater selves, will live on through the ages.

I had intended, Mr. Chairman, to make a few remarks on the works and style of the more modern writers of Gaelic prose, especially of Brother Michael O'Clery and of Geoffrey Keating. At the end of a paper like this, however, I would not have time to do them justice, and consequently shall not attempt to do so I need only remark that to the ordinary reader who reads for amusement rather than for instruction, modern Gaelic prose is by no means so interesting as mediaeval; whilst it is not nearly so extensive. This is easily explained. The several conquests and re-conquests of Ireland, from the time of the Reformation to that of the Revolution, completely swept away the old order of things. Defeat, conquest, and persecution did not, indeed, silence the Gaelic muse, for we know that much of our sweetest Gaelic poetry was written, or rather composed, for some of it has never been written, during the seventeenth and following centuries; but with prose the case was naturally very different. A good education, leisure, access to libraries, are necessary for the composition of great prose works; and these were not to be had. When the power of the native chieftains had been broken, and the monasteries had been swept away by the Reformation, the occupation and the *raison d'être* of the bard were gone; and so that noble line of storytellers, that had been held in honour by the Gael for two thousand years; disappeared from the land.

A few words should certainly be said about Irish prose, as written at the present day. Of course, the work that modern *Gaelic scholar*; are engaged in doing is mainly one of revival it consists, for the most part, not in original work, but in editing, translating and annotating existing texts. There is growing up, however in the ranks of the Gaelic League, a school of modern Gaelic writers; and their work may be seen, month by month, in the columns of the Gaelic Journal. A modern Gaelic prose style is being formed, and, when developed, it will combine, let



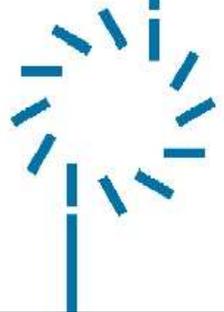
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us hope, the purity and elegance of Keating, with the nature-love and imagination-play of the mediaeval romances.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, it may be asked what are the future prospects of Gaelic prose literature? Is this glorious literature a thing of the past?—a thing on which we may look back with pride indeed, but which is now utterly and irretrievably gone? Or, can it be that it yet has a future before it?—that the day will yet come when the bard and the *seanchaidh* will once more hold a honoured place in Eire, when the world will listen in amazement, as it did of yore, to the immortal *sgéalta* of the Gaelic race? Personally, Mr. Chairman, I am convinced that this day will come; and that it will come is the firm belief of thousands today. We will be met, of course, with the stereotyped objection that the men who say and think these things are enthusiasts; this is perhaps, true; but it would be well to recollect that every great movement that has ever been carried out on this earth has been carried out simply and solely by enthusiasts.

Centuries ago, when the European civilization and literature of to-day were unknown, Eire had her day of empire; but hers was the empire, not of brute force, but of intellectuality. Time was when this land of ours was the literary centre of Christendom, when the learned of the world found their chief reading in these very prose tales that we have been considering. Gaelic literature, like the Gaelic race, has long been dying, but it is "fated not to die." When we remember the past, and when we look into the future, we are driven to admit, laying all enthusiasm aside, or, at least, avoiding extravagance in our enthusiasm, that in centuries yet to come these self-same old epics, these selfsame old *sgéalta*, with their simple and beautiful imagery, with their grand and sonorous descriptive passages, with their strange old-world Celtic eloquence, may still be inspiring and rejuvenating the heart of man, and lifting him to higher and nobler ideals.



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