DAFYDD AB GWILYM.

ALTHOUGH of all Welsh writers Dafydd ab Gwilym is certainly the best known to Englishmen, perhaps, indeed, the only one of whom they have heard, it may be doubted whether even he is much more than a name. The responsibility for this is no doubt largely to be attributed to Welshmen, to their neglect to bring the claims of their literature to the notice of other nations. Even to the very small number of Englishmen familiar with Welsh, the difficulties in the way of a study of Welsh poetry are great. Only a comparatively small portion of it has been published at all; the greater part of at least the mediæval poetry is hidden away in manuscripts often difficult of access. Nor is the study of poets like Dafydd ab Gwilym, whose works have been published, an easy thing. There is no really critical edition of Dafydd, for though Dr. Gwenogfryn Evans is preparing one, it has not yet appeared; so that it may often happen that, in Professor Cowell's words, the student "spends his strength uselessly in attempting to solve some enigma which at last turns out to be no dark saying of the poet, but some dull blunder of a scribe." Moreover, as there is no annotated edition of Dafydd, and all the existing Welsh dictionaries are seriously inadequate,

it is by no means a light undertaking to make one's way unaided through the many difficulties which, even when the text is sound, the poems offer.

In spite of all these obstacles, Dafydd has been the object of enthusiastic admiration and study by Welshmen; he has inspired innumerable later poets, has influenced greatly the course of Welsh literature, and to some extent the ideas of Welshmen, and has come to be regarded by many as the chief poet of Wales.

But it is not only from this point of view that Dafydd is worth knowing; for he is a poet to be read for his own sake. Probably few people will agree with Borrow's extravagant estimate of him as 'the greatest poetical genius that has appeared in Europe since the revival of literature'; but he is nevertheless a great poet and a real addition to our literary acquaintance. Perhaps, therefore, it will be some slight service both to Welsh literature and to English students of poetry to translate some specimens of his work. He has, indeed, been better treated by translators than the majority of Welsh poets. To say nothing of earlier versions, a volume of verse-translations, which, though by no means inspired, are in several cases above the average of such renderings, was published by A. J. Johnes in 1834; but this book, which is now to be obtained only by a lucky accident from some second-hand bookseller, does not seem to be widely known among English readers. To 'Y Cymmrodor' for 1878 (vol. ii.) Professor Cowell contributed an admirable article on the poet, with some verse and prose translations; but the volume is not likely to

have been seen by many except persons already interested in Wales and Welsh literature. Translations of single poems are to be met with in various places; the best I have seen are by Mr. W. J. Gruffydd ('The Celtic Review,' April, 1907), and by Mr. Ernest Rhys ('Celtia,' October, 1907).

The prose versions here given are of course a very inadequate representation of Dafydd's work as a whole, and they can give no idea of his metrical skill, and the sweetness and verbal felicity which distinguish his verse. For their form, however, some defence can be given. No doubt an inspired verse translation of any poet is always better than the best prose rendering; but an inspired translator of Welsh verse has yet to be found, and failing him there is much to be said for prose. The whole of Dafydd's work is in the 'strict metres,' which, being built up, not from feet and stress-accent like English verse, but from syllables and *cynghanedd*, a sort of combined rhyme and alliteration, are totally different from anything in English. It is, therefore, quite impossible to represent their peculiar effect in English verse; and this being so, the chief advantage of a verse translation, that it more accurately represents the effect of the original, is lost. On the other hand, it is possible to be much more literal in prose; though it must be remarked that the great difference between English and Welsh idiom makes strict literalness in many cases impossible. Even in their own limited sphere these translations leave much to be desired; but in default of anything else, they may serve to introduce a beautiful poet to English readers.

It will perhaps be well to supplement these specimens by some general remarks on the poet and his works. The time has hardly yet come for a discussion of the facts of his life; for till the publication of a critical edition of his poems, and the definite attribution of several poems of doubtful authenticity, it is unsafe to use his works for biographical purposes, and the traditional biography is suspected at almost every point. Almost the only two facts which can be regarded as certain—though even the second of these has been disputed by more patriotic than critical Northwallians—are that he lived in the fourteenth century and that he was a native of South Wales.

Concerning his poems more may be said, since few readers of this article are likely to know much of his work, and the poems here translated are too few to form a basis for criticism. Professor Cowell and others have dwelt upon the many resemblances between Dafydd and the troubadours, and though, as Professor Cowell remarks, Dafydd is a greater poet than any troubadour, the similarity of tone and subject is undoubted. Like the troubadours he is pre-eminently the poet of love and of the summer; but he gives to his treatment of these themes a naturalness and freshness very different from the artificiality of Provençal poetry. A contemporary of Chaucer, he differed from him in having behind him an old and highly developed poetical tradition; he inherited a language long adapted to literary uses and brought to a singular degree of perfection, and this language he uses with a mastery which raises him, as Matthew Arnold said of Chaucer, far

above the 'mediæval helplessness.' But if he is the heir of the past, he is also the initiator of a new school. It is possible to trace the growth of *cynganedd* all through early Welsh poetry, but not till the fourteenth century, in Dafydd and his contemporaries, does it appear as a fully developed system; and about then also began to be formed the canon of twenty-four 'strict metres' (finally established in the fifteenth century), chief among them the *cywydd*, in which nearly all Dafydd's poems are written.

In his subjects also he marks a new era. Throughout the second period of Welsh literature, from 1100 A.D. to the end of the thirteenth century, poetry was intimately connected with the great struggle against England. There were indeed both love poems and religious poems, but the most characteristic productions of the age were political in character, elegies or panegyrics on patriotic princes, songs of lamentation for defeat or exultation in victory. After the final conquest comes a time of despairing silence; then of a sudden we find Dafydd ab Gwilym singing light-heartedly of nature and of his lady. His contemporary Iolo Goch lived to celebrate Owen Glendower and to exult in what seemed the recovery of Welsh liberty, but no faintest echo of the national cause is heard in Dafydd.

I have already said that Dafydd is pre-eminently the poet of the summer, and the remark indicates at once his merit and his limitation. It would probably not be unjust to say that this limitation, which alone prevents him from taking a very high

rank among the poets of modern Europe, proceeds from a certain want of character. In saying this I do not mean to imply any condemnation of his morals, which, for aught I know, may have been beyond reproach. The life of Catullus was one which not a Puritan only would find it difficult to approve of, yet it was Catullus who wrote one of the noblest couplets in the whole poetry of love :

‘Dilexi tum te, non tantum ut vulgus amicum,
Sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos.’

It would be rash to make general statements without a wider knowledge of Dafydd's works than I possess, but I doubt if he would ever have been capable of such a depth of passionate insight as that. He is in many ways representative, both in its defects and in its virtues, of the Welsh mediæval character—a character so different from that of to-day, moulded by a century and a half of Protestant Nonconformity—exquisitely delicate and graceful, exquisitely sensitive to every influence of beauty, enamoured of life and the joy of life, of bright colours, lovely forms, and the sunshine; richly endowed with fancy, quick to emotion, ardent and agile, yet withal a little volatile and untrustworthy, wanting in stamina, in depth, in grip of realities; a character the despair of the rigid moralist, but rising by its gracious loveableness to a sphere where most men will feel that the ordinary moral standards may be disregarded. There is, too, in Dafydd a humour which, while no doubt partly responsible for the ease with which he handles his subject, introduces at times a jarring

note, a flippancy and want of nobleness disconcerting to his admirers, as when, in his poem on the thunder, he descends from so magnificent an image as 'a thousand giants shouting together from the chariots' of the constellations' to the stupid frivolity of 'an ugly hag banging her crockery.' We should hardly go to him for sublimity, for deep insight, for criticism of life; he is, as Professor Cowell says, the poet of the fancy rather than of the imagination, playing exquisitely on the surface of things, but rarely penetrating to their elemental reality. Nevertheless he is capable at times of deep feeling, as in the beautiful lines which conclude his poem to the summer (below, p. 53); he is capable, too, of wonderful touches of imaginative vision, as in the fine line describing the snow-clad country-side, which Professor Cowell quotes:

'Palment mwy na mynwent mor,'

'a pavement vaster than the graveyard of the sea,' or the poem on 'The Lineage of the Owl,' alluding to the old Welsh legend concerning the transformation of the unfaithful wife of Llew Llaw Gyffes, when, in reply to the poet's abuse, the bird tells him with dignified pathos how 'at the banquets of yore princes called me Flower-Aspect,' and beseeches him

¹ Welsh, *certwynau*. There is a variant reading *cadwynau*, "chains." [For the benefit of Welsh students it will be well to say that the text from which these translations are made is that of Mr. O. M. Edwards in "Cyfres y Fil" (except in the case of two passages, not given in that selection). I should like to apologize in advance for any errors which my renderings of a poet often difficult may contain.]

to 'leave me in peace, to endure pain and chastisement, and the hate of all birds that live.' In his own realm of the fancy he is perfect; he has a lightness of touch which in his best poems is unerring. It is perhaps most exquisite in those poems, like the one describing his own funeral when his mistress's cruelty has killed him, in which he mingles a playful humour with an under-current of pathos. His exuberant fancy sometimes leads him, as we have seen, into faults of taste, but these after all are few in comparison with the many lovely images which adorn almost every poem. 'A black eyebrow upon fair parchment, like a swallow on the bosom of the wave'; 'the wings of a flaming seraph,' and 'the sunlit border of a crested wave,' of gold hair; 'white bees of heaven wandering through Gwynedd,' of falling snow; 'a ray of sunlight, the gauntlet of ocean' and 'a (white) nun on the crest of the tide,' of a sea-gull; 'the candle of the most high God,' and 'the pearl of Mary,' of the moon; 'the porter of April,' 'the teacher of praise between light and darkness,' 'a chorister in God's chapel,' 'sea-lord of the tangled ocean of the sky,' of the skylark—such are a few of the images which his inexhaustible invention pours forth. His nature-poetry shows everywhere the traces of minute and loving observation; nature to him was no conventional literary background, but the object of his deepest feeling. His descriptions of natural sights and sounds do not indeed show the minute fidelity of some English poets, of Browning, for instance, in his poem on the thrush, nor the philosophic depth of Wordsworth, or, in Wales, of his disciple

Islwyn; but they have an exquisite grace, a wealth of imagery quite unsurpassed; they are reflections of nature absolutely true in essence, but seen in a magic mirror where all takes on a new glory and strangeness under the light of fancy. A characteristic instance is the lovely description of the night-ingale's song:

Delicately she sings her first grave note, the sweet mean and treble of her stormy song. It is love's bright, enraptured prelude from the choir of the leaves; the happy song of a pure, glad maiden as she climbs through the branches, the bright welding of love. Dear is her memory to the minstrel,¹ poetess, weaver among the trees. Glad she is by day and by night, a voice unstammering, perfect in pure loveliness.

Another, and perhaps more striking example of Dafydd's fanciful imagery is the poem on the thrush-cock, which I translate in full.

In a pleasant place I was to-day, under the mantles of the fair green hazels, listening in the bright dawning of day to the learned music of the thrush-cock. Surely far from here was he born, and a far journey was his, the gray messenger of love. He came hither from the narrow shire of Chester at the bidding of my golden sister.² His robe, from his slender waist, was of a thousand

¹ Welsh *offydd*, which may be either a proper noun (=Ovid) or a common one. Professor Cowell takes it as the former, translating, 'valuable is her mention of Ovid'; but surely the meaning could only be, 'valuable is her mention *by*' or 'her memory *to* Ovid.' O. M. Edwards in his edition prints the word with a small initial, evidently taking it as a common noun.

² Morvyth, the poet's lady (see below, p. 55). It is not uncommon in Welsh, as in Oriental, literature for a poet to call his mistress his sister.

delicately branching flowers; his cassock, you would guess, of the wings of the wind's green mantles; there was not there, on my faith, aught but gold for a covering to the altar.

Morvyth had sent him, sweet singer, foster son of May. I heard him in glowing notes descant unceasingly, and with clear and unstammering tongue read the gospel to all the congregation. On the hill there he raised to us, for wafer, a fair loaf, and the bright nightingale with her sweet eloquence, minstrel of the glen, sang to many listeners' from the corner of the wood beside him. Then the sacring-bell rang clear, and they raised the host, even to heaven, above the thicket, singing an ode to our Lord and Father, lifting up a chalice of ecstasy and love,—ah! fain I am of the singing that was prepared in the birch-copse of the woodland.

In a graver strain is the beautiful invitation to the summer to visit Morgannwg,² one of the poet's most famous works:

Thou Summer, sire of lustihead, with thy fair tangled forest brakes, jewelled prince of the glen, whose hot sun awakens yonder valley; ample are thy branches that shadow our highways, thou chief prophet of green boughs, who shall match thy tangled weaving,³ skilled painter of the fair trees? Thou hast created purest gems and rich webs on park and hill; thou coverest with pasture the face of the fair green earth, making it sweet as a second Paradise. Thou hast brought flowers, and leaves on leaves, lovely row on row above thy leafy dwellings. The notes of the young birds come back to us, the song of the Spring is on oak and hillock, and we hear among the buds a proud and lovely music, where the blackbird

¹ Lit. 'a hundred.'

² Glamorgan; pronounce *w* like English *oo*.

³ A free (and doubtful) rendering.

sings. All the world thou givest us, and makest all men glad.

Hear me, O Summer! If I have my desire, for which I come ambassador to thee in thy glory, fly over me to the land of Essyllt, from the mid country of wild Gwynedd.¹ Ride on even to my border, dear land on the sea's brow.

Bear for me of thy grace my greetings, yea, twenty times, to Morgannwg; my blessing and all good things, two hundred times, to that land I love. Put forth thy power for my country in all its confines, walk thou round about it—a country enclosed and trim, land of abundance, full of corn and hay, with lakes of fish, sweet orchards, houses of stone where dwells plenty, lords who dispense the banquet, pouring forth to men rich wine. It is seen at all times, my lovely land, thick set with orchards, full of all birds that haunt the woodland, of leaves and meadow flowers, with wide-branching trees and bright fields, corn in eight kinds and three of hay; a sweet and radiant land clad in green, fair grown with clover.

There are rich lords who give me golden coins and mead; and many a choir of singers who make music with string, and melody. Help and sustenance for all lands spring from it each day, and its milk and wheat give increase to far countries; Morgannwg, on the brow of the isle, feeds every place, each palace, and precinct.

If I win thee, O Summer, in thy lovely hour, with thy plenty and thy growing growth, bear gently thy calm days, a golden messenger, to Morgannwg. On some hot morning make the world glad, and greet the white homesteads. Give plenty; give the first growth of the spring, and heap together thy flowers; shine proudly on the lime-white wall, amply, in the brightness of light; set there in thine own land the trace of thy foot, green-robed grassy pastures; shake the burden of sweet fruits freely about its trees;

¹ North Wales; pronounce Gwyneth.

pour thine abundance, like a river, on every forest, and the meadows, and the wheat-land; clothe orchard, vineyard, and garden with thy plenty and fertility; scatter upon its lovely earth the sweet notes of thy bright season.

Then, in the time of thy flowers, when thy tree-tops are glossy with many leaves, I will gather the roses from the close, the meadow flowers, and the gems of the woodland, bright clover, the raiment of earth, and the sweet blossom of grass, to set them for a memorial of my gold-famed lord, ah, woe is me! upon Ivor's¹ grave.

As a poet of love Dafydd is capable of tenderness, but hardly of passion; his love, whether genuine or not (and I for one cannot doubt its genuineness), serves less as an end in itself than as the impulse to radiant flights of fancy, a theme to embroider with lovely words and images. In a large proportion of his poems the two themes, love and nature, are intermingled, and he sends the birds and the forces of nature, the wind for example, on embassy to his lady. Several ladies are celebrated in his poems, but the chief object of his muse was a certain Morvyth.² About the personality of this lady there has been much dispute. Professor Cowell has advanced the theory, which he supports by the analogy of Provençal love-poetry, that Dafydd's passion for her was a purely fictitious and conventional one; and a fantastic attempt has more recently been made to turn her into an allegorical figure of Wales; her husband, the 'Bwa Bach,' or 'little hunchback,' whom the poet covers with ridicule, being England. The latter theory scarcely

¹ Ivor Hael, the poet's patron.

² Welsh *Morfudd*. I spell as above to show the pronunciation.

calls for discussion. Professor Cowell advances some strong arguments for his, but in view of the tone of certain poems, particularly those written in the poet's later years, I find it very difficult to believe that Morvyth was anything but a real person, or the poet's love a literary convention.

Dafydd's attitude to life in general is that of the natural man in revolt against mediæval asceticism. He is of the kindred of Aucassin: 'In Paradise what have I to win? Therein I seek not to enter, but only to have Nicolete, my sweet lady that I love so well. . . . But into Hell would I fain go; for into Hell fare the goodly clerks, and goodly knights that fall in tourneys and great wars, and stout men at arms, and all men noble. With these would I liefly go. And thither pass the sweet ladies and courteous that have two lovers, or three, and their lords also thereto. Thither goes the gold, and the silver, and cloth of vair, and cloth of gris, and harpers, and makers, and the prince of this world. With these I would gladly go, let me but have with me Nicolete, my sweetest lady.' In a similar spirit Dafydd protests against 'the creed of the monks of Rome,' for example in the following poem, which is one of several alleged to have been addressed to the daughter of Ivor Hael, the poet's patron. According to the tradition, Dafydd was appointed the young lady's tutor, but a mutual passion arose between them, and Ivor placed his daughter in a convent in Anglesey, where Dafydd besieged her with odes. The tradition does not seem to rest on any very secure foundation, but may serve in default of anything else.

The love of a pale black-eyed maid fills me with care ;
 I pine away. Is it truth, O woman that I love, that thou
 carest nought for the fair-growing birch-tree of Summer ?
 Wilt thou never cease in thy cloister, thou perfect star,
 thy psalm-singing ? A nun and a saint thou art, dear to
 all the choir ; for God's sake have done with the bread
 and water, and cast from thee thy cress. Have done, o'
 Mary's name, with the lean paternoster, and the creed of
 the monks of Rome. Be no more a nun in the Spring-
 time ; better are the woods than the cloister. Fairest of
 women, thy religion is treason against love ; the ring of
 troth, the mantle, and green raiment would better beseech
 thee. Come to the spreading birch, to the creed of the
 trees and the cuckoo, where none will chide us that we
 gain Heaven in the green woodland. Forget not the
 book of Ovid, and have done with too much religion.
 There, among the fair trees by the hill-side, we will set
 our souls free. Is it any worse that a maid of gentle
 birth should gain a soul in the woodland than to do as
 we should do at Rome or the shrine of Saint James ?

Several poems again contain controversies between the poet and some monk or other who stands as the type of established morality. In one of these, which indeed is perhaps not a genuine work of Dafydd's, but is at any rate thoroughly in keeping with his spirit, he declares :

God is not so cruel as old men say ; it is a lie of priests,
 reading some musty parchment. God will never damn
 the soul of a gentle youth for loving woman or maid.
 Three things there are that are loved through all the
 world, woman and fair weather and health ; woman will
 be the fairest flower in Heaven save God himself. . . .
 From Heaven came all delight, from Hell all sadness.

He is then the poet of the summer, the poet of

youth and love and the joy of life. A tradition, stated, quite possibly with truth, to go back to an eye-witness, declares that he was 'tall and slender, with long rippling yellow hair, full of golden curls and ringlets'; and he has himself given us some indications of his personal appearance. In his poem on the hard-heartedness of the ladies of Llanbadarn he says:

There was never a Sunday passed in Llanbadarn but I was in Church taking stock of the congregation,¹ with my face on some sweet girl, and only the nape of my neck turned up to the dear God. After I have gazed an age over their feathers, across the whole congregation, one will say to her neighbour in a clear whisper, easy to hear, "Look at the pale-faced boy there with his languishing glances. Sure 'tis his sister's hair he is wearing!"

In his poem 'The Spectre,' too, he puts into the phantom's mouth what may well be the picture of his own youth:

'I too was young, as one not made for death, and in the pride of youth passed about the world reaping just renown, a wandering man of war, even as thou art. Fair love-locks clad my shoulders, auburn-hued, fair-growing as the vine-tendrils; bright were mine eyes, pure and clear, my glance was keen, my tongue rich in faultless speech; I had pride in the May-time. I kissed my lady in the fair, pleasant summer days.; I walked in honour;

¹ Welsh *na bawn ac eraill a'm barn*, a difficult line. My translation, which is free, rests on the assumption that, as suggested by a friend, *ac* may be (by an easy MS. corruption) a mistake for *ar*, in which case the logical order will be *na bawn a'm barn ar eraill*, and the literal meaning, 'that I was not with my judgment on (=was not criticizing) others.'

I had joy in women and the mead-bowl; but in the end came silence—my boast was great, yet I must die.’

‘In the end came silence.’ Yes! even youth and the joy of life must pass. Summer goes, and the poet of the summer is left mute. In the dark winter hours, in the shadow of death, it is not to the poet of the summer that we shall turn for consolation and new courage; but so long as summer days return and the woods grow green again, so long, we may believe, the poems of Dafydd ab Gwilym will endure.

We may fitly conclude with two poems written in later life.

THE POET IN OLD AGE RECALLS THE DAYS THAT HAVE BEEN

O lily-maid, bright of hue, Morvyth, fair as the comely light of day, much have I sung of thee, O thou whose beauty is in all men’s sight.

Yester-eve, ’twas late, I tarried for thee, sweetheart, in the place where we met that first summer-month of our love. I gazed awhile, I looked about me and remembered,——

When first in secret I saw thy shape and heard thy voice, our wood upon its sweet bank was all leafy and young, and on the top of my birch-tree no branch was broken; lusty it was, full of the summer and youth’s increase, even to its roots. A green temple it was, a house of many leaves, a cottage thatched with thick foliage, a lovely tower, round-topped, battlemented; its branches

‘I find the Welsh here difficult, and the translation may be inaccurate in places.

were strong and round, and birds with their lore sang rapturously yonder in the forest. The blackbird to our sweet birch-tree came with offering of tender songs; thou knowest how radiantly he sang to the lovely wood in May. At night came the nightingale to our leaves, enraptured, with melodious music, and we greeted duly the psalm she sang to love's tune.

Now grievous age holds lordship over the delicate leaves, and the tree with withered branches pines under the languishment of winter and the pouring rain. Old age weighs heavily upon it, and the storm-wind bears away its covering; and no more upon its head does the blackbird exult in his gold-woven song,¹ nor the nightingale sing her odes in the midst of it. Too cold is it now!

I remember my young strength, and the love that I bore thee, sweet; and the great chastisement I had for loving thee, and how I did not win thee to be my crown of life. Long waiting for love wore me away, and life was ever hard for me; nathless I must endure my burden many a year without thee. Bitter is the anguish in my brain, and in my heart chill decay for thy sake; grievous my night-watches; my grave is made ready for me.

¹ Johnes translates these two lines—

‘And the ouzel’s pride is o’er,
With his head bespleck’d with gold,’

and he adds a note on the second: ‘This line is a literal translation; though it does not suit the common ouzel, it may apply to the rose-coloured ouzel whose head is glossed with blue, purple, and green. Bewick, p. 95. In a poet so true to nature this line still leaves a difficulty.’ It is curious that it did not occur to him that his translation might be wrong, for wrong it certainly is. *Ar ei ben*, ‘on his head,’ refers to the tree, not the blackbird, and *ag curwe bwnc* can only mean ‘with gold-woven song.’

THE LAST CYWYDD¹

After youth, mourning; like an arrow it pierces me.
My life to me is sorrow now; I will call for strength to
the Lord.

Gone is youth and its glory; if my day was brave it is
over now. Gone is my wisdom and my brain, and love's
vengeance takes hold upon me; the Muse is cast from
my lips, she that long time brought me song to inspire
me. Where is Ivor, who gave me counsel? Where is
Nest,² who was my refuge? Where is Morvyth, my
world, beneath the trees? They rest all in the sod, and I
fare heavily all my days, under a bitter burden enduring
long pain.

I shall sing no more songs, nor make trial of them, to
the trees, or the young herbs, or the vetch. No more in
the lovely woodland can I rejoice for the nightingale's
song, nor the cuckoo's, nor for the kiss of the woman I
loved, my darling, nor her voice, nor the sound of her
speech.

Old age is a dart in my brain; it is not the love of a
fair maid is my sickness now,—nay, love is gone from
me, and all my favour; it is a grief to think thereon. I
am become as chaff, without strength; I am fallen into
the snares of death. The grave is made ready for me,
and life's end, and the earth. Christ be my haven and
my help! Amen; it is the end!

H. IDRIS BELL.

¹ One of the twenty-four metres (see above, p. 48). I do not
translate 'last lines,' because the last lines were actually in the *englyn*
metre.

² The wife of Ivor Hael.