IX.

THE IRISH MSS. IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

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THERE are in the British Museum 200 MSS. and four Charters in the Irish language. When the Museum was first instituted in 1753 the united Sloane, Cotton, and Harley Collections contained only seventeen Irish MSS. In 1831, by the incorporation of the Arundel MSS., two more were added. But it was in the next year that the most important addition (in quantity, if not in quality) was made. In 1832, among the first MSS. acquired under the terms of the will of Francis Henry Egerton, 8th Earl of Bridgewater, was a large and miscellaneous collection of MSS., 119 in number, gathered by James Hardiman, author of the *History of Galway* and editor of *Irish Minstrelsy* from various sources. To these have been added at various times since a number of MSS. in the additional and Egerton collections acquired in the ordinary course by purchase or gift, bringing the total up to 200 MSS. and four Charters.

All these MSS. are summarily described and indexed in the various catalogues of the Manuscript Department. But it was early felt that a collection of so special a character merited a separate catalogue. In 1849 Eugene O'Curry, the famous Irish scholar, compiled a manuscript catalogue of all the MSS. then in the Museum, which still stands in the Department. Later on Dr. Standish Hayes O'Grady commenced a more elaborate and detailed description. Full descriptions of eighty MSS. and of part of the eighty-first as also of the four Charters were printed, but not published. The sheets are on sale at the Museum. This catalogue is being carried to completion, and the whole will be published in due course.

The MSS. described by Dr. O'Grady fall in the main under the headings of History, Law, Lexicography and Grammar, Medicine and Poetry (this last section being left incomplete). For the first four sections a general reference to Dr. O'Grady's catalogue will be

sufficient; it may be added that a great deal of interest in relation to Gaelic medical MSS. is to be found under that heading in Professor Mackinnon's Catalogue of Gaelic MSS. in Scotland, Edinburgh, 1912.

The remaining MSS. in the Museum may be classed under the headings Tales (including epic, romantic, and semi-historical tales), Theology (including Hagiology), and Poetry. Of course, particular MSS. can rarely be classed strictly under any one of these headings, so that much that falls under the last three categories has been described by Mr. O'Grady in his catalogue. It is natural (though not altogether scientific) to divide Irish MSS. into two classes, those written on vellum and those written on paper, or, to put it in terms of chronology, those written before or after 1600. Of course the older texts went on being copied into paper MSS. almost into our own day; but the seventeenth century which saw the break-up of the old Irish schools as of much else in Ireland, marks a very real distinction in the MSS. The O'Clerys, Colgan, and Keating, who attempted, in those disastrous times, to gather up the wreckage of Irish literature and tradition, must have felt that an old era was coming to an end and a new one beginning. And to us studying the MSS. the gradual degradation of the scribal tradition makes this tragically clear. During the seventeenth century itself the representatives of the older scribal families, an O'Duigenan here, a MacFirbis there, valiantly struggle to preserve the old tradition, but by the beginning of the eighteenth century the MSS. have entered on a course of rapid degeneration, and old tales accidentally preserved are extremely corrupt. The scope of this report does not admit of more than a very general notice of the paper MSS. But the vellums must have a more extended description.

Of these the most important are certainly the two MSS. Eg. 1782 and Harley 5280. They have been frequently described and are well-known to Celtic scholars. Written respectively *circa* 1419 and in the sixteenth century, they contain epic, romantic, and historic tales (notable in Eg. 1782 is the great series of the Tain Bo Cuailgne with its foretales and the older Bruiden Da Derga cycle, and in Harley 5280 the Mailduin story, so interesting in connexion with the St. Brendan legend and its developments in European literature) and much miscellaneous matter. There are, for instance, in Eg. 1782, a fully glossed copy of the Amra of St. Columcille, a considerable amount of interesting Ossianic

material, the earliest copy of the *Echtra an Madra Maoil*, a strange compound of a werewolf theme with Arthurian romance closely connected with the Latin Arthur and Gorlagon, some fragmentary annals apparently deriving from the lost Annals of Cluain Eidnech in Leix, a collection of scholastic poems with glosses containing much folklore and a curious tract, entitled *Baile Bricini*, a vision of the saints of Ireland, who are noticed by their nicknames. Much of this is inedited or throws fresh light on texts already published. Harley 5280 contains, in a curious orthography, a great quantity of secular and ecclesiastical texts, tales, treatises, and poems of the Old and Early Middle Irish period; much has been printed from it, but it contains texts like the *Baile Bricini*, which still await their editor. Of the other MSS., Add. 33993 has mutilated versions of old texts of the Tain cycle and a series of bardic poems on members of the Purcell, Cantwell, and other Anglo-Irish families. The rest come mainly under the heads of Theology, Romance, and Poetry. They contain a great number of translations of current mediaeval texts. Add. 30512 has a great quantity of native matter of much interest in connexion with the spiritual history of early Irish Christianity. It was written at the end of the fifteenth century by the prolific scribe William Mac an Lega, but represents in part much older material. It is possible that a number of its texts come ultimately from a MS. written at the famous monastery and school of Clonmacnois, on the Shannon. The contents are various: many poems of the late Old Irish and Early Middle Irish period, a series of prayers and litanies, treatises and short notes on theological subjects; of a later date are a series of saints' lives translated from the Latin and other versions of homilies and theological tracts. Other MSS. present a like variety of material. Thus Eg. 93 contains the famous Tripartite life of St. Patrick and fragments of epic tales. Eg. 91 contains lives of saints, native and foreign, many inedited, among them the interesting text on the saints of Egypt, a mixture of versions from the *Vitæ Patrum* with a lost passion of Pope Marcellinus, various theological treatises, and a short collection of Mary-legends. Eg. 92, a MS. written in part in Fermoy, co. Cork, has a vast number of short texts in prose and verse, chiefly of a native character, many connected with Fermoy, the Druid Mog Ruith and St. Molaga. Eg. 1781, written in Breffny *circa* 1484-7, contains a series of translations: of a Latin version of the *chanson de geste* of Fierabras, of the pseudo-Turpin's account of Charlemagne, of

Innocent the Third's *De Contemptu Mundi* (also in Eg. 91), of Statius' *Thebaid* (now in course of publication), a fragment of a version of Rufinus' translation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* (in completer form in the *Leabhar Breac*), translations of Maundeville and of Prester John's letter, and a number of versions of lives of saints, etc. Most of these translations must have been made in the 14-15th century period, and they prove the activity and receptiveness of the Irish mind in those days before the Tudor deluge. Add. 11809, again, has a series of translations dating from the same period: of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* ascribed to St. Bonaventura, of a Latin account of the life of the Virgin, originally composed in Germany in the early thirteenth century in verse, but perhaps known to our translators in a prose version, of the *Liber Scintillarum* of Defensor, of a Middle-English poem on the *Testamentum Christi* and of a long ascetic treatise, the original Latin of which has not yet been identified. None of these have been printed. Of other MSS., Add. 18205 has a life of St. Molaisse of Devenish in Loch Erne, with poems on the saint, containing much interesting local information, and Cotton MS. Vesp. E. 2, a collection of poems relating to St. Caillin, the patron of Breffny.

Much of the material enumerated above is still unpublished. And it will be readily seen how wide a field remains to be worked before we can pronounce with any confidence on the nature and extent of mediæval Irish literature. The older epic field early attracted scholars. But these later texts, which are destined to throw light on the minds of Irish scholars and writers in the period from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, remain still for the most part in the MSS.

Of the modern paper MSS., by far the larger portion of the collection, I have left myself little room to speak. But to anyone who would understand the Irish mind from the sixteenth century down to the Famine they will supply an abundance of material. And those who know best from personal contact with surviving representatives of the old poets and story-tellers the dignity and beauty of that ancient and disappearing view of life will recognize in these manuscripts the legible traces of an order of things now almost gone from the world. These manuscripts contain an infinite variety of poems, tales and traditions, folk-lore, jest and earnest, theology and burlesque, which illustrates as nothing else can the Irish mind as it emerged from the past into the present. And seen

in connexion with the old vellums they display the essential unity of that mind through all its phases. The ancient head of the order of poets, with all his train of lesser poets about him, weaving into a connected story the scattered fragments of the Tain, was animated by no other spirit than that which prompts the old fisherman of to-day to tell in his dying language the traditions of his people: "Fuit Ilium et ingens gloria Teucrorum." But the tale of Troy still lives on.