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regarded as a native of Dyfed, for we are told that, after her marriage at her father's court, she and Pwyll set out towards Dyfed. It is quite possible that legends concerning Rhiannon prevailed in the districts of Maesyfed and Ardudwy, for Eveydd, the name of Rhiannon's father, still survives in the name Maesyfed, for Maes Hyveyd, and in the Mabinogi of Branwen the fabulous birds of Rhiannon are connected with Harlech in Ardudwy. Moreover, according to one legend the grave of Pryderi is said to be at Maentwrog, in the same district, showing that the legend of Rhiannon was widespread in Wales.

(To be continued)

OLD IRISH SONG¹

ALFRED PERCEVAL GRAVES, M.A.

IN the dim morning twilight of Ancient Erin, legend describes her Fili's, or musical bards, as constant attendants upon the king and chieftain.

As Mr. Alfred M. Williams, the American critic, picturesquely puts the tradition, 'Surrounded by the Orfiddy, or instrumental musicians, who fulfilled the function of a modern military band, they watched his progress in battle for the purpose of describing his feats in arms, composed birthday odes and epithalamia, aroused the spirits of clansmen with war songs, and lamented the dead in the caoines, or keens, which are still heard in the wilder and more primitive regions of Ireland.'

We must, of course, discount much of the legendary colour which enthusiasts like Walker take on trust. But this is the picture of the early Irish bard presented to us by the chroniclers. Amongst other privileges, he wore

¹ A lecture to the Royal Institution of Great Britain. Basil Woodd Smith, Esq., F.R.A.S., F.S.A., Vice-President, in the chair.

a tartan with only one shade of colour less than that upon the king's robe, and his assassination involved a blood-penalty inferior only to the royal eric. But before attaining such high honours, he had to satisfy the moral requirements of 'purity of hand, bright without wounding, purity of mouth without poisonous satire, purity of learning without reproach, purity as a husband in wedlock.'

He had, moreover, to pass through a decidedly arduous courtship of the Muse before he was entitled to claim her favour; indeed, some writers go so far as to say that, like the patriarch, he had to serve seven years for her, committing to memory an almost incredible number of earlier compositions, and giving the closest study to the laws of verse, before he could become a poet on his own account.

When it is added that these laws of Irish verse, as finally formulated by the early Celtic professors, were the most complicated ever invented—not only limiting the sense within the stanza, but fixing the amount of alliteration and the number of syllables in each line, to say nothing of their assonantal requirements—we may well understand that although Early Irish verse may be granted, according to Professor Atkinson, to be the most perfectly harmonious combinations of sounds that the world has ever known, it must also be conceded that Irish 'direct metre' was the most difficult kind of verse under the sun—the despairing opinion of another leading Irish philologist.

Dr. Whitley Stokes's comment is 'that in almost all the ancient Celtic poetry, substance is ruthlessly sacrificed to form, and the observance of the rigorous rules of metre seems regarded as an end in itself.' The consequence of such an artificial system, combined with the high privileges of the bardic caste, resulted in the multiplication of minor parts to a degree which would have paralysed all Mr. Traill's efforts to keep pace with them, had he been a contemporary critic.

O'Curry quotes this droll account of their pecuniary dealings: 'At this time we are told that the poets became

more troublesome and importunate than ever. They were in the habit of travelling about the country in companies of thirty, composed of pupils and teachers, and each company had a silver pot, called "the Pot of Avarice," having chains of bronze attached to it by golden hooks. It was suspended from the points of the spears of nine of the company, which were thrust through the links at the other end of the chains. The reason that the pot was called the Pot of Avarice was because it was into it that whatever of gold or silver they received was put, and, whilst the poem was being chanted, the best nine musicians in the company played music round the pot. If their minstrelsy was well received, and adequately paid for, they left their blessing behind them in verse; if it was not, they satirised their audience in the most virulent terms of which their poetical vocabulary was capable; and, be it observed, that to the satire of an Irish bard, to whom there still clung in the popular belief the mystical attributes of the druid, there attached a fatal malignity.'

At the time of the conversion of Ireland to the Christian faith, the bards were said to number a third of the male population, and, in 590 A.D., a Synod was held at Drumceatt, by Aed, king of Ulster, which greatly reduced their forces. Indeed, such was the popular irritation against them, that had it not been for the friendly intervention of the statesman-poet, Colum Cille, they would probably have been banished altogether.

The Fili, or bard, no doubt was a minstrel as well as a poet, in the first instance, but in the course of time there would appear to have been a further bardic differentiation, and we learn that perfection in the three Musical Feats, or three styles of playing, gave the dignity of Ollamh, or Doctor of Music, to the professors of the harp. Now what were the three Musical Feats? Here they are well described in a weird old folk tale.

Lugh (the Tuatha da Danann king), and the Daghdha (their great chief and druid), and Ogma (their bravest

champion), followed the Fomorians and their leader from the battlefield of Moytura, because they had carried off the Daghdha's harper, Uaithne by name. The pursuers reached the banqueting house of the Fomorian chiefs, and there found Breas, the son of Elathan, and Elathan the son of Delbath, and also the Daghdha's harp hanging upon the wall. This was the harp in which the music was spell-bound, so that it would not answer, when called forth, until the Daghdha evoked it, when he said: 'Come, Durdabla; come, Coircethairchuir the two names of the harp. Come, Samhan; come, Camh, from the mouths of harps and pouches and pipes. The harp came forth from the wall then, and killed nine persons in its passage; and it came to the Daghdha, and he played for them the three musical feats which give distinction to a harper, viz., the Suaintraighe (which, from its deep murmuring, caused sleep), the Geantraighe (which, from its merriment, caused laughter), and the Golltraighe (which, from its melting plain-tiveness, caused crying). He played them the Golltraighe, until their women cried tears; and he played them the Geantraighe, until their women and youths burst into laughter; he played them the Suaintraighe, until the entire host fell asleep. It was through that sleep that they (the three champions) escaped from those Fomorians who were desirous to slay them.'

This passage is of threefold interest. It indicates the popular belief in the introduction of music into Ireland by the Tuatha da Danann, a mysterious race, by some regarded as an offshoot of the Danai, whom tradition declares to have conquered and civilised the country, and then to have disappeared from it into fairyland. Again, it contains the first reference in Irish literature to the harp or cruit, destined to become our national instrument. Lastly, it describes three styles of Irish music, of each of which we have characteristic examples that have descended to the present day. For the Geantraighe, which was provocation of mirth and frolic and excited spirit, is repre-

sented by the jigs, reels, planxties, and quick-step marches ; the Golltraighe, or the sorrowful music, still lingers in the keens or lamentations, and some of our superb marches of the wilder and sadder type ; and the Suaintraighe survives in many a beautiful Irish hush song.

The Irish sleep-compelling airs have not attracted the notice they deserve. Moore ignored them altogether, but Dr. Petrie prints many of them, and points out their resemblance to the slumber-tunes still in vogue in India and elsewhere in the East. They certainly support the tradition of the oriental affinities of the Early Irish.

The first period of Irish bardic literature may roughly be said to be that of epic poetry interspersed with songs. Fine exemplifications of these are to be found in the *Silva Gadelica*, a recent translation of a series of Early Irish tales by Mr. Standish Hayes O'Grady. The music to which they were sung has perished or become dissociated from these lyrics, but some of their measures are identical with those of rustic Irish folk tunes. We now come to the bardic period, thus described by the poet Spenser in *A View of the State of Ireland* :—

‘ *Iren*.—There is amongst the Irish a certain kind of people called Bardes, which are to them instead of Poets, whose Profession is to set forth the Praises or Dispraises of men in their Poems or Rithmes ; the which are had in so high Regard and Estimation amongst them, that none dare displease them for fear to run into Reproach through their offence, and to be made infamous in the mouths of all men.

‘ For their verses are taken up with a general applause, and usually sung at all feasts and meetings by certain other persons, whose proper function that is, who also receive for the same great rewards and reputation amongst them.’

It would appear that the poet Spenser made a study of the Irish poetry of his day, and a music-book of the sixteenth century, misnamed *Queen Elizabeth's Virginal Book*,

contains three Irish airs, one of which, Callino Casturame, is evidently alluded to by Pistol in Shakespere's *Henry V.*, who, on meeting a French soldier, cries, 'Quality ! Caleno custure me'—clearly, 'A Chailin òg, an stiuir thu mi.'

Here it may be well to give, in full, the famous passage in Spenser's *View of the State of Ireland*, relating to the character of the bardic lyrics of his day.

'*Eudoxus*.—But tell me (I pray you) have they any art in their compositions ? or be they anything witty or well-favoured, as poems should be ?

'*Irenæus*.—Yea, truly, I have caused divers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them ; and surely they were favoured of sweet wit, and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry ; yet were they sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their natural device, which gave good grace and comeliness unto them ; the which it is a great pity to see so abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which with good usage would serve to adorn and beautify virtue.

'As of a most notorious thief and wicked outlaw, which had lived all his lifetime of spoils and robberies, one of their Bardes in his praise will say, That he was none of the idle milksops that was brought up by the fireside, but that most of his days he spent in arms and valiant enterprizes ; that he did never eat his meat before he had won it with his sword ; that he lay not all night slugging in a cabbin under his mantle, but used commonly to keep others waking to defend their lives ; and did light his candle at the flames of their houses, to lead him in the Darkness ; that the day was his night, and the night his day, that he loved not to be long wooing of wenches to yield to him, but where he came he took by force the spoil of other men's love, and left but lamentation to their lovers ; that his musick was not the harp, nor lays of love, but the cries of people, and clashings of armour : and finally that he died not bewailed of many, but made many wail when he died, that dearly bought his death.

‘Do you not think (Eudoxus) that many of these praises might be applied to men of best deserts, yet are they all yielded to a most notable traitor, and amongst some of the Irish not finally accounted of. For the song, when it was first made and sung to a person of high degree there, was bought (as their manner is) for forty Crowns.’

The lyrical epoch alluded to by Spenser is the second era of bardic poetry in Ireland. It embraces the period of the English struggle for supremacy in the country—that terrible time of internecine war which alike brutalised the Saxon and the Celt. In times such as these it was impossible to compose long narrative poems. As Mr. Williams well puts it, ‘The inspiration of the bards was turned to more direct appeals for war, rejoicings for victory, and lamentations for misfortune and defeat. The poetry took a more lyric form, and became an ode instead of an epic.’

Irish Music and Song had now fallen on evil days. The downfall of the great Celtic families, and many of the great Anglo-Irish ones who had espoused their quarrel with successive English Governments, forced our national bards, for want of better support, to wander from castle to castle, instead of remaining as leading figures in the great households.

Turlough O’Carolan was the most remarkable of these wandering lyrists. Born in the year 1670, he early lost his sight through small-pox, but solaced himself for this deprivation by the study of music, in which he made astonishing progress. The *Irish Monthly Review* gives this instance of his wonderful musical memory, and his extraordinary power of musical improvisation. At the house of an Irish nobleman, where Geminiani was present, Carolan challenged that eminent composer to a trial of skill. The musician played over on his violin the Fifth Concerto of Vivaldi, and it was instantly repeated by Carolan on his harp, although he had never heard it before. The surprise of the company was increased when Carolan asserted that he would compose a concerto, himself, upon the spot; and he did then and there invent a piece that

has since gone by his name. But this story is evidently inaccurate, for whilst it is probable that it has a foundation in fact, Carolan cannot have had this trial of skill with Geminiani, whoever his Italian opponent may have been. Carolan composed upon the buttons of his coat, the buttons serving for the purpose of the lines, and the intervals between them for the spaces.

Carolan did not adhere entirely to the Irish style of composition, and his musical pieces show a considerable Italian influence; yet, as Mr. Bunting writes, he felt the full excellence of the ancient music of his country. He was a most prolific composer. One harper at the beginning of this century was alone acquainted with about a hundred of his tunes, and many were at that time believed to have been lost.

Passing over the period of 1798, which does not furnish many lyrics of first-rate quality, we now come to that important epoch in Irish lyric literature—the Granard and Belfast meetings of harpers, promoted with the object of reviving the taste for Irish music, which had begun to decay. These meetings, which took place about the year 1792, were very successful, and awoke in the distinguished Belfast musician, Mr. Bunting, such an enthusiasm for Irish music, that he henceforth devoted his main efforts to its collection and publication. Of the Belfast meeting he writes thus vividly :—

‘ All the best of the old class of harpers, a race of men then nearly extinct, and now gone for ever, were present—Hempson, O’Neill, Fanning, and seven others, the least able of whom has not left his equal behind. Hempson realised the antique pictures drawn by Cambrensis and Galilei, for he played with long crooked nails, and in his performance the tinkling of the small wires under the deep notes of the bass were particularly thrilling. He was the only one who played the very old music of the country, and this in a style of such finished excellence as persuaded me that the praises of the old Irish harp in Cambrensis,

Fuller, and others, were no more than just to that admirable instrument and its then professors. But more than anything else the conversation of Arthur O'Neill—who although not so absolute a harper as Hempson, was of gentle blood, and a man of the world, who had travelled over all parts of Ireland—won and delighted me. All that the genius of later poets and romance writers has feigned of the wandering minstrel was realised in this man. There was no house of any note in the north of Ireland, as far as Meath on the one hand, and Sligo on the other, in which he was not well known and eagerly sought after.'

What are our grounds for believing that many of the airs played at the harp meetings are very ancient ?

First, the testimony of the harpers, most of them very old men, at the Belfast meetings one hundred years ago, who smiled on being interrogated by Bunting as to the antiquity of the so-called ancient airs, and answered,— 'They are more ancient than any to which our popular tradition extends.' Moreover, Bunting informs us that 'though coming from different parts of Ireland, and the pupils of different masters, the harpers played those ancient tunes in the same key, with the same kind of expression, and without a single variation in any essential passage, or even in any note.' He adds, 'This circumstance seemed the more extraordinary when it was discovered that the most ancient tunes were in this respect the most perfect, admitting of the addition of a bass with more facility than such as were less ancient. Hence we may conclude that their authors must necessarily have been excellent performers, versed in the scientific part of their profession, and that they had originally a view to the addition of harmony in the composition of their pieces.

'It is remarkable that the performers all tuned their instruments upon the same principle, totally ignorant of the principle itself, and without being able to assign any reason either for their mode of tuning, or of their playing the bass.' And here it may be mentioned that the ancient

Irish harps had commonly thirty strings, and were tuned in the key of G, and that the Irish airs supposed to be the oldest are in the ordinary major scale of G, and were played in this key. But, for the sake of variety, the harpers played tunes in other scales, and melodies were composed in the scale of A, but with the tuning of the harp unchanged.

But the strongest proof of the skill of the Irish harpers of the thirteenth century is the testimony of Gerald Barry, best known as Giraldus Cambrensis, an inveterate opponent of everything else Irish: 'They are incomparably more skilful than any other nation I have ever seen. For their manner of playing on these instruments, unlike that of the Britons or (Welsh) to which I am accustomed, is not slow and harsh, but lively and rapid, while the melody is both sweet and sprightly. It is astonishing that in so complex and swift a movement of the fingers the musical proportions as to tune can be preserved; and that throughout the difficult modulations on their various instruments, the harmony is completed with such a sweet rapidity. They enter into a movement and conclude it in so delicate a manner, and tinkle the little strings so sportively under the deeper tones of the bass strings—they delight so delicately, and soothe with such gentleness, that the perfection of their art appears in the concealment of Art.'

John of Salisbury (twelfth century) is equally eulogistic, and Fuller says, 'Yea, we might well think that all the Concert of Christendom in this war and the Crusade conducted by Godfrey of Boulogne would have made no music if the Irish harp had been wanting.' There is indeed a continued record of praise (British and Continental) of the Irish music and its professors from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, which we may conclude by Drayton's stanza in his *Polyolbion* :—

'The Irish I admire,
And still cleave to that lyre
As to our Muse's mother;
And think, till I expire,
Apollo's such another.'

The antiquity of individual airs has distinct historical confirmation by Bunting and others. The tune called 'Thugamar fein an samhradh leinn' was sung to welcome the landing of the Duke of Ormond by a band of Virgins who went out to meet him from Dublin. Again, the ancient Irish air 'Summer is coming' is the same song practically as 'Summer is a comin' in,' which is reputed as the first piece of music set in score in Great Britain. Bunting claims that air, therefore, for Ireland on the ground of the extreme improbability of its having been borrowed by the ancient Irish from a country that has no national music of its own (the Welsh excepted). 'Their ignorance of the English language,' he adds, 'and their rooted aversion to their invaders, were effectual bars to any such plagiarism or adoption.'

Besides the remarkable similarity between our lullabies and those of the East already touched on, there is a marked correspondence between some of the early Norse and ancient Irish tunes. The distinguished Swedish harpist, Sjöden, who visited Dublin on the occasion of the Moore Centenary, showed me that some of our old Irish airs—for instance—the 'Cruiskeen Lawn'—were almost identical with early Norse ones; the question for settlement of course being, whether the Irish got them from the Danes or the Danes from the Irish, though the musical reputation of our ancestors, amongst whom the Danes formed maritime settlements at Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, and elsewhere, points to the latter conclusion. Then there is the strong internal evidence of extreme antiquity from the old-world characters of such airs as the 'March from Fingal.'

To what poetical measures were these old airs sung? We have, fortunately, some clue to this, not only in the modern Irish words to them published by Dr. Joyce, but in the important fact that we have Irish poems, as early as the ninth century, which will sing to some of the ancient airs; for example, an invocation for God's protection upon

his coracle, by Cormac Mac Cullinane, King and Bishop of Cashel, who died in 903. This measure is identical with that of Shenstone's lines :—

‘ My banks they are furnished with bees,
Whose murmurs invite us to sleep,
My grottoes are shaded with trees
And my hills are white over with sheep.’

Professor O'Curry puts the case very strongly, but not, I think, too strongly, when he says, ‘ Those verses of King Cormac M'Cullinane, now almost one thousand years old, which sing to the air of “ For Ireland I would not tell who she is,” is adduced as an interesting fact, proving that a fragment of a lyric poem, ascribed to a writer of the ninth century, and actually preserved in a MS. book so old as the year 1150, presents a peculiar structure of rhythm, exactly corresponding with that of certain ancient musical compositions still popular and well-known, and, according to tradition, of the highest antiquity.

‘ I believe such a fact is unknown in the musical history of any other nation of Europe ; and yet in ours very many such instances could be adduced of ancient lyric music still in existence, in minutely exact agreement with forms of lyric poetry used not only in but peculiar to the most ancient periods of our native literature.’

A large proportion of the Irish airs are in eight-line measures, consisting of two quatrains ; though originally it would appear that the verses consisted of four lines only, in which event the range of the air was very limited. But, as time went on, the strain appears to have been repeated, with a variation, and then added to by means of a strain of different character, the final musical measure being a repetition of the first strain.

Stanzas built up to suit such airs largely consist of sixteen lines, which are quaintly called ‘ curving eight-lined verses ’—the meaning of the word curved referring to the second part of eight lines, which are added to the

first eight to fill up the curve turn, or second part of the tune.

Finally, it may be worth while to state the case of the Scottish claim to Irish airs, and the Irish claim to Scottish melodies. A pedantic attempt has been made to specify certain Irish musical characteristics, the absence of which will prove one of the airs in dispute to be Scottish. But Sir Robert Stewart justly points out that the so-called unfailing characteristic of Irish, as of Chinese, melody to omit the fourth and seventh of the scale, is by no means a sure test. In many Irish airs these intervals are wanting in others they both exist. In some they are omitted in the first strain and are present in the second part of the air. Again, the presence of the submediant or sixth of the scale, supposed to be a never-failing test of an Irish air, is equally emphatic in the Scottish air 'Auld Lang Syne,' and many other Scottish tunes.

The Scottish airs may be roughly classed as Highland tunes and Lowland tunes. The first class have a close affinity with the Irish music, and no wonder, for not only are the Highland Scotch of North Irish descent, but the Scotch of the West coast were for centuries closely connected with their kinsfolk across the North Channel, and a constant exchange of minstrelsy must have therefore gone between them. The Lowland Scotch tunes form a large and distinct body of national melodies, composed by national musicians, and not found in Irish collections. In Ireland there is a much larger body of airs acknowledged on all hands to be purely Irish and *not* found in Scottish collections.

Outside these airs there is a large number common to and claimed by both countries. As Dr. Joyce pithily puts it, 'In regard to a considerable proportion of them it is now impossible to determine whether they were originally Irish or Scottish. A few are claimed in Ireland that are certainly Scottish, but a very large number claimed by Scotland are really Irish, of which the well-known air

“Eileen Aroon” or “Robert Adair” is an example. From the earliest times it was a common practice among the Irish harpers to travel in Scotland. How close was the musical connection between the two countries is hinted by the Four Masters when, in recording the death of Mac Carroll, they call him the chief minstrel of Ireland and Scotland! and there is abundant evidence to show that this connection was kept up till towards the end of the last century.’ Ireland was long the school for Scottish Harpers, as it was for those of Wales: ‘Till within the memory of persons still living, the school for Highland poetry and music was Ireland, and thither professional men were sent to be accomplished in these arts.’ Such facts as these sufficiently explain why so many Irish airs have become naturalised in Scotland.

‘It is not correct to separate and contrast the music of Ireland and that of Scotland as if it belonged to two different races. They are in reality an emanation direct from the heart of one Celtic people; and they form a body of national melody superior to that of any other nation of the world.’

PAN-CELTIC NOTES

IRISH LONDON NOTES

The Gaelic League of London meets every Monday in the Furnivall Street Hall for instruction in the Irish language, Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced, for the Study of Irish History and Literature under Mr. Hegarty and Miss Eleanor Hull, and for singing in a Gaelic Choir, under Miss Una Rae Hall, the rehearsals for which take place at the Central Offices, 77 Fleet Street.

Adult and children’s classes are also held at various local centres, *e.g.* Clapham, Kensington, Fulham, Forrest Gate, and Haverstock Hill, at which every now and again a *Plaraca* or a miscellaneous entertainment is held consisting of the performance of Irish or bilingual plays, singing, reciting and dancing.