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Etain the Beloved by James H. Cousins

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ETAIN THE BELOVED By James H. Cousins

Dublin: Maunsell & Co. 3s. 6d.

I believe one poet of Ireland has succeeded in the task of rendering in purest poetry the best thoughts and sympathetic strivings of the modern mind. I speak of Mr. J. H. Cousins and his recently published volume, "Etain." In this little epic of heroic Ireland the expression is felt to be equally in harmony with the ancient, and with the best in the modern, world. I venture the suggestion that the probable reason is that the poet has fulfilled the Aristotelian canon by making his art universal. Alike in the perfection of his technique and in the pure beauty of his characterisation and setting, he has succeeded in lifting his work clear of the temporary imperfections and débris of Nature's handiwork, which is superficially, though painfully, apparent in every generation. His golden verse moves along the ways of that common human love and effort which is inspired by an intuitive perception of high ethical and spiritual verities, which the poet seeks to make real to the reader in the only way possible, not by the dogmatic insistence of legal or moralist pedantry, but by a representation of their operation in the actual tissue of human passion and character. Touches are not absent of that intense sympathy with every kind of human failure and misery which is becoming so prominent a feature of the best modern thought. Nor does he compel his art to cloud its beacon brightness by actual contact with an external hideousness: a magic phrase imparts the spirit and atmosphere of compassionate understanding for which the reformer pleads, when he

"crowds the ways, where human sorrow pleads
With generations of exalted deeds."

The spirit of a thousand reiterated demonstrations of the human claims of Labour breathes, sweetly without bitterness, in the little poem of intense Celtic feeling, entitled "Laborare Est Orare." These lines, in fact, illustrate the peculiar advantage of the modern poet who is Irish in race and spirit over his English compeer, in that in Ireland the unmixed wine of poetry is to a large extent ready to hand in the atmosphere, in the fibre and substance, of the common life, while in England the prevalent industrial system has made a local selection of inspiring material a difficult if not impossible task. Potent, too, in depth of comprehension and in fidelity to the tradition of Ireland is the poet's sympathetic recognition of woman as spiritually co-equal with man, and of her, not as struggling to retrieve her position of equal freedom against those who would keep her in dishonour, but craved as his needed complement in the joint human task of social government. Nowhere can I remember to have read so noble and imagina-

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tive a presentation of the universal fact of sex, so true to the modern findings of science and psychology, as in those stanzas, where the feminist gospel rings out clear in a single line—

“Diverse in gift, in essence one and whole.”

Quotation, unless for the purpose of illustrating in some degree the poet's prophetic apprehension of the true significance of certain tendencies which to-day are troubling the waters of civilisation, is unfair to the poet in exact proportion to the excellence of his craftsmanship and exasperating to the reader who is not already acquainted with the poem. I forbear to pass comment on the interpretation of the love of man and woman in those phases of rarefied intensity where the passion is elevated to the supreme pitch of impersonal devotion to a conception purely spiritual. Mr. Cousins is no ordinary poet. He is a seer of clear-eyed vision in the depths of the human heart and the complexity of an anarchic social order, with an extraordinary faculty of precise and vivid similitude to concrete realities. His pages are crowded with a delicate tracery of word-pictures complete in themselves and pregnant with thought which often startles by its subtle and intangible familiarity at the very moment when the pleasure of the imagery is keenest. For a sheer imaginative presentation of the fact of social solidarity, which is being discovered and proclaimed to-day, and its reconciliation with the older theory of man's spiritual independence, take the following:

“Not all from spade and share
The harvest comes: seed to its fruit has grown,
Self-shaped, though stirred by smart of sun and air;
And in life's myriad hands beaten and pressed,
Man is not made, but man made manifest.”

On the side of technique, Mr. Cousins seems to me to have accomplished in this generation the unique task of art, that of handling a body of ideas of great number and variety in a style which fuses thought and diction into a unity of a higher order. One instance of his power of new rhythms, and equally significant as a peculiarly Celtic appreciation of the magical soul of nature, is in the little masterpiece, commencing:

“Hills crowned with age,
And solemn seas,
Are full of sage
Philosophies.”

Matthew Arnold spoke of the Magic of Celtic descriptions of natural objects. That power, consisting in a kind of spiritual surrender of the temporary personal

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ego to receive the illumined consciousness of intimate union with Nature's moods, has been noted as a feature alike of ancient Irish poetry and of poetry in English by Irish poets and writers of Irish extraction. Mr. Cousins is appreciated by many admirers chiefly on the score of his already published poems, like the "Corn-crake," which reveal this sympathetic quality in a marked degree, and the present volume contains some striking examples, like the "Starling and the Robin," which should endear him to the rising generation.

MAURICE A. C. WILKINS.

THE CHARWOMAN'S DAUGHTER. By James Stephens. 3s. 6d.
Macmillan and Co.

Readers of "The Irish Review" have no need to be informed of the merits of the story which they know as "Mary." Of those who read the book, eight out of every ten will be prepared to declare that "The Charwoman's Daughter" is one of the best stories they have ever read. All the time Mr. Stephens is speaking to the wise, kindly and sympathetic side of ourselves, and his story of the charwoman and her daughter has the profound reality of a fairy tale. In making Dublin the setting for the story Mr. Stephens has done more for our Capital than a national Government could do—he has made Dublin a most interesting and exciting place. Stephen's Green and the Phoenix Park have become like the territory that is round the Well at the World's End, and the Streets of Dublin have become full of romantic possibilities, for we know the policeman who stands where Grafton Street and Nassau Street cross, and we hope to meet the wayfarers that Mary has seen—the tall man with the sweeping brown beard who seemed to know everybody, the tall, thin black man who was always smiling sweetly to himself, the man who looked at Mary once and who gave her the impression that she had known him well hundreds of years before, and that he remembered her also, and the man who looks the tireddest man in the world. We are glad that Mr. Stephens has not put "Finis" at the end of his story, but has written there "Thus far the story of Mary Makebelieve." We hope to meet her again with Mrs. Makebelieve and with the young man whom Mr. Stephens has left at Mary's side "exploring with a delicate finger his half-closed eye." Meantime, we can put "The Charwoman's Daughter" with the best loved books on her shelves—even beside "Don Quixote." It is a story that Cervantes would have loved.

CONAL O'RIORDAN'S PLAYS.

Shakespeare's End and other Irish Plays by Conal O'Riordan (Norris Connell).
London: Stephen Swift and Co.

If "Shakespeare's End" shows Conal O'Riordan capable of making feckless experiments, the other two plays in this volume shows him capable of more