A. E. and Fiona MacLeod

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A.E.'s letters on Fiona MacLeod, and especially his last one, contain so much that is good and true, so much that every Irish heart should respond to, that it is all the more important to point out one fatal error which vitiates their reasoning so far as concerns the particular issue on which Miss MacLeod and he have joined controversy. A.E. writes, "A number of our rapidly dwindling race have their backs to the wall; they are making a last stand for freedom, for the right to choose their own ideals, to make their own laws, to govern their own lives according to the God-in-planted law within them. . . . We in Ireland would keep in mind our language, teach our children our history, the story of our heroes, and the long traditions of our race which stretch back to God; but we are everywhere thwarted." And a race so thwarted and oppressed ought not, A.E. thinks, to have "moral platitudes" about the law of Love addressed to it by one of the oppressors.

Very good—now let us throw a little day light on this vehement statement. Who are thwarting and oppressing us, and in what way? Take the case of the language and the history, which may represent the cultivation of the inward and spiritual nationality of Ireland. The history of the land, from Partholan to O'Connell, as written by an Irish scholar and a Nationalist, has for some years lain fully open to our National schools, and may be taught there without let or hindrance from any authority whatsoever. And as far as the language, if we have lost, or are losing, that great national treasure, who is to blame? Not the Sassenach! Have not our whole people, with their social and political leaders, for the last sixty years, co-operated eagerly with the National Board of Education in digging the grave of the ancient tongue? I would ask A.E. to consider whether there is not some insincerity, some lack of that clear thinking and straightforward speaking which are our vital needs in Ireland, in thus laying all these things to the charge of England when we ourselves, in our blindness and apathy, have been most willing partners, if not leaders, in the shame and ill that have been wrought? In quite recent times some awakening of the Irish mind to the real significance of what is going on has been witnessed, and England certainly does not stand in the way of a reversal of the fatuous policy of the past. The Chief Secretary recently declared in Parliament his strong approval of the programme of the Gaelic League so far as concerns the maintenance of the language; and pointed out that the practical issue rested entirely with the National Board, a body which in addition to A.E.'s "insolent blockhead" contains many persons supposed to be in sympathy with popular ideas, and some who have openly pronounced in favour of the Gaelic movement. If the Irish people really want the language preserved they can do it if necessary by the simple process of boycotting the National Schools for three months. It is a very small effort for so great an object, and if they will not make it, or make any other effective protest, we really cannot blame England for the lamentable results of our own folly and unfaithfulness. I do not believe that English opinion is any more hostile to the Irish language than to the Welsh. It simply follows the line of least resistance, and A.E. will hardly deny that the Anglicization of this country has hitherto met with practically no resistance at all among the masses of the Irish people or their accredited leaders.

But I have a further criticism to make on the passage quoted above from A.E.'s last letter. He is mixing up completely different things, things which ought to be kept sedulously apart; and the result is that his indictment of Miss MacLeod is quite unanswerable without first going through the process of unravelling a very tangled skein of thought. The right of Ireland to "make her own laws," if by that A.E. means the establishment of a local legislature, is one thing—the right to "choose our own ideals" is a very different one. Ireland might have her local legislature and yet be thoroughly denationalized and vulgarized. She might, like Wales, realize a perfectly distinct and individual nationality in social life, literature, and art, and yet be content with her present voice in the Imperial Parliament. Personally I am for all the nationality we can get, and in all its forms, political and other, so long as we retain the imperial position which gives us, and alone can give us, a place on the stage of world-history. But I see that any movement inspired by a spirit of hate towards the monarchical idea and the imperial unity of these Kingdoms, is foredoomed to ruin, and that it will drag the Gaelic movement to ruin too, if the latter, in an evil hour, be associated with it. The Gaelic League and all the organisations for fostering and guiding the inward national life of the country all proclaim, by a wise instinct, their absolute aloofness from the political movement. A.E. has no warrant for speaking of the political movement and the spiritual movement as if they were one and the same thing. It has been under the dominance of the former that the latter has withered. Our politicians have contended furiously about comparative trifles, and nourished that spirit of blind hate, against which Fiona MacLeod appeals, towards a kindred Power, with whose destinies ours must remain for ever bound up, while they saw with indifference the most sacred treasures of our national life slipping from our heedless hands. I do not write these words as an indictment of them and their ways—they merely wrought and taught what it was in them to do, and the people followed them gladly. But I protest against the assumption that they stand for Irish nationality, or that there is no way of realizing that ideal save through them.

A.E. concludes his letter by disputing Fiona MacLeod's title to speak as a representative voice of Gaeldom, "for the Gael in Ireland, in addition to his traditions, which are shared to some extent by the Scottish Celt, has the aspiration to a distinct and self-governed nationality." Again, that fatal confusion between "self-government" (of which we have at present a great deal more than most of us realize) and "distinct nationality"! But who told A.E. that Miss MacLeod is a Unionist? The essay which originated this discussion certainly contained nothing to warrant this assumption; nor, to the best of my knowledge, does any published work of Miss MacLeod's. In one sentence she does, I admit, deny to Ireland the possibility of possessing a national literature unless it be written in the Irish tongue. I think she is wrong; but her opinion is precisely that upon which the leaders of the Gaelic League are never tired of insisting as the only true doctrine on the subject of Irish literature.

Those of us in Ireland who are engaged in trying, according to our lights and opportunities, to stem the tide of Anglicization and vulgarization which is drowning the national life of this country, have much to contend with and the worst enemies are within our own borders. Fiona MacLeod is most emphatically a helper not a hinderer in this work, and one of the most potent helpers we have. For my own part I think that her essay, "Celtic," indicates the lines on which we may most successfully work. There are other people who apparently think that when little children are induced to march through the streets of Dublin singing to a music-hall tune, "To hell with the Union Jack," a great anti-English demonstration has been carried out. I regret A.E.'s letters on Miss MacLeod, because, whether he will or no, they cannot fail to encourage the latter seriously mistaken view.

T. W. ROLLESTON.