

seems to me that by the principle of the survival of the strongest we are running a handicapped race.

E. MAUD GRAHAM, '96.

OSSIAN—THE GAELIC HOMER.

In these latter days, when the spirit of evolution is in the air, and everything must be considered in its origin and growth, we cannot wonder that Literature has met the common fate. Each new literary work is eagerly seized by the critics, and its pedigree is closely examined. We are told that the form is taken from one quarter, and the style from another, while the matter is gathered from various sources. And in the end we find that the new author, who has so captivated our hearts, has but the least shred of original genius—is a mere satellite shining with borrowed light. Our early enthusiasm for him is chilled by the damaging revelations of these cold-blooded literary evolutionists, and we can only turn away sadly with the old complaint of the Preacher on our lips: "There is no new thing under the sun."

And to us who are sometimes weary of studying books with the swell of the lamp upon them—books which are the products of dry scholarship, and each the offspring of many earlier works—it is inexpressibly refreshing to take up some form that has sprung fresh from the heart of the singer. Of such a kind are the simple heart-felt lyrics of Robert Burns, who was not a school man; only a plain peasant singing, as Nature prompted, the music of his own heart, as he followed the plough along the furrows of his native Lowland farm. But if the Lowlands of Scotland can claim the honor of giving Robert Burns to the world, there remains for the Celtic dwellers in the Highlands, the honor of giving to their country many centuries before, its first great Nature-poet, Ossian.

It was not until the middle of the last century that the poems of Ossian were brought to the notice of the literary world. James McPherson, a Scotchman of literary tastes, made a tour of the Highlands about 1760, for the purpose of securing any Ossianic remains that were still available. He then wrote a book purporting to be an English translation of the poems of Ossian. At once a heated controversy arose as to the authenticity of these translations, and to the present time that matter has remained a bone of contention for the critics. This is no place, even were we able, to discuss the merits of the dispute. But it was most natural that such a dispute should have arisen. McPherson did not publish his Gaelic originals along with the translations, and this fact naturally caused suspicions. Dr. Johnson was one of the bitterest critics. "Produce the manuscripts," he would roar, "and if they are proved authentic that will end the matter." Finally, the Gaelic poems were produced, and McPherson was then accused of forging them to match the translations. The best opinion now seems to be that McPherson did actually find many fragments in his journeys; that he wove them together in a rather free English translation, filling in the gaps with his own invention in order to make a complete epic poem; and that, when pressed for the originals, he bound his Gaelic fragments together in the same way. It is generally agreed now that the great body of his work is quite as ancient as he claimed it was.

But, McPherson aside, there is no doubt as to a great mass of Gaelic poetry of very great antiquity. Scotland has always been a land of song. And it has ever been a favorite pastime of the Gael, on the mountain-side in summer, and around the bright peat fire in winter, to recite or sing the ancient songs of their fathers. As a race they have lived, even as they do to-day, very much in the past, and they can find nothing of modern times to equal the old songs and legends that have come down from almost pre-historic times. Men have been known who

could recite Gaelic poetry for several successive evenings without repeating a single line the second time. Thus the old ballads have been preserved—not in books or mouldy parchment—but cherished lovingly in the heart by each generation, and carried down through the ages on the lips of men. It were surely then no unprofitable thing to glance at this ancient poetry which has lived so many centuries, and which has become specially interesting in our own time on account of the part it played in the revival of German literature in the last century.

Who then was this Ossian? Unfortunately, we know nothing about him that can be called historically certain. Like Homer, he is shrouded in the dim shadows of antiquity, and like Homer too, his very existence as a living personality has been doubted. Nothing but tradition and his own songs remain to tell us anything of his life. There are many legends concerning him—all differing widely in detail—but agreeing strangely in their general character. He is uniformly represented as an old man, bereft of all his kindred, seeking solace from his loneliness in song. According to one legend he was lulled to sleep by the sweet strains of invisible singers, and awoke, after a hundred years, to find himself alone among a race of strangers. The most general story is that Ossian lived in the third century, when the Celts were still Heathen, and long before Christianity had begun to gain any foothold in Britain. He is the son of Finn or Fingal, the great war king of the Fenians, and himself a warrior as well as bard, goes out with the valiant peers of his father to battle against the invading hosts of Lochlan. At last, in his extreme old age, he is left alone. All his friends have passed away, and, saddest of all, he is bereaved of his young hero son Oscar, the sole comfort and hope of his declining years. Only the beautiful Malvina, the betrothed of Oscar, is left to him, and she seeks to console him with her song. And thus, with no interest in the present, and with all the ties which bound him to the past ruthlessly broken, the sightless old bard sits in the mist, in which he imagines according to his heathen fancy his friends come again to visit him. And as he communes with these, and meditates upon the past, he sings a plaintive song of other years,

"Of old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago."

To illustrate the style of Ossian, let us take this battle-picture from the first book of "Fingal," and let us remind the charitable reader that, as the music and language-beauty of Homer cannot be reproduced in translation, so it is probable, as all the critics agree, that McPherson has fallen far short of the Gaelic original.

"Like autumn's dark storms, pouring from two echoing hills, towards each other approached the heroes. Like two deep streams from high rocks meeting, mixing, roaring on the plain; loud, rough, and dark in battle, meet Lochlin and Innis-fail. Chief mixes his strokes with chief, and man with man; steel, clanging, sounds on steel. Helmets are cleft on high. Blood bursts and smokes around. Strings murmur on the polished yews. Darts rush along the sky. Spears fall like the circles of light, which gild the face of night. As the noise of the troubled ocean, when roll the waves on high. As the last peal of thunder in heaven, such is the din of war! Though Cormac's hundred bards were there to give the fight to song; feeble was the voice of a hundred bards to send the deaths to future times! For many were the deaths of heroes; wide poured the blood of the brave!"

And, in contrast, let us quote from the sixth book this passage of a more peaceful character:—

"The clouds of night came rolling down. Darkness rests on the steep of Cromla. The stars of the north arise over the rolling of Erin's waves; they show their heads of fire through the flying mist of heaven. A distant wind roars in the wood. Silent and dark is the plain