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Thursday, March 16, 1901

Irish Minstrelsy, Song and Story.

We have received in pamphlet form from one of our esteemed subscribers, the following timely contribution from the pen of one of the most gifted Irish priests of the neighboring Republic—Rev. Thomas J. Shanahan, D.D., of the Catholic University of Washington—entitled "Historical Sketch of Irish Minstrelsy, Song and Story." The holding of the festival of Irish Minstrelsy in Philadelphia last month at which the celebrated Irish baritone, Mr. William Ludwig, whose recent visit to Montreal aroused so much enthusiasm—afforded Dr. Shanahan an admirable opportunity to discuss this interesting subject. The contribution is very appropriately addressed to Mr. Ludwig. It is as follows:

Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., Jan., 1901. William Ludwig, Esq.

Dear Sir: I hear with sincere pleasure of the Gaelic festival of Minstrelsy and Song which is to be given under your experienced direction in the City of Brotherly Love on the evening of February 13, 1901. No more suggestive site could be chosen for such a musical event than the city which was sympathetic to the Gael from the date of his first great exodus, and whose very name recalls the common Christianity of its sea-divided sections, and the Christian principle of mutual affection, however large and that ought to bind these scattered remnants of the world's oldest race in useful and honorable co-operation for certain great goods of life that many think to be now in jeopardy, at least from an historical and Christian point of view.

It is some fourteen centuries since such a feast or national musical congress was celebrated among free and governing Gaels, nearly fourteen hundred years since the Hill of Tara, the "Palace of Music," was deserted and the harp ceased to resound amid the brilliant concourse of beauty, chivalry and art that in those old days was wont to gather every three years about the High King of Erin. Shall the beloved island ever see again such an hour? Who knows? Father Time is not only long and patient, but eminently equitable; his records are full of splendid acts of equity that yet astound the soul of every intelligent reader. Even Golden Rome became, in due order, a proof that injustice and oppression, however large and ruinous the sweep of their action, are themselves culprits that shall one day be judged with becoming severity.

The Gaelic peoples of antiquity were the most musical of the world. Their chief seat, Ireland, was known as the "Land of Song." How little do we know of the music of Greece and Rome or the ancient Orient? When we find a broken slab of marble with some words of a hymn to Apollo, all Europe and America are interested, for one brief moment the whole world listens to the music that could please an Alexander and an Aristotle. But how different is it with the music of Ireland! It is not only as old as any ancient music that has reached us, but is infinitely abundant, and has always exercised a potent influence upon the hearts and fortunes of the Gael.

The musicians of ancient Erin were a princely caste, vowed to music from their tenderest youth, educated with the greatest care. Their native tongue were far from being melodious, formed as nowhere else in Europe yehe basis of a lengthy special training. The memory was cultivated in a phenomenal way. The old Irish school-master in the stories of Carleton and Crofton Croker is a genuine descendant of the men who formed the youthful Irish bards while the world was yet young, and the spirit of romance still flourished in Ireland. If the musician had to know at least three hundred and fifty "prime stories" before he was let loose on the community, he had also to be acquainted with the endless resources of the Gaelic tongue. It is said, on three hundred and eighteen metres were actually classified, though the musical capacities of the Gaelic tongue were far from being exhausted by this number. Careful students of literature like Dr. Sigerson, of Dublin, assert that it is to the Gaelic poets that we owe the introduction of rhyme into our modern languages. Thereby instead of measuring our poetry by an academic and artificial system of long and short syllables, we have the natural and pleasing effect of similar sounding syllables, the delicate attuning of vowels and consonants so arranged as to keep up a unity of sentiment in a variety of expression. The rapid play of mind and heart in the musician is conveyed by the use of accent, and the overflowing melody is constrained on all sides by the use of fixed breaks or pauses, the number of syllables to the line, the art of making vowels and consonants everywhere along the line already charged with picturesque words and the virgin emotions of the singer's heart.

It has often been noticed that there is about the Irish orators of England—Duke, Grattan, Flood, and their congeners—a certain flood-

ing sense of solemn and magnificent music, as it were their atmosphere. So it is with the Irish music in general. It has an ineffable tone-color of its own, delicate and endless shadings of sound effects that in modern rigid, scale cannot render with accuracy. The more we read and study about Irish music the more we are convinced that under other political circumstances it would have already conquered the world's heart, and affected mightily the flow of human life.

Certainly on Irish soil it has been passionately loved and cultivated. The harp is mentioned in the oldest poetical document of the Gael, the song of Amergin and Lugaid, son of Ith. Its music is compared to the warbling of song birds blowing sweetly over stately golden trees. The scholarly musicians who were its best masters were sacred and inviolate in their persons, wore the rich scarlet dress of Kings, and received for their rewards not merely cups and beakers of gold, but vast estates. It is said that the whole barony of Carby, in Cork, was once given to a singer as a fit reward for his skill.

The Christianized Gael were no less devoted to their ancient music. The bards became the friends of Saint Patrick and weave for him a "thread of verse about the Breton Law" that the Saint adapted to Christian teachings, i. e., they threw it into a metrical form so that it could be recited or sung before the judges. The great singers of the time became his converts or those of his disciples—Fiacc, Sechnall, Dallan, Seanchuan, Dubtach, Cearvail. From that day the Bishops, abbots and priests were wont to carry their harps with them on their apostolic journeys, and literally sang their way into the hearts of the Gael. Their common saint, Columba of the Churches, the Saint of Ireland and Scotland, was one of the sweetest singers of all Erin. Several of his poems are yet extant and they breathe a spirit of genial lyricism—they were clearly first sung by Columba, and then handed around in writing. There is a pretty tale told about this saint who was born not long after the death of St. Patrick, now he was one day conversing with his brethren in the presence of the poet Cronan on the banks of the River Boyle, where it flows into Loch Ce in Roscommon. When the poet related the monks' distress their sorrow that Columba had not asked him to sing something "according to the rules of his art." Thus the old pagan music was still lovingly preserved and cultivated. Adamant, who has written the life of Columba, praises his extraordinary voice, very sweet yet so powerful that he could be heard a mile away. His monastery at Derry was one of the first nurseries of Church music among the Irish. The old legend has it that every leaf on the oaks of Derry was occupied by a listening angel, so lovely was the song of its monks.

Perhaps such airs as "Aillean a Roon" go back to this time. One tradition assigns it to the brother of the famous Donogh O'Daly, abbot of Boyle in the thirteenth century. Another says it was sung in the ninth century. Handel said once that he would rather have written it than all his oratorios. So, too, the "Coolin" song, the "Blooming Deirdre," the "Molly Ashore," the "Brown Thorn," the "Dear Black Hill" are as they lie inimitably sweet and tender. The Irish of music think that many of the airs selected for the famous political and sentimental songs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were chosen precisely because they were very old and very dear to the people. It must not be forgotten that the mediaeval Irish had, besides the ordinary notation by staves and points, another curious system of musical notation, the letters of the alphabet. The Latin letters of the fifth and sixth centuries, to whom they also owed the use of the Latin alphabet.

Our modern music, as all know, is an outgrowth of the music of the middle ages, and that was the creation of the Catholic Church. Now the Irish monks on the Continent contributed in their day no little to this music—there is for proof the well-known story of Monks and Marcellus at the monastery of Saint Gall in Switzerland in the ninth century, were they taught music. Later men like Notker the Stammerer and Hermann the Dwarf followed in their footsteps. The multitude of Irish monks in the eighth and ninth centuries in every court of Europe, at every cathedral and along every highway suggests a still more general influence of a musical character. The men who taught handwriting and the illumination of manuscripts to Frank and Teuton were not likely to neglect the supreme and peculiar art of their faith-land, the art of song. In the seventh century it was they who, at Ripon, Lindesfarne, Malinesbury and other monasteries founded by them presided at the birth of English psalmody and taught the Angles and Saxons of Northumberland to chant the psalms of David and the prayers of the Church.

Few writers have said harder things about the Gael than the famous Gerald Barry (Cambrensis), who lived at the time of the Nor-

man invasion. Yet he praises in the highest terms the musical gifts of the Irish.

"This people," he says, "deserves to be praised for their successful cultivation of instrumental music, in which their skill is, beyond comparison, superior to that of every nation we have seen. For their modulation is not drawing and morose like our instrumental music in Britain, but the strains, while they are lively and rapid, are also sweet and delightful. It is astonishing how the proportionate time of the music is preserved, notwithstanding such impetuous rapidity of the fingers; and how, without violating a single rule of the art in running through Irish music, the work is done with so sweet a rapidity, so unequal an equality of time, so apparently discordant a concord of sounds, the melody is harmonized and rendered perfect."

Indeed the Irish music was precisely one of those many charms that acted so potently on all the Norman English who came into friendly contact with the people. In the sixteenth century the English traveler Stanhurst says of the Irish harper, Cruise, that he was the most famous ever heard of, not only the greatest but the sole master of that instrument. So in the "Diary of Evelyn" we read the praises of the harper Clus. Dr. Renchan tells us in his "History of Music" that it was precisely in the Anglo-Norman time that the great musicians of the families of the O'Connors, the O'Connors, the O'Donnells and particularly of the O'Connors to whom we owe many of the exquisite strains that the world still admires. At the end of the sixteenth century an Italian historian of the foreign composition of Ireland. Well he might, for the same Virgil, praises in almost the same terms as Cambrensis the eminent skill, the elegance, the accuracy and rapidity of execution of the Irish instrumental performers of Ireland. Well he might, for Bacon wrote about that time that "no harper hath the sound so melting and prolonged as the Irish harp." According to the poet Tasso, the ancient music of the Irish was initiated by the famous Italian composer of the sixteenth century, Gesualdo, himself in turn the inspiration of Geminiani, whose long stay in Ireland and fondness for O'Carroll's harp, Geminiani used to say that "in the domain of Great Britain we have no original music except the Irish." Handel, too, found his most appreciative public in Dublin, where he as well as other foreign composers loved to dwell in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Old Irish airs and motifs have been detected in the works of more than one brilliant composer of the continent.

Yet the beauty and power of this music were the cause of its decay. The Kings and Queens of England pursued the harpers with the greatest animosity. Every minstrel's heart was an altar of patriotism. They were forbidden the Pale; their horses and appurtenances were confiscated with all their property. Finally, they were condemned to be hung because they would not cease to chant the glories, the rights and hopes of their ancient fatherland.

"When England would a land enthral,
(She'd) do the muses' sons to fall;
Least Virtue's hand should string the lyre,
And feed with song the patriot's fire."

With the independence of the Northern Chiefs were lost, in the seventeenth century, the castles and the home where the minstrels flourished. Every minstrel's heart was an altar of patriotism. They were forbidden the Pale; their horses and appurtenances were confiscated with all their property. Finally, they were condemned to be hung because they would not cease to chant the glories, the rights and hopes of their ancient fatherland.

Thus there remained only the great heart of the people as the last shreds of Irish music. Today, in a sudden sunshine of popular favor and appreciation that heart is giving back to men like Douglas Hyde, William Yeats, Lionel Johnston, John Todhunter, T. B. Rollison, Nora Hopper and Dora Sigerson some of its secrets treasured through a long night of centuries. No law can reach, no tyrant destroy. Since the death in 1738 of the great O'Carroll the last of the world-old race of Gaelic harpers, the wood-side cabin, the mountain shieling, the rumbly festivities of wedding and saints' days, the sacred solemnities of death and burial, the tender loves and betrothals of the past remote and near, the deep and stirring musings on life, its rises and meanings, were the refuge of the spirit of music in Ireland. In Gray's faultless ballad, "Ruin Seize Thee, Ruthless King," we may catch the sentiment of those old singers of Ireland who assisted at the tomb of the one art that had so long given them fame and fortune while it gladdened through every strain of the peculiar social world of which they were the beloved ornament. The renaissance of cultured life in the Dublin of the eighteenth century, the presence of many Italian masters and the pa-

triotic hopes excited in the popular breast by the events of the end of that century aroused again some enthusiasm for Irish music. But it was not until the revival of the harp that arose. The meetings of the harpers in 1784 at Granard, and in 1792 at Belfast were events of more importance. They gave occasion to hunting to music, his great collection of true Irish airs and songs. The melodies of Moore popularized the world over the spirit of Irish melody. But in more than one way both he and Sir John Stephenson failed to catch the inner soul of the splendid music. This was done by George Petrie, the antiquarian; by O'Curry, by Joyce and others who have gone down to the hearts of the Irish people and caught again those noble airs and songs where they were first born, in the innermost world of the ancient Gaelic heart. When the Petrie collection of over 1,800 airs is finally printed, we may know that one of the greatest acts of national piety has received fulfillment, the rescue of a people's songs from oblivion, songs that go back, perhaps, to the pre-historic days when the Keltic people were beginning their long journeyings to the shores of the Western Sea.

Even when the political fortunes of Ireland were at the lowest ebb have children did not neglect their noble gift of song. After all, it was the plain people of Ireland who saved the music of the nation as they saved the literature and the indomitable passion for independence.

At the cradle of her child the mother sang old songs, croons and lullabies that had drifted down along the current of mother-hearts from the dawn of history. The milk maid carolled gaily songs and tunes, unrivalled for the simple beauty of the air and the feeling of the words. Over the dead the shrill and heart-melting keens of lamentation were raised as it had been for untold centuries of battle and conflict. In there in all literature of song lamentation than the ode of the O'Hussey for Maguire of Fermanagh? Sir Samuel Ferguson used to say that it was a song worthy of the grim genius of Dante, Ireland, indeed, never had a more beautiful song—her old men, her maidens, her schoolmasters vied with the harpers and fiddlers in assimilating and handing down the musical genius of the race. What a lovely picture does the old Irish people give us of the aged Alice Kenny on the hilltop amid the heather, weighed down with seventy years, yet singing delightfully for him and his companion an endless lot of old love songs, croons, lullabies, lamentations and the like! The world is only now awakening to the rich store of fancy and romance that is still to be found in the hearts of the Irish people. They are only now beginning to know how to seek for it like Mr. Douglas Hyde and the lamented Dr. George Petrie. Even these prose stories of Erin that seem to be now attracting the world's attention are only fragments of what the ancient music, for they were originally sung amid all the splendor of the old nightly life of the nation. The poor English prose of them is only the last dying echo of what the music charmed the happy warriors and the lovely women of Ireland.

The wayward whistles of the plow boy, the drollery of the village satirist, the sportive and playful feelings of the young and gay, the spirited and lively music of the fiddle, the wild pathetic melody of the songs of departure and adieu that overflow with the passion of home and fatherland, the comic jollity of the drinking songs, the piercing recitative of aged men above the young and lovely dead, the magnificence of the marching tunes—what emotions are there in the human heart, gay or sorrowful, simple or complex, that so truly find a true and manifold rendering in the songs of Ireland! "Give me the making of a people's songs, and I care not who makes their laws," said the poet Fletcher. What these "people's songs" were like in ancient Ireland we may learn from the words of another poet, himself an Irishman born and educated within sight of the home of O'Carroll.

"The music of the finest singer," says Goldsmith, "is less to be valued than the music of the heart. I felt when our old dairymaid sung me into tears with Johnny Armstrong's last goodnight or the cruelty of Barbara Allen."

How strange! While a hundred years ago Henry Maddin at Versailles and Michael Kelly at Naples, Rome, Thomas Carter at Vienna, Rhinpo Lacey at Madrid and The Hague, Andrew Ashe at Brussels, Michael Balfe in Dublin were charming the world of Europe with their genius as representatives of modern music, the Irish farmer's daughter, the laboring man in the field, the young mother by the cradle, the ballad singer on the streets of Cork or Belfast were preserving for our own time the very soul of a music that was old when our modern world was yet unthought of.

Irish nationality is intimately bound up with the music of the Gael. While the latter lives and is cherished the hopes of a revival of the former cannot die. The power which once hung the high-souled harper of old has within recent times exiled even the tamer poets who took his place—the highest tribute to the power of song. There is, indeed, a creative, preserving, inspiring force in music as in no other art. It seeks the innermost recesses of the soul and binds past, present and future into one. It is the natural tongue and the last refuge of patriotism.

when Talliesin and Llywarch Hen were famous, that roused the courage of a Roderick Dhu and a Wallace and fired with immortal bravery the souls of many an Irish soldier on a thousand fields of battle from Benburb to Fontenoy.

THE ROCK OF CASHEL

IN PENAL DAYS.

A familiar object in the golden vale of Tipperary is the celebrated Rock of Cashel, crowned by its lovely mediæval chapel of Cormac, and the ruins of the cathedral within whose walls occurred many a scene of martyrdom wherein Irish confessors of the faith, men and women, won their eternal reward. Long ago the fertile plain of Tipperary was covered by dark forests, wherein grazed herds of savage beasts, the kings of Eile (King's county) and Muskerry. During their wanderings the swine herds discovered among the oak trees a grey shining like the oak trees a grey limestone rock wherever they saw a being shining like the sun, who in the sweetest of voices sang about the coming of a great Magi (the Irish word for Druid), who would convert everyone to his religion, and that in after-ages this rock should become a sacred place. The King of Eile, hearing this tale, seized upon the rock which he turned into his chief "dun" or fortress, and its old name, "Sheadrum" or "Druid's Rock," changed into "Cashel" (Cashel) or "the rock of the king," which was paid there by the royal vassals every year. Those indefatigable Franciscan historians, known as the Four Masters, noted in their annals that in 1101 "Cashel of the Kings" was devoted by King Murrough O'Brien to the use of religious of Ireland in general, without the intervention of laic or ecclesiastical meaning thereby that there should be no lay abbots, which was a common abuse of that period. The cathedral which was built in the thirteenth century, the archiepiscopal palace, or castle, the round tower, a hall for vicars-choral, and the exquisite Norman chapel erected for Henry II, by Cormac McCarthy, King of Munster, who was also a bishop, form a pile of stately remains of architecture unrivalled in Ireland. Near the cathedral once stood a Dominican Priory, while on the plain below the Rock was Hore Abbey, which had been the home of the Black Monks of Saint Benedict until they were removed by one of the archbishops in the thirteenth century, to make room for the white-robed Cistercians.

At the Reformation the ecclesiastical buildings, like so many others, were seized by the Reformers together with the episcopal revenues, some of which were bestowed upon their own prelates, such as the apostate monk Myler McGrath. In the seventeenth century, when the troops of Cromwell were ravaging Ireland, one of the Parliamentary leaders, the cruel Lord Inchiquin, named Morrough an Heitan or Morrough of the Burnings, overran with his equally unscrupulous soldiery the county lying between Limerick and Tipperary, killing the poor peasants and burning their cottages and crops, never very abundant. The misery inflicted by this expedition was appalling, but the climax was to be at Cashel, then occupied by a very strong position, some of which were bestowed upon their own prelates, such as the apostate monk Myler McGrath. In the seventeenth century, when the troops of Cromwell were ravaging Ireland, one of the Parliamentary leaders, the cruel Lord Inchiquin, named Morrough an Heitan or Morrough of the Burnings, overran with his equally unscrupulous soldiery the county lying between Limerick and Tipperary, killing the poor peasants and burning their cottages and crops, never very abundant. The misery inflicted by this expedition was appalling, but the climax was to be at Cashel, then occupied by a very strong position, some of which were bestowed upon their own prelates, such as the apostate monk Myler McGrath.

From this post they could see Inchiquin and his men setting part of the town on fire and looting the rest. They then fiercely attacked the cathedral, but were driven back repeatedly. At last Inchiquin sent up a flag of truce, with a message that the brave garrison might depart with all the honors of war, if they would surrender the Rock to the Catholic people and the clergy. This proposal was instantly rejected by the Catholic soldiers, who refused to purchase their own safety by abandoning defenceless men and women to the tender mercies of Murrough of the Burnings, and they also sent him word "that they would rather offer up their lives to God on that Rock of Saint Patrick, than allow the sanctuary to be profaned by heretics." Inchiquin and his 7,000 ferocious men again stormed the cathedral, and in spite of the gallant defence made by the small garrison, they at last gained entrance. Round the altar knelt men and women, old and young, as well as innocent children, and infirm people, all offering up their last prayers on earth, and there on their knees, with their rosaries round their necks, they were murdered by the infuriated Cromwellians. "Within the cathedral," wrote the Superior of the Jesuit mission, "the number of the slain was 612, of whom more than 500 were heretics, soldiers, and about 400 Catholics. Everywhere dead bodies were to be seen which remained without interment for some days. The altars and chapels, the sacristy and the seats, were covered with them, and nowhere could the foot rest save on the corpses. In the tower itself no fewer than 3,000 were massacred, and 20 priests martyred within the sanctuary.

In Saint Patrick's Chapel a number of helpless females, who had gathered round the statue of the saint, were there put to death barbarously. One of these was Elizabeth Creagh, a virtuous lady married to Mr. John Kearney. Their house had always been a hiding-place during the persecution for all priests, particularly the Franciscans; and their little son in his seventh

year was so holy as to surprise all who knew him. He displayed the greatest affection for the Franciscans, and at a later period entered their order. He confessed the faith in London, where he was tortured, but eventually escaped to France.

About five years after the martyrdom of his mother in the cathedral of Cashel, Father Kearney, while on the mission near that town was seized again, and hurried to Clonmel, where in his thirtieth year, he was hanged in the market-place, wearing his religious habit. To revert to the martyrs of Cashel, we must now relate the fate of one of the priests captured by the brutal Inchiquin. His victim was Father Richard Barry, Prior of the Dominican convent on the Rock. He was in his black and white habit, and so greatly did his noble and venerable appearance strike his enemies, that they offered him his life if he would fling off his habit. "You are to know," replied Richard, "that this habit represents the passion of Christ our Lord; it is the livery of my warfare; and if you are disposed to save me you must respect it." When informed that death awaited him if he would not comply, he said, "Be it so, your cruelties will be to me a blessing, and death itself great gain." The heretics bound the aged Friar to a stone chair or bench, and the soldiers made him the butt of their insolent mockery, while others were collecting the wood for the slow fire which was put under the martyr's legs and feet. For two long hours he endured this terrible agony, until some one, perhaps less hardened than the others, shortened his sufferings by plunging a sword through the body of the victim. Some pious woman who had escaped the general slaughter apparently made a search, and having found Father Barry's body, she informed the Vicar-General. As Inchiquin and his soldiers had gone elsewhere, there was no one to hinder the Catholics still remaining in the blackened ruins of Cashel from entering the once beautiful cathedral, now a scene of deepest desolation and destruction, where the martyred Dominican's remains were carefully gathered and transported in procession to the Priory. The few clergy who had escaped the massacre intended the "Te Deum," and then they laid to his rest the holy Friar. Preacher who had so bravely sacrificed his life rather than deny his faith.

Among the other priests who were murdered on the Rock of Cashel was a Jesuit, Father William Boyton, who, at the awful hour of his execution, the cathedral, was calmly engaged in administering the sacraments to the doomed people, and encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith. When the Cromwellians burst into the sacred edifice he was stabbed by an enraged Puritan, while kneeling at the altar of our Blessed Lady. Another distinguished ecclesiastic, very remarkable for his piety, Father Theobald Stapleton, a Franciscan of the cathedral, who, in his simplicity and stolid, and grasping his crucifix actually asperged with holy water the Parliamentary troops, as they tumultuously entered the church. "The heretics mad with rage, strove with each other who should pierce him with their swords, and thus he was hewn to pieces. At each wound the holy man exclaimed, 'Strike this miserable sinner!' until he yielded his soul to his Creator" (Cardinal Moran).

Since the days of persecution have disappeared, never more to return as we may hope, Cashel of the Kings, now a small provincial town, nestled as it were beneath the ancient Rock, once the scene of many a pagan, tragedy, and martyrdom enacted within the grey walls of its stately ruins, which are, as one of our Irish orators once truly observed, "an emblem as well as a memorial of Ireland—on which it is impossible to look without feeling the heart—'at once elevated and touched by the holiest as well as the most solemn recollections."

To Catholics these "recollections" should be still further hallowed by the reflection that here in the blood of her faithful children was written one of the noblest pages in the history of the Catholic Church, when in battle and in storm those valiant Irish martyrs surrendered their lives for the faith they loved so well, leaving to their descendants an example of matchless fidelity to their old religion which Saint Patrick brought to Ireland.—M. T. Kelly, in the Irish Rosary Magazine.

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