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## BALLAD POETRY OF IRELAND.



HE tendency to adulate high art has become so pronounced in this century, that in the realm of metrical literature, we confine ourselves to the study of the master-piece of verse, totally ignoring a species of rhythmical composition, which is deserving of our attention, not only on account of its importance from a historical point of view, and the influence it has exerted upon literature in general, but from an aesthetic standpoint as well. I refer to ballad poetry.

From the time when the bardic prince of Greece chanted the sorrowful tale of Troy to the barbarous tribes of his native land, clear through the ages to this very day, when cultured audiences are thrilled by the declamation of "The Battle of Fontenoy," or "Ye Mariners of England," the ballad has played a very important part in the affairs of men. It is the vehicle whereby the early history of all nations has been conveyed to us. To perpetuate the memory of events of public importance in the childhood of peoples, rude bards fashioned a record of them into verse, and sang their story to the accompaniment of some simple instrument. The numbers, unpolished though they were, assisted the memory: the subjects themselves, whether of war, the chase, love, or native scenery, were sacred to all classes of the community: and so the bardic songs were taken up and carolled by the ploughman in the field, and the shepherd on the hillside, or hummed to the time of the spinning-wheel in the

peasant's cottage. The child at his mother's knee became familiar with their burden, and thus were they handed down, unwritten, from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation. It is in this way that the wars of the incipient clans of all European peoples, and the fame of their noted heroes, have been recounted to their modern descendants,—in this way that the manners and customs prevalent in these long distant periods have been made known. Not that all families have held in sacred memory these old songs: far from it. As education spread they were discarded as too crude for the higher grades of society, and were preserved only among the less cultured classes, by the fireside of the husbandman, or in the hut of the mountaineer. For centuries their existence was ignored, perhaps unknown, to the students of literature, till curious delvers into the antique in different parts of Europe unearched these gems, thus saving them from destruction, and pointed out their beauty, and their importance as records of a shadowy past, to the literary public. In England this resurrection of the ballad occurred in the eighteenth century, at a time when Art had come to be worshipped to the exclusion of sentiment, emotion, thought, which constitute the very soul of poetry; and the gusto with which these simple, touching old tales were received, adequately evidenced the satiety men had experienced of the formal, unsympathetic effusions of the classical age.

Through the efforts of Percy the old English songs have been preserved to us; in his "Reliques," Scott was barely in time to snatch from oblivion the "Songs