

Early Bardic Literature, Ireland



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By
Standish James O'Grady



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EARLY BARDIC LITERATURE, IRELAND

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IRELAND.

BY

STANDISH O'GRADY.

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EARLY BARDIC LITERATURE, IRELAND.

SCATTERED over the surface of every country in Europe may be found sepulchral monuments, the remains of pre-historic times and nations, and of a phase of life and civilisation which has long since passed away. No country in Europe is without its cromlechs and dolmens, huge earthen tumuli, great flagged sepulchres, and enclosures of tall pillar-stones. The men by whom these works were made, so interesting in themselves, and so different from anything of the kind erected since, were not strangers and aliens, but our own ancestors, and out of their rude civilisation our own has slowly grown. Of that elder phase of European civilisation no record or tradition has been anywhere bequeathed to us. Of its nature, and the ideas and sentiments whereby it was sustained, nought may now be learned save by an examination of those tombs themselves, and of the dumb remnants, from time to time exhumed out of their soil—rude instruments of clay, flint, brass, and gold, and by speculations and reasonings founded upon these archæological gleanings, meagre and sapless.

HISTORY OF IRELAND,

VOL. I.

BY STANDISH O'GRADY.

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

“Light,” April 20, 1878.

“It is a book deserving of high praise, if regarded as an attempt to produce an epic from untouched pre-historic legend.
.....

“The very style, the powerful and Homeric similes, the frequent divergence to pluck some flower of thought and fancy, all combine to render such an account of desperate fighting, of feasting and harping, a novel and pleasing poem.
.....

“We will conclude with a few short specimens of our Author's style, we do not say at his best, for it would be difficult where so much is good to make a choice.

“Feasts there in the darkness. From the doors of huge booths, on hill-side and forest, glares the red light. Laughter that shakes the trembling stars, clang of great goblets drained. Anon, melody and passionate voices singing, the stricken tympan and the harp.”

“The description of the earliest fabled life of the demi-gods of Erin is almost Æschylean in its terrible grandeur and brief graphic word-painting.

“The series of single combats in which Cuculain holds the ford against champions of the opposing army are almost, if not quite, equal to Spencer's description of fighting.”

“The Spectator,” June 22, 1878.

“In speaking of this volume we do not intend to enter into the question from an archæological point of view, nor does the author's manner of dealing with his subject seem to invite such criticisms. The real importance of the book under notice is this, that the writer has given to the general reader, in a bold and spirited manner, a succession of wild and poetic stories, each forming a part of that picturesque romance called the heroic period of the history of Ireland.

“The heroic and pathetic story of Cuculain which glistens with the dew of poetry and rings with the clangour of martial music. From the moment when Cuculain, a boy of ten years steals away from his father's Dún, with his little wooden shield and sword of lath seek-



OPINIONS OF THE PRESS—*continued.*

ing Emain Macha, the city and school of war of the warrior king of Ultonia, through all the scenes of his heroic career he draws the heart of the reader with him.

No figure in legend or history is more striking than this of Cuculain, forlorn and unconquerable in his lair in the mountains, whence he issues each day to strive with a fresh champion. His grief and amazement at the desertion of his friends, his tender care for his old and half silly father, who has tracked him out but can give him no help, his generosity towards those who persist in assailing him, the love he inspires in many of those who are forced to be his enemies, the admiration he wrings even from the baffled and vexed Queen Meave when, in an hour of truce he visits her camp. All these traits taken in connection with his terrible strength, unflinching skill, and indomitable endurance, as revealed by turns in the progress of the narrative, produce an indescribable effect upon the reader. The love borne Cuculain by Fergus Mac Roy, who is at once first General in war and Prime Minister of State, with Meave; the meetings between them by night in the mountains, when the hero's strength and endurance are gradually ebbing away, and the friendly enemy can do nothing to assist him, give rise to situations as striking as are to be found in the poetry of any country.

The story is left unfinished in the present volume, and we hope that in the next we will find its completion as well as a satisfactory rendering of others which we need not mention. We should be glad to see, perfect in its details, the exquisite tragedy of the children of Lir. There are, indeed, scattered throughout this volume certain slight, though touching allusions, to the wanderings of the three wild swans.

Laying down this volume it will naturally occur to the reader to ask why Irish poets have left so long unwrought this rich mine of the virgin poetry of their country? Will the Irish muse sleep on till the foreign invader pounces upon her treasures?"

"Whitehall Review."

"Produces a quick enthusiasm not easily quelled. We are most anxious to see the second volume."

"Revue Celtique."

"We have read this book with great interest."

"Westminster Review."

"A wealth of romantic legend poetically told."

"Celtic Magazine."

"A complete and grand prose epic."