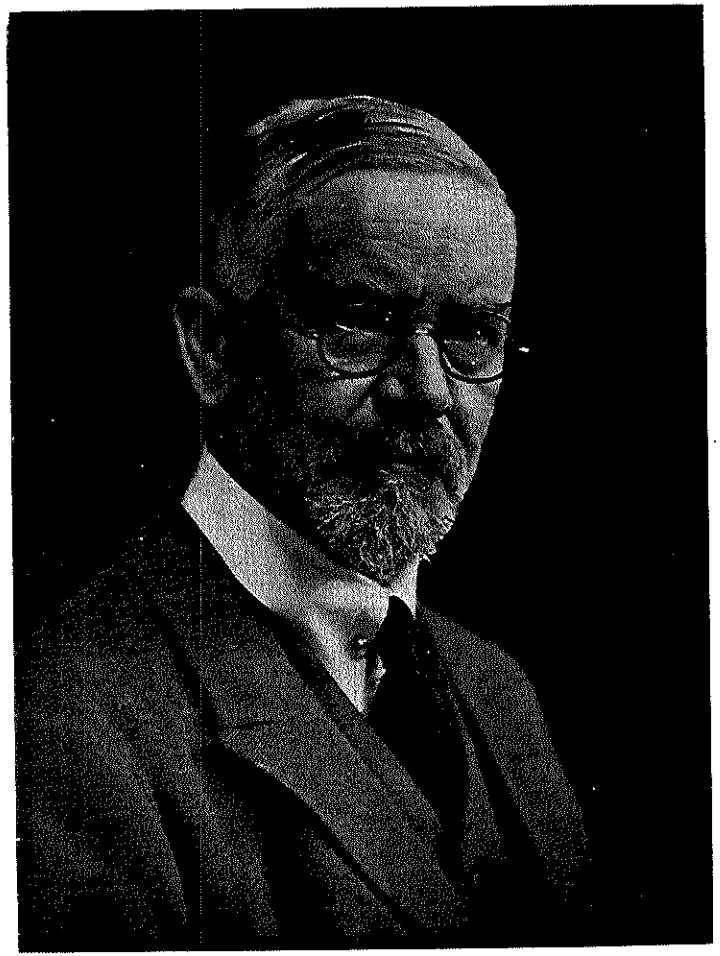

OSBORN BERGIN 1873 - 1950

IRISH BARDIC POETRY

Texts and translations,
together with an introductory lecture

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Bardic Poetry

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A Lecture on the subject of Bardic Poetry before the National Literary Society implies, of course, a lecture on the bardic poetry of Ireland. That is, no doubt, what you have expected. Yet after I had agreed to deliver this lecture I began to doubt the wisdom of the choice. Irish bardic poetry differs so widely from any form of literary expression that most of us have been accustomed to, that it will be well-nigh impossible in a single evening to discuss its characteristic features. Few forms of composition suffer more in translation. The grace and the elaborate polish of the original must disappear entirely, and even if I could succeed in the difficult task of producing an accurate though bald and prosaic version of some of the finest work of the bardic schools, the world in which this kind of poetry arose and flourished was so different from the world we live in to-day that a running commentary would be needed to make that version intelligible. Such a commentary would, I fear, leave little of the elusive charm of the original. In bringing specimens of the literature in question before your notice I have tried to do two things — first, to select from the great mass of bardic poetry preserved in manuscript poems which have so far remained unedited, and are thus likely to throw fresh light on the literary life of the period to which they belong; and, secondly, to choose such poems as are likely to explain themselves.

By Bardic Poetry I mean the writings of poets trained in the Bardic Schools as they existed in Ireland and the Gaelic parts of Scotland down to about the middle of the seventeenth century. In Scotland, indeed, they lingered on till the eighteenth century. At what time they were founded we don't know, for the Bardic order existed in prehistoric times, and their position in society is well established in the earliest tradition. You will understand that the subject is a vast one, but I mean to deal only with a small portion of it — the poetry of the later Bardic Schools from about the thirteenth century to the close — that is to say, compositions of the period known as Later Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish. For this period the manuscript material is very plentiful, but very little has yet been printed.

Bardic Poetry of any period is easily distinguished by its form.

A great deal of it is not really what a modern critic would call poetry in the higher sense. But though it may lack inspiration, it is never wanting in artistic finish. For we must remember that the Irish *file* or *bard*[1] was not necessarily an inspired poet. That he could not help. He was, in fact, a professor of literature and a man of letters, highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of his training, his learning, his knowledge of the history and traditions of his country and his clan. He discharged, as O'Donovan pointed out many years ago, the functions of the modern journalist. He was not a song writer. He was often a public official, a chronicler, a political essayist, a keen and satirical observer of his fellow-countrymen. At an earlier period he had been regarded as a dealer in magic, a weaver of spells and incantations, who could blast his enemies by the venom of his verse, and there are traces down to the most recent times of a lingering belief, which was not, of course, confined to Ireland, in the efficacy of a well-turned malediction. He might be a poet, too, if in addition to his training he was gifted with the indefinable power, the true magic, of poetry. But whether he was a poet in this higher sense or not, he always composed in verse.

It is a well known fact that verse comes before prose in the literatures of the world. In one sense, of course, we may talk prose all our lives. But most of us find it hard to write even passably good prose, although we have countless examples to show how it is done. In the literature of more than one nation we find that verse has been brought to the highest perfection of ease and grace and power, at a time when prose is still awkward and unattractive and obscure. It is not surprising, therefore, to find verse composition developed in Ireland before prose. The misfortune is, I think, that this state of things lasted too long. Until quite modern times we have no prose authors. Of course, there is prose of a kind — excluding such things as legal and medical tracts, annals and the like — there is a fairly large body of translations; above all there

1 The title 'bard' is rare in Irish. In early times the 'bard' was of lower rank than the 'file'. It is sometimes asserted that the 'file' died out and was replaced by the 'bard'. But all the writers with whom we shall deal called themselves 'fileadha', not 'baird', as far as I can remember. And 'file' is still the ordinary word. The supposed 'rise of the bard' is explained by the fact that the word 'bard' came to be used in English, not in Irish, to denote an official Celtic poet. It is in this English sense that I use the terms 'bard' and 'bardic' in this lecture.

are the native romantic tales, the most important part of our literature.[2] These show that the early writers had full command of an admirable medium for plain vivid narrative. Unhappily it was not developed. Who were the authors of these tales? We cannot tell. No one thought of putting his name to a piece of prose. The copyist may deal with it as he pleases. And the copyist does so. He expands and condenses, combines two versions of a tale, recasts the language, and so on. Prose is common property; tales are made for telling, for public recitation, not for private study. This is what gives much of our romantic literature the incoherence, as well as the freshness and naiveté of the folktale. We have, then, practically no prose authors or stylists down to the modern period. Even in the seventeenth century we find two distinct recensions of Keating's History, quite different in style, in the same hand-writing, and we begin to ask which version did Keating write, and which is the work of the scribe, and did Keating object to this deliberate recasting of his sentences? If we want the personal note of the conscious literary artist we must go to the verse. I think this was a very unhealthy state of things for Gaelic literature, but that is beyond the scope of my subject.

I have already mentioned the fact that the *file* or *bard* — both terms had come to be used more or less indiscriminately in our period, though at an earlier time there was a technical distinction of rank between them — belonged to a hereditary caste. The Gaelic poet, we may say, had to be *both born and made*. In the same way the professions of history, law and medicine were confined to certain families. We must consider now how the poet was *made*. The best description of a Bardic School or College is in the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde*, published in 1722, which gives us a fair idea of the training as practised in the early seventeenth century.[3] The manners of the professional classes in Ireland, indeed the whole structure of society, were so wonderfully conservative that Clanricarde's description will probably hold good for several centuries earlier. After a discussion of the custom of confining the professions to certain families, he continues:

> Concerning the poetical Seminary or School, from which I was carried away to clear other things that fell in my way, it was open only to such as were descended of Poets and reputed within their Tribes.

2 It is noteworthy that the Irish epics — if we may use such a term — are all in prose, with occasional lyrics interspersed.

3 [This account appears to be the work of Thomas O'Sullevane, see Flower, *BM Cat. of Irish MSS.* iii 16.]

And so was it with all the Schools of that kind in the Nation, being equal to the Number of Families that followed the said calling. But some more or less frequented for the difference of Professors, Conveniency, with other Reasons, and seldom any come but from remote parts, to be at a distance from Relations and other Acquaintances that might interrupt his Study. The Qualifications first requir'd were reading well, writing the Mother-tongue, and a strong Memory. It was likewise necessary the Place should be in the solitary Recess of a Garden or within a Sept or Enclosure far out of the reach of any Noise, which an Intercourse of People might otherwise occasion. The Structure was a snug, low Hut, and beds in it at convenient Distances, each within a small Apartment without much Furniture of any kind, save only a Table, some Seats, and a Conveniency for Cloaths to hang upon. No Windows to let in the Day, nor any Light at all us'd but that of Candles, and these brought in at a proper Season only. The Students upon thorough Examination being first divided into Classes, wherein a regard was had to every one's Age, Genius, and the Schooling had before, if any at all, or otherwise. The Professors (one or more as there was occasion) gave a Subject suitable to the Capacity of each Class, determining the number of Rhimes, and clearing what was to be chiefly observed therein as to Syllables, Quartans, Concord, Correspondence, Termination and Union, each of which were restrain'd by peculiar Rules. The said Subject (either one or more as aforesaid) having been given over Night, they work'd it apart each by himself upon his own Bed, the whole next Day in the Dark, till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed it to writing. Being afterwards dress'd and come together into a large Room, where the Masters waited, each Scholar gave in his Performance, which being corrected or approv'd of (according as it requir'd) either the same or fresh subjects were given against the next Day. This Part being over, the Students went to their Meal, which was then serv'd up; and so, after some time spent in Conversation and other Diversions, each retir'd to his Rest, to be ready for the Business of the next Morning. Every *Saturday* and on the Eves of Festival Days they broke up and dispers'd themselves among the Gentlemen and rich Farmers of the Country, by whom they were very well entertain'd and much made of, till they thought fit to take their leaves, in order to re-assume their Study. Nor was the People satisfied with affording this Hospitality alone; they sent in by turns every Week from far and near Liquors and all manner of Provision towards the Subsistence of the Academy, so that the chief Poet was at little or no Charges, but, on the contrary, got very well by it, besides the Presents made him by the Students upon their first coming, which was always at Michaelmas, and from thence till the 25th of March, during the cold season of the Year only, did that close Study last. At that time the Scholars broke up, and repair'd each to his own Country, with an Attestation of his Behaviour and Capacity from the chief Professor to those that had sent him.

The reason of laying the Study aforesaid in the Dark was doubtless to avoid the Distraction which Light and the variety of Objects represented thereby commonly occasions. This being prevented, the Faculties of the

Soul occupied themselves solely upon the Subject in hand, and the Theme given; so that it was soon brought to some Perfection according to the Notions or Capacities of the Students. Yet the course was long and tedious, as we find, and it was six or seven Years before a Mastery or the last Degree was conferred, which you'll the less admire upon considering the great Difficulty of the Art, the many kinds of their Poems, the Exactness and Nicety to be observ'd in each, which was necessary to render their Numbers soft, and the Harmony agreeable and pleasing to the Ear.

As every Professor, or chief Poet, depended on some Prince or great Lord, that had endowed his Tribe, he was under strict ties to him and Family, as to record in good Metre his Marriages, Births, Deaths, Acquisitions made in war and Peace, Exploits, and other remarkable things relating to the Same. He was likewise bound to offer an Elegy on the Decease of the said Lord, his consort, or any of their children, and a Marriage Song when there should be Occasion. But as to any Epick, or Heroick Verse to be made for any other Lord or Stranger, it was requir'd that at least a Paroemion, or Metre therein, should be upon the Patron, or the Name in general. A pleasant Instance of this happen'd in the last Age, when Donough O Brian, Earl of Thoumond, was Lord President of the Province of *Munster*, to whom one of his Rhimers (to acquit himself of that Obligation) in a Panegyrical Poem compos'd by him in honour of a Gentleman of the MacCarthies, who had much signaliz'd himself in Martial Exploits, wish'd that some warlic Lord or Captain of the O Brians, then living, had by his Merit and Conduct acquir'd so excellent a Name. This immediately taking Wind, so disgusted the Earl, that in Revenge of the Slight or Affront he vowed his Chastisement whenever he fell into his Hands. Hereupon the Poet, dreading the consequences, disappear'd and kept out of the way for some Years. Notwithstanding, it happen'd that one time, going a Journey along with his Wife, they saw at a Distance the said Earl with his Equipage, and a great Company of Horse in his Attendance, coming towards them. There being no Probability of escaping, the Poet told his Wife that he would feign himself dead as of a sudden, which she should humour by crying over him; that if the Earl ask'd the Reason she should not conceal his Name, but beg Forgiveness for the great Folly he had been guilty of against his Lordship and Family. The Woman acted her Part to the Life, and the Earl, when he was come up, being told whose the Corps was, he had the Curiosity to put Questions himself to her, and Ask'd whether the Poet had repented of his undutiful Expression with relation to the O Brians. The Woman answer'd he did heartily; and that being surpriz'd upon Sight of his Lordship's Equipage, the Horrour of his own Guilt most sensibly touching him, he fell down dead upon the Spot; but (in Addition) said farther, that since he was gone, and had made some Attonement by the long Affliction he had suffer'd, his Lordship would forgive him, which accordingly the Earl did, being moved with Compassion, and flung down the Woman some Gold to bury her Husband. This being over, the reputed dead Man springs up in an Instant, and taking hold of the Reins of the Horse on which the Earl was mounted, pronounced a very exquisite Poem in his

Praise, which brought him into full Favour again. It was pretended this Piece was Extemporary, and made by the Poet whilst he lay there as dead. But 'tis more probable that he had composed it before at his leisure, and that all that was acted in this Place was only a Farce, design'd to gain a fit Opportunity to beg and obtain the Earl's Pardon.

For the Nature of the Poem and great beauty of it shew that it was a work of Study and Time.

The last Part to be done, which was the *Action* and *Pronunciation* of the Poem in Presence of the Maecenas, or the principal Person it related to, was perform'd with a great deal of Ceremony in a Consort of Vocal and Instrumental Musick. The Poet himself said nothing, but directed and took care that everybody else did his Part right. The Bards[4] having first had the Composition from him, got it well by Heart, and now pronounc'd it orderly, keeping even Pace with a Harp, touch'd upon that Occasion; no other musical Instrument being allowed for the said Purpose than this alone, as being Masculin, much sweeter and fuller than any other.

The bardic system, like the independence of the clans, lasted in Scotland into the eighteenth century. Martin, in his *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in London in 1703, describes it as he found it in its decay:

> The Orators, in their Language called Is-Dane, were in high esteem in these Islands and the Continent, until within these forty years they sat always among the Nobles and Chiefs of Families in the *Streah* or Circle. Their Houses and little Villages were Sanctuaries, as well as Churches, and they took place before Doctors of Physic. The Orators, after the *Druids* were extinct, were brought in to preserve the Genealogy of Families and to repeat the same at every Succession of a Chief; and upon the occasion of Marriages and Births they made *Epithalamiums* and *Panegyricks*, which the Poet or Bard pronounc'd. The Orators by the force of their Eloquence had a powerful ascendant over the greatest men in their time; for if any Orator did but ask the Habit, Arms, Horse, or any other thing belonging to the greatest Man in these Islands, it was readily granted them, sometimes out of respect, and sometimes for fear of being exclaimed against by a Satire, which in those days was reckon'd a great dishonour; but these Gentlemen becoming insolent, lost ever since both the Profit and Esteem which was formerly due to their Character; for neither their Panegyricks nor Satires are regarded to what they have been, and they are now allowed but a small salary. I must not omit to relate their way of Study, which is very singular. They shut their Doors and Windows for a Days time, and lie on their backs with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plads about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick; and indeed they furnish such a Stile from this Dark Cell as is understood by very few; and if they purchase a couple of Horses as the reward of their Meditation, they think they have done a great Matter. The Poet or Bard had a Title to the Bridegroom's upper Garb — that is the Plad and Bonnet — but now he is satisfy'd with what the Bridegroom pleases to give him on such occasions.

4 'Bard' is here used in the sense of 'reciter', for which the technical term was 'reacaire'; so 'reacaim' 'I recite'. It is to be regretted that modern revivalists have adopted the word 'aithriseóireacht' for 'recitation'; its ordinary meaning is 'mimicry'.

I have never seen a description in Irish of life in a Bardic School. To the poets it was, of course, too familiar to need description; but there are many references to it which show that Clanricarde was well-informed. There is an anonymous poem, the utterance of an unknown poet looking back in his loneliness to the delights of his youthful studies, and the charm of a fellowship that has now passed away for ever:

> I am alone among men . . .
> [*Aonar dhamhsa eidir dhaoinibh*, Poem 42.]

This poem probably belongs to the early seventeenth century — a time of upheaval, when the old Gaelic world was falling to pieces.

Whatever the students thought of the routine work of the schools, and the practice of 'lying in the beds of booths'— *lighe a leapthaibh both*, as one of the poets calls it — there are many indications that they greatly enjoyed the comradeship of school life. The fifteenth century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó Huiginn, in an elegy on his elder brother, Fearghal, who was head of one of the schools, tells us that the students were sorry to hear the cuckoos, with the coming of the holidays they were to disperse. These bardic schools or colleges provided the nearest thing in Ireland to University life.

Yet some at least must have been willing to experiment for themselves outside the traditional limits. There is a curious poem, in which the writer, Ó Gnímh, pokes fun at Fearghal Óg for his defiance of convention:

> This is comfortable, o Fearghal Óg . . .
> [*Cuimseach sin, a Fhearghail Óig*, Poem 27.]

This habit of composing in the dark no doubt did keep away distracting thoughts, and helped the poets to concentrate on the subject they had chosen. But I am inclined to think that in its origin it was something different. It looks very like a relic of some rite or ceremony of divination handed down from pagan times, long after its original purpose had been forgotten. We know that in early times the functions of the poet and the druid or magician were very similar, and both practised magic. The whole subject of magic in ancient Ireland would repay a fuller investigation than has yet been made. There can be no doubt that even after the coming of Christianity the attempts to stamp out forbidden rites

were not altogether a success, and the less dangerous had to be tolerated. In this connexion the following well-known passage from Cormac's Glossary is instructive as showing the attitude of the most learned scholar and ecclesiastic of the ninth century. I quote from Whitley Stokes's translation, with a few corrections:

> *Imbas forosna*, 'Manifestation that enlightens': (it) discovers what thing soever the poet likes and which he desires to reveal. Thus then is that done. The poet chews a piece of the red flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone behind the door valve, and chants an incantation over it, and offers it to idol gods, and calls them to him, and leaves them not on the morrow, and then chants over his two palms, and calls again idol gods to him, that his sleep may not be disturbed. Then he puts his two palms on his two cheeks and sleeps. And men are watching him that he may not turn over and that no one may disturb him. And then is revealed to him that which is before him till the end of a nómad (a period of nine days) or two or three nómads, according to the long or short time he may arrange at the offering. Patrick banished that and the *Teinm láida* 'illumination of song', and declared that no one who shall do that shall belong to heaven or earth, for it is a denial of baptism. *'Dichetal do chennaib'*, 'extempore incantation', however, that was left, in right of art, for it is science that causes it, and no offering to devils is necessary, but a declaration from the ends of his bones at once.

This last phrase is interesting. Sorcery that involved no offering to devils is regarded as a lawful branch of science.

Or take the description of the bull-feast in the *Sick-bed of Cuchulainn*, or the *Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*. 'A bull-feast is gathered by the men of Erin (in order to determine their future king) — that is, a bull used to be killed by them, and thereof one man would eat his fill and drink its broth, and a spell of truth was chanted over him in his bed. Whosoever he would see in his sleep would be king, and the sleeper would perish if he uttered a falsehood.' Another way to procure a vision was to sleep in the hide of the newly-slaughtered bull — a means of invocation practised in the Highlands at a late period, and described by Scott in his 'Lady of the Lake.'

On the whole, I think this insistence on the dark room was originally due to other than literary motives. It must have been connected at first with some kind of pagan divination. Later on it was continued, with the professional reverence for precedent. It may have been found helpful. In any case it would never do to let people think poetry could be composed on horseback — that was contrary to all etiquette; it would rob poetry of half its mystery, and bring down its market value at once.

As to the length of the course, six or seven years, at the bardic

schools, probably the first comment of a modern educationalist would be, 'Yes! but they got six months holidays in the year, not counting the week-end trips.' But the usual explanation of the length of time required is the extraordinary difficulty and complexity of the various metres in which the students were taught to compose. I think myself that the difficulty has been hugely exaggerated. Probably O'Molloy led the way by calling the *dán díreach* — that is, the straight or strict metre — 'the hardest of all that I have seen or heard — I might say the hardest thing under the sun.'[5] If O'Molloy, or any of those who continually copy him or one another at the present day, had reflected for a moment, it is hard to see how it could have escaped their notice that for many centuries, year after year, hundreds of poems in the most faultless metre had been written and recited all over Ireland by men who cannot all have been intellectual giants. The particular metre now generally selected as an example of the incredibly difficult is the *deibhidhe*,[6] which is actually the commonest metre of all, and was practised by the lowest grades of bards.

The truth is that worthy O'Molloy himself had not the knack of verse-writing, and most of his readers have simply taken his words as gospel. By flinging the rules of metre together, it might be shown that verse in almost any language is exceedingly difficult. But the poet is guided by his ear, and if he is composing in a well-known metre, he unconsciously follows the model of number less examples. Why, even at the present day thousands of fairly unintelligent schoolboys can be taught to write Latin verse, which has at least the one merit that it will scan, and that though they have to rely on their eyes for the metre, as the language is an utterly dead one to them, and as they pronounce it half the quantities are wrong.

Too much has been said about the difficulties of Irish metre. What is wanted is less amazement and more attention. The requisites of an Irish stanza are, curiously enough, often ignored by those who write about them. O'Donovan, for instance, wrote a description of Irish metres based on O'Molloy, but when he came to edit Irish poems he often disregarded the rules. The late Dr.

5 *Grammatica Latino-Hibernica* (Rome, 1677), p. 144: 'De Metro, omnium quae unquam vidi, vel audivi ausim dicere, quae sub Sole reperiuntur, difficillimo.'

6 Miss Hull, *Text Book of Irish Literature* ii p. 174, calls it 'the most difficult and scientific of all the classical forms of verse'. I do not understand the meaning of 'scientific' here.

MacCarthy edited a tract on Irish metre, and in the same volume showed by his edition of certain Middle Irish poems that he had forgotten or ignored the rules, and frequently mistranslated lines where the metre would have kept him straight. Even O'Grady, in his brilliant Catalogue of Irish MSS. in the British Museum, often nods. In dealing with a faulty text the metrical test is almost unfailing. The poets *could* have mixed up their metres, just as Virgil could, if he liked, have ended his hexameters with a dactyl. But they never did so.

And besides the question of the difficulty of the metres, I think a wrong impression prevails with regard to the effect these metres had on style. We are told that the favourite metre allowed only seven syllables to the line, and four lines to the stanza, with a break after the second line. This must have led to a great condensation of thought. I admit that there is no room here for those long strings of alliterative adjectives which disfigure some Middle Irish prose and some eighteenth century verse. But the break after the second line, though common, is not obligatory, the total number of syllables in a quatrain is twenty-eight, the same as in the ordinary English ballad metre, and the number of quatrains is quite unlimited. The fact is, some Irish poems are terse and epigrammatic, others are diffuse enough, no matter what their metre may be. Often in transcribing from manuscripts I have wished, before reaching the fortieth or fiftieth quatrain, that the poet had had enough restraint and good taste to stop at the twentieth.

Here I must join issue with my friend, Dr. Hyde, who says in his *Literary History of Ireland*, p. 537: 'Their chief characteristic is an intense compression which produces an air of weighty sententiousness... Accordingly O'Gnive calls the poets the schoolmen of condensed speech, and the Scotch bard, MacMuirich, in the Red Book of Clanranald, speaks of Teig Dall O'Higinn as putting into less than a half-rann what others would take a whole crooked stanza to express.' The phrase 'schoolmen of condensed speech' is one of those vivid sayings which stick in the memory and colour the thought. Dr. Hyde has published O'Gnive's poem in his Mac Ternan Prize Essay on Irish Poetry [p. 104]. The couplet with which we are concerned reads:

Ni clos sgoluidhe sgéil teinn
D'Uibh n-Dálaigh ná d'Uibh n-Uiginn.

Now, while it is doubtful whether *sgoluidhe sgéil teinn* could ever bear the meaning 'schoolman of condensed speech', it is quite

certain that O'Gnive did not use these words at all. The text is corrupt, as the second line shows. There is a good copy of the poem in the Book of the O'Conor Don (in which, by the way, the author's name is given as Aonghus Ó Dálaigh), and this gives us the true reading:

Ni clos sgolaidhe — sgél tinn —
d'Íbh Dálaigh nó d'fhuil Uiginn.

No scholar has been heard — a sorrowful tale! — of the O'Dalys or the O'Higgins.

As for the lines in the Red Book of Clanranald, the only meaning I can extract from them is just the opposite to Dr. Hyde's interpretation. In a bardic controversy someone quotes a line by Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn, *Lámh dhearg Éirenn Íbh Eathach*, 'Iveagh is the Red Hand of Ulster.' Niall M'Vurich answers (*Rel. Celt.* ii 297):

Ni derbhadh let ar laimh dheirg
dán direch taodg i huiginn
sgo cuirfet anaon chethram[7] *cám*
n[e] *cuirfedh táodhg sa leathrann.*

You hold that the straight verse of Tadhg O Huiginn is no authority concerning the Red Hand — I will put into a single crooked line more than Tadhg would into half a quatrain.

The real difficulty was not so much the metre, for, though many elaborate metres are mentioned in the various metrical tracts, few of them were in common use. But, besides acquiring a thorough familiarity with the literature and history of the country, the student had to make a minute and careful study of the language itself. Practically all bardic poetry is written in one standard literary dialect, which remained almost unchanged for five hundred years. All this time the local dialects were diverging more and more, and there was no capital to set a natural standard. Yet the trained professional poet wrote in such a style that it is impossible to tell from his language to what part of Ireland or Scotland he belonged, or to fix his date even approximately. It is hard to say what they ought to have done, but what they actually did is clear. They made an artificial standard. They normalized the language by admitting into their verse only such forms and usages as had the sanction of earlier poets of high repute, everything else being rigorously excluded. There is a grammatical tract compiled or revised about the beginning of the sixteenth century. This tract, which I hope to publish, gives models of declension and verbal inflection with

7 'cethramh' or 'ceathramha', earlier 'cethramthu' 'quarter', the technical term for one of the four lines of a 'rann' or stanza.

thousands of examples, rules for aspiration and eclipsis, alternative forms, forms which must never be used, and so on. The most interesting thing about it is that the compiler gives hundreds of couplets from various poets as examples to prove his statements. In this he was like a modern scientific grammarian. He took the literary language as he found it and classified its usages. But it is unlikely that the compilation was due to scientific interest in the language. I believe it was intended as a practical text book for use in the schools. Without something of the kind the teaching of the standard dialect could hardly have been so successful. This dialect was somewhat archaic, as might have been expected, but it allowed a mixture of various periods, and indeed in some ways was less archaic than one or two of our twentieth century writers. Thus a West Munster poet of the fourteenth century had no hesitation in writing *mar deir mé* when it suited his metre, though the spoken language of his district has not even now reached this stage of development. On the other hand a Scottish poet would write *atú*, 'I am', at a time when this form was certainly obsolete in Scotland, and only intelligible to the educated.

From their study of good models and their association with the best teachers the poets derived one characteristic which is common to the whole bardic order, and that is a sustained dignity of style. Their respect for their position, their hereditary pride, and their excessive devotion to traditional precedents, gave them at least a rooted dislike of vulgarity. They took their art seriously. It might be undignified to compose poetry on horseback, but what they thought of real buffoonery we can gather from a satire by the Scottish bard Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh on one who 'practised an art without difficulty':

> Good is the trade you have chosen, to win entertainment and revelry, the making of incorrect verses at the time of banqueting and assembly.

The manners of this improvisator, he tells us, are as bad as his verse. He snatches up the food at table without waiting for grace. But, of course, however disorderly he may be, talking rambling nonsense in his cups — a thing more in his line than poetry — and throwing meat and butter at his host, he must never be deprived of the honourable title of scholar. For with all his buffoonery he manages to curry favour with the great!

> Being in the company of an earl is an omen of high honour to you, till you put one bite on top of another, while your tongue is grinding out words.
>
> Alas that I have never attempted to acquire your style, incorrect and formless in its import — not to speak of elementary scholarship.

> Let me forsake the snare of straight verse, as we have found it in tradition, and enter your order now in the new fashion — it will last longer than the track I have followed!
>
> [*Sona do cheird, a Chalbhaigh*, in *Celtic Studies in Memory of Angus Matheson* 51 - 55.]

Yet though times have changed and it would pay the poet to follow the bad example he has described, and adapt himself to circumstances, his professional pride is too strong, and he declines to pay the price of popularity.

This represents the attitude of the seventeenth century, when the old order was passing. In earlier times the position of the official poet was secure, and his confidence in it unshaken. He respected himself and demanded that others should respect him. Here is how the bard of the Maguires asks the chief to give him a new farm away from a disturbed neighbourhood:

> Attend to me thou chief of the descendants of Odhar . . .
>
> [*T'aire riom-sa a rí ó nUidhir*, Poem 33.]

A good deal of the bardic poetry that has come down to us consists of elaborate panegyrics on patrons and benefactors. These compositions were greatly admired and treasured by the families of the recipients, but they are likely to leave the modern reader cold, for, while their technique is marvellous, there is naturally a want of freshness and variety about most of them. The earliest poem of the kind that has been preserved is addressed to a Leinster king of the eighth or ninth century. With a little touching up this might be passed off as a sixteenth century panegyric. Allowing for the changes in the language, the style and mannerisms are almost identical.

All court poetry is more or less tainted by the voice of insincerity and formalism. A writer whose name is given as *an Pearsún Riabhach*, 'the Grey Parson', takes the Irish poets sternly to task for their extravagant flattery, accusing them of interfering with the dispensations of Providence:

> O ye who fashion lies in verse, when the judgment day comes ye shall repent it; if His anger arise, the Creator of the elements will take vengeance for the false witness that ye bear against Him.
>
> Ye put lovely graceful locks upon a bald forehead — for shame! — if a man's eyes are twitching and squinting, ye make them slow moving and clear as crystal.
>
> For one whose complexion is sallow and tawny you feign — though it is a pitiable saying — that the scion of lovely face has skin like the swan and a bosom like lime.
>
> From every man from whom you win a reward, you have deserved hatred and anger; because of your praise, alas! his last end will be hell.
>
> [*A lucht chumas bréag sa dán*, *Measgra Dánta* 21.]

I think the worthy Parson was a trifle severe. The Irish chiefs liked compliments, to be sure, but we need not suppose that they were so simple as to take them at their face value. For one thing, the practice was too common. When everyone in high place is addressed in superlatives, superlatives lose their force. The conventional language of ceremony tends to become obsequious in a formal way, and the formalities soon grow dull and petrified. We can see this even in a matter-of-fact age like the present; the language of public and private life is full of polite formalities which do not mislead anybody. What makes Irish panegyrics appear so extravagant and fantastic at the first glance is that they take us into a world of unfamiliar conventions. Thus, through mere habit we think it natural that a warrior prince should be termed a lion, though this is only a hackneyed literary metaphor to us, for few of us have ever seen a lion outside a cage, and, to judge by the reports of modern hunters, the lion at large has little in common with the king of beasts in Æsop's Fables. Well, the Irish poets used the word *lion* too, as a term of praise, though none of them could ever have seen a lion. But when they address a patron, in metaphors more familiar to them, as a *hound*, a *hawk*, a *salmon*, a *branch*, a *spreading tree*, a *cluster of nuts*, with much ornament in the way of mythological and geographical detail thrown in, the result to the modern reader is too quaint to be impressive.

Instead of one of these highly polished and difficult compositions let us take an anonymous poet's address to his old cloak. Here, at least, there is no room for flattery:

Are you my acquaintance, brown cloak?

[*An tú m'aithne, a fhallaing dhonn*? Poem 41.]

Even an official poet could write simply and sincerely when his own feelings were touched. Here is an elegy on a young poet, written by his own father Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, 'Ireland's Arch-professor of Poetry', who died in 1387. The writer, who was looked up to and quoted by later poets as one of the greatest of his period, was for a time devoted to the earls of Desmond.

O cross yonder upon the hill that art the cause of my weeping, whosoever is glad at thy completion, thy setting up is my casting down.

It is thou, my beloved son's cross, that hast made me cheerless to-night: O firm cross by which I mourn, it is thou that shalt quench my joy.

Should my mind wander from Eoghan, thou recallest to me his going hence: it is just that I should be as I am: it had been easy not to have erected thee.

Sad is thy recalling of grief, tho' thy shapeliness is lovely: with

thee, cross of Eoghan, above me, my wealth will fade away.

When men pass thee on the road, tears shall fall to the ground: at the sight of thee, O cross, the face of women's hands will grow crimson.

Tho' they be the cause of a mighty grief, yet are they a goodly ornament to the world — thy four dark ridges, broad, even, and balanced.

O son for whom the cross has been framed as a bright and steady beacon, thou hast gotten a cross most fair and graceful, let an elegy be yoked thereto.

This cross which I see overhead is the cross of one who was best at winning goodly prizes: this cross, that is viewed like a banner, conceals the very flame of art.

There is no need to bear witness to it either in its neighbourhood or afar off: tho' it is a smooth jewel, it is sorrowful that it should be as a token before all.

His cross above the hill-side — omen of grief to men of my own craft! — there shall be a shower of tears upon dark eyebrows when poets recognize his cross.

For this it was raised above the ground, the student's cross, in that this wood will be to the fresh-cheeked lad a presage of alms and prayer.

A blessing upon the soul of him whose cross I see before me; better than a flood of grief is a prayer for the graceful comely one.

This cross whereby I have been tortured is fashioned after Thy cross, O Lord; may he thereby come to Thy house, he whose cross this is.

To stay behind Eoghan's cross will be an opening for my grief: it is a defence against a host, and yet, O God, it is no shelter against sorrow.

The delicately carved cross of the youth brings more honour to the holy churchyard, to reverence this cross a company comes which would fill a church.

He would have been the ollav of the men of Munster, tho' he never got the title of ollav, that we have no such ollav as he, O God, that is the want I feel.

I omit here a mythological narrative, which would seem far-fetched to modern taste, though it was not far-fetched or incongruous to the poet and his contemporaries. He concludes:

A son in the father's place, that were a fitting ordinance: that his father should be his heir, O Lord, it is a cause of misery.

While Eoghan lived, such was my love for him, I could not endure, tho' I do it now for ever, to be two nights parted from him.

Had any other been his teacher, I should not feel his death as I do: it makes his departure more distant, O God, that I was Eoghan's teacher.

This Eoghan, with his fair locks — I must do without him: his time is over — what more can I say? and yet what fate is harder?[8]

[*A chros thall ar an dtulaigh, D. Dána*, p. 196.]

8 It should be noted that the deliberate repetition of the word 'cross' is less monotonous in the original, where the form varies between *cros*, *crois* and *croise*.

Some of you may have heard of the famous Contention of the Bards at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Such poetic debates were not uncommon. There are two graceful poems on the River Shannon. It is uncertain whether they belong to the fifteenth or to the end of the sixteenth century. The original in each case is in a pretty tripping measure, of which the technical name is *ae freslige*:

A Shionainn Bhriain Bhóraimhe,
iongnadh is méd do ghâire,
mar sguire dod ghlóraighe,
ag dol siar isin sâile.

[Poem 12.]

The debate is continued, with more learning than poetry, in two other poems, and finally a third poet, Tadhg Mac Aedhagáin, sums up the case in favour of Tadhg Óg Ó Huiginn, deciding on historic grounds that the Shannon is a northern river.

In the Tudor period the shadow of impending change falls upon the classical poetry. The bards see to their dismay that even men of Gaelic race are found on the side of the foreigner and his foreign civilization. There is a poem by Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird, dating probably from the sixteenth century. It is apparently meant as a reproach to someone who has adopted the dress and manners of a Tudor courtier. He is contrasted with another, perhaps his brother, who has chosen the harder, but more adventurous, life of a rebel.

O man who follows English ways...

[*A fhir ghlacas a ghalldacht*, Poem 9.]

It is worth noting that our classical writers were no purists in the matter of vocabulary. They had no scruple about using the foreign word to denote the foreign thing. In this short piece we find several English loanwords — *loca, brísde, clóca, cóta, spor, buatais, stoca, ráipér, sgarfa.*

When the change came, it came suddenly. The old Gaelic world went to pieces, and numbers of highly trained educated men found that their once honourable profession had disappeared. There is a poem written by Fear Feasa Ó an Cháinte, a well-known poet of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. It is addressed to the celebrated Finghean or Florence MacCarthy, 'the dangerousest man in all Ireland', who had learned at Elizabeth's court the diplomacy that so baffled her ministers, until Carew hit upon the expedient of trapping him by means of a safe-conduct, and then treacherously arresting him. It is not clear whether this appeal against a boycott by his clan was written during one of his earlier

visits to London, or during the long years of imprisonment in the Tower. We know that Florence MacCarthy carried on correspondence and lawsuits throughout his imprisonment.

Go, my letter, to London...

[*Gluais a litir go Lunndain*, Poem 39.]

I have already referred to a poem by an unknown writer who looks at an empty school. His fellow-students are scattered and his patrons are all gone. His lot must have been a common one, for we find many poetical begging letters composed about this period. Here is a specimen by Cian Ó Heachaidhén, a northern poet:

Devise thou counsel for me O Cormac, in this difficulty, thou generous and most noble one: as thou art full of wisdom and learning, answer our hardship if thou canst.

Here is thy poet — all that is left after the slaughter, 'tis fitting to listen to our address — thou salmon of the Mourne, thou fortress of wealth — seeking thy counsel, my chief.

All men have hated the art of our fathers, since the glory of the Gaels has set, the end of our term has come alas! while English increases.

O thou of mild glance and kindly eye, every one is full of hatred of the poets; it was foretold that they should be as they are, and that men should care only for howling and strolling jesters.

Since generosity and honour have departed, all men — a tale of misery unmerited by us — have with hard hearts turned their backs upon listening to true art.

The passing of the Gaels of the land of Fódla has made poetry an outlaw: alas for her helplessness to-day, a deed never expected under the old law.

No Gael considers that we are alive, a thing which even the wicked deem marvellous: that alone is wretched, not to mention acknowledging literature.

Moreover all that live of our artists have been made deaf mutes: who now listens to our music? The utter ruin of the nobles is the cause of this.

The exile of the race of noble Niall, a woe which will long oppress our annals, has left me beyond all men powerless, this is the reason for my importunity.

These new-fashioned Gaels of the bright field of Niall, it were more fitting to call them Galls: they agree not with the sages of the schools. If they are Gaels, I know it not.

As thou art not one of this new company, devise thou for us a counsel, O Cormac, O potent salmon of Line's slopes, what craft would be best for me?

As it is thou, O darling of my heart, that art most quick and shrewd, make for me an exchange of profession, if perchance that would bring me into favour.

Search the markets, thou son of Art, let there be upon thy lips a

bout of trafficking: refuse no exchange however bad; by thy luck let us find our relief.

We are weary of our tedious luck — coax his trade from the comb-maker: as we all know their proximity, get an exchange from the fuller.

Make for us an exchange betimes — hasten! gives us heed to our fortune, I beseech thee, O swift mighty star! — with the needle-makers.

Better for me, unless thou make an exchange of trade for me, O thou of the well-known form, to depart from the view of all men's senses, to leave Ireland and the sight of it.

Or a fourth time — a cruel hardship — I must go, thou tree of fortune with fair offspring, under the protection of the children of Rudhraighe.

Unless God and thou look upon the last of thy hereditary poets, alas for those of my noble craft who are gone — I am still left.

Thou descendant of Seaán, noble son of Brian, son of Feidhlim, whose foot was firm in hard fight, relieve, my prince, the destitution of the schools, it is fitting to magnify everything that is good.

If any lived of the blood of Brian Ballach, in the fashion that we have heard ... I should not change my profession.

Thou offspring of the kings of Tara's rath, physician who dost banish drooping spirits, do thou loose the fetters of doom from her wrists, and put a new soul into Poetry.

The race of royal Niall of noble exploits, I should not speak of the woe of my profession — my sore plight has carried me beyond my purpose — if I saw them in their own sovranty.

[*Cinn dúinn comhairle, a Chormaic, Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe,* p. 120.]

As this petition has been preserved in a fine and well written manuscript we may trust that it served its purpose, and that the author was not reduced to competing with 'rude mechanicals' in order to earn a living.

The last sample of bardic poetry to which I shall draw your attention deals with the same theme, the downfall of literature under the new regime. It was written by Mathghamhain O Hifearnáin, or Mahon O'Heffernan, who belonged to the early seventeenth century, the time of confiscations and plantations. He was the author of the well-known bitter verses beginning *A mhic, ná meabhraigh éigse* —'My son, cultivate not the poetic art' [*BM Cat. of Irish MSS* i 392-3]:

Question! who will buy a poem?

[*Ceist! cia do cheinneóchadh dán*? Poem 37.]

These specimens will give you some idea of the scope and subject-matter of the poems produced in the bardic schools, though I cannot of course reproduce the elaborate polish or the idiomatic vigour of the original. Remember that they were made to be recited, or chanted in a kind of recitative to a musical accompaniment, but they are not songs; most of them are in an

unrhythmical metre which could not be set to any regular melody. There must have been thousands of popular songs in medieval and early modern Ireland, but these songs have perished. There are several poems in praise of the harp, but the literary classes appear to have looked down upon the singer, whom they classed with the *geócach* or buffoon. Tom Moore's picture of the bard singing and playing in the intervals of draining bumpers would have shocked the real bard as something very vulgar indeed. O'Curry pointed out fifty years ago the existence of purely lyric measures in Middle Irish. He was mistaken in thinking that some verses in the Book of Leinster attributed to Cormac mac Cuillenáin, who died in the the year 903, could be sung to the air of *Ar Éire ní 'neósainn cé hí*, for nearly all the lines in those verses are a syllable too short for that air. But there are some other examples of beautiful staves with a regular musical beat. Whatever be the reason, these song-measures are very rare in Middle Irish and then disappear entirely, until they reappear in modern songs. They must have been in use all along among the unlearned and unlettered. The earliest trace of a modern Gaelic song is, I think, the title of an air in Queen Elizabeth's Virginal Book, *Callino Casturame*. It will be remembered that Shakespeare brings these words into Henry V. When Pistol calls upon a French soldier to surrender, the latter says '*Je pense que vous estes le gentilhomme de bonne qualité*'. Pistol, who knows no French, answers 'Quality? *Calen O custure* me!'— ejaculating apparently the only foreign words he can think of. It is usual in Anglo-Irish circles to explain the words *Callino Casturame*, or *Calen O custure me* very simply as *cailín óg, a stór*, 'young girl, my treasure'. The words cannot bear this meaning, for *cailín óg* is not in the vocative. At a pinch we might translate them 'his sweetheart is a young girl'. But there are several difficulties in the way of identifying the Tudor English representation of sounds with these Irish words. There is the initial *c* of *casturame* (*custure me*) , the *u* which does not correspond with the *ó* of *stór*, and above all there is the final *me*. No such difficulties stand in the way of the Scottish claim that the words represent *Chailin òig, an stiùir thu mi*? 'maiden, wilt thou guide me?' Here we have the loss of the pretonic particle *a* and the unvoicing of the *g* in the Scottish fashion, while the *u* and the final *mi* are correctly represented. In fact the words will read off with as close an approximation to the Highland pronunciation as can be expected from symbols with English sound values. *Chailin òig an stiùr thu mi*? is the first line of a 'waulking-song' published in the *Mac-*

donald Collection of Gaelic Poetry, 1911, p. 246. To maintain that the Elizabethan English could not have heard any Scottish Gaelic songs is merely begging the question. For my part I am willing to admit the Scottish claim to this song, but there must, of course, have been many such songs at the time, in Ireland and Scotland. [See now G. Murphy, *Callen O Custure Me*, *Éigse* 1 125].

To come back to my subject. Bardic poetry, like all Irish poetry, is lyrical in one sense, but the poems are not songs. They are compositions in verse of varying length, sometimes emotional lyrics, sometimes moral or didactic essays in verse, sometimes political pamphlets. They are addressed exclusively to members of the upper and educated classes. They sometimes lack genuine inspiration, but they are always dignified in style and carefully finished. And as they follow unswervingly the old traditional standards they form a great linguistic storehouse of classical Gaelic, unimpeachable in vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. For the social history of Ireland it would be hard to exaggerate their importance. Until the various collections of bardic poetry have been published it will be impossible to fill in the outlines given by our annalists, for there is nothing corresponding to the romantic tales of an earlier period, and annals alone are dull and colourless things. I am glad to say that there are at least four important collections in the hands of editors at present, and much fresh material may be looked for in a year or two. But enough is now accessible to enable the critic to estimate the literary value of these compositions in general. We may regret the class prejudices of the bardic order. We may wish that their horizon had been widened by the freshening influences of the renaissance. But given the state of the country and the national and international relations in which they lived, that was impossible. They stood for the independence of the Gael, and they fell with it. While it lasted they were held in honour. Neither they nor their patrons dreamed that a change was needed. To serve one's own day and generation may not be the highest ideal for a man of letters, but it is an ideal worth attaining.

TEXTS