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The Ancient Irish Sagas

NEXT to developing original writers in its own time, the most fortunate thing, from the literary standpoint, which can befall any people is to have revealed to it some new treasure-house of literature. This treasure-house may be stored with the writings of another people in the present, or else with the writings of a buried past. But a few generations ago, in that innocent age when Blackstone could speak of the "Goths, Huns, Franks, and Vandals"—incongruous gathering—as "Celtic" tribes, the long-vanished literatures of the ancestors of the present European nations, the epics, the sagas, the stories in verse or prose, were hardly known to, or regarded by, their educated and cultivated descendants. Gradually, and chiefly in the nineteenth century, these forgotten literatures, or fragments of them, were one by one recovered. They are various in merit and interest, in antiquity and extent—"Beowulf," the Norse sagas, the "Kalevala," the "Nibelungenlied," the "Song of Roland," the Arthurian cycle of romances. In some there is but one great poem; in some all the poems or stories are of one type; in others, as in the case of the Norse sagas, a wide range of history, myth, and personal biography is covered. In our own day there has at last come about a popular revival of interest in the wealth of poems and tales to be found in the ancient Celtic, and especially in the ancient Erse, manuscripts—the whole forming a body of prose and poetry of great and well-nigh unique interest from every standpoint, which in some respects can be matched only by the Norse sagas, and which has some striking beauties the like of which are not to be found even in these Norse sagas.

For many decades German, French, Irish, and English students have worked over the ancient Celtic texts, and recently many of the more striking and more beautiful stories have been reproduced or paraphrased in popular form by writers like Lady Gregory and Miss Hull, Lady Gregory showing in her prose something of the charm which her countrywoman Emily Lawless shows in her poems "With the Wild Geese." It is greatly to be regretted that America should have done so little either in the way of original study and research in connection with the early Celtic literature, or in the way of popularizing and familiarizing that literature, and it is much to be desired that, wherever possible, chairs of Celtic should be established in our leading universities. Moreover, in addition to the scholar's work which is especially designed for students, there must ultimately be done the additional work which puts the results of the scholarship at the disposal of the average layman. This has largely been done for the Norse sagas. William Morris has translated the "Heimskringla" into language which, while not exactly English, can nevertheless be understood without difficulty—which is more than can be said for his translation of "Beowulf"—and which has a real, though affectedly archaic, beauty. Dasent has translated the "Younger Edda," the "Njala Saga," and the "Saga of Gisli the Outlaw." It is pleasant for Americans to feel that it was Longfellow who, in his "Saga of King Olaf," rendered one of the most striking of the old Norse tales into a great poem.

It is difficult to speak with anything like exactness of the relative ages of these primitive literatures. Doubtless in each case the earliest manuscripts that have come down to us are themselves based upon far earlier ones which have been destroyed, and doubtless, when they were first written down, the tales had themselves been recited, and during the course of countless recitations had been changed and added to and built upon, for a period of centuries. Sometimes, as in the "Song of Roland," we know at least in bare outline the historical incident which for some reason impressed the popular imagination until around it there grew up a great epic, of which the facts have been twisted completely out of shape. In other instances, as in the "Nibelungenlied," a tale, adaptable in its outlines to many different peoples, was adapted to the geography of a particular people, and to what that people at least thought was history; thus the Rhine becomes the great river of the "Nibelungenlied," and in the second part of the epic the revenge of Krimhild becomes connected with dim memories of Attila's vast and evanescent empire. The "Song of Roland" and the "Nibelungenlied" were much later than the earliest English, Norse, and Irish poems. Very roughly, it may perhaps be said that, in the earliest forms at which we can guess, the Irish sagas were produced, or at least were in healthy life, at about the time when "Beowulf" was a live saga, and two or three centuries or thereabouts before the early Norse sagas took a shape which we would recognize as virtually akin to that they now have.

These Celtic sagas are conveniently, though somewhat artificially, arranged in cycles. In some ways the most interesting of these is the Cuchulain cycle, although until very recently it was far less known than the Ossianic cycle—the cycle which tells of the deeds of Finn and the Fianna. The poems which tell of the mighty feats of Cuchulain, and of the heroes whose life-threads were interwoven with his, date back to a purely pagan Ireland—an Ireland cut off from all connection with the splendid and slowly dying civilization of Rome, an Ireland in which still obtained ancient customs that had elsewhere vanished even from the memory of man.

Thus the heroes of the Cuchulain sagas still fought in chariots driven each by a charioteer who was also the stanch friend and retainer of the hero. Now, at one time war chariots had held the first place in the armies of all the powerful empires in the lands adjoining the Mediterranean and stretching eastward beyond the Tigris. Strange African tribes had used them north and south of the Atlas Mountains. When the mighty, conquering kings of Egypt made their forays into Syria, and there encountered the Hittite hosts, the decisive feature in each battle was the shock between the hundreds of chariots arrayed on each side. The tyranny of Sisera rested on his nine hundred chariots of iron. The Homeric heroes were "tamers of horses," which were not ridden in battle, but driven in the war chariots. That mysterious people, the Etruscans, of whose race and speech we know nothing, originally fought in chariots. But in the period of Greek and Roman splendor the war chariot had already passed away. It had seemingly never been characteristic of the wild Teuton tribes; but among the western Celts it lingered long. Cæsar encountered it among the hostile tribes when he made his famous raid into Britain; and in Ireland it lasted later still.

The customs of the heroes and people of the Erin of Cuchulain's time were as archaic as the chariots in which they rode to battle. The sagas contain a wealth of material for the historian. They show us a land where the men were herdsmen, tillers of the soil, hunters, bards, seers, but, above all, warriors. Erin was a world to herself. Her people at times encountered the peoples of Britain or of Continental Europe, whether in trade or in piracy; but her chief interest, her overwhelming interest, lay in what went on within her own borders. There was a high king of shadowy power, whose sway was vaguely recognized as extending over the island, but whose practical supremacy was challenged on every hand by whatever king or under-king felt the fierce whim seize him. There were chiefs and serfs; there were halls and fortresses; there were huge

herds of horses and cattle and sheep and swine. The kings and queens, the great lords and their wives, the chiefs and the famous fighting men, wore garments crimson and blue and green and saffron, plain or checkered, and plaid and striped. They had rings and clasps and torques of gold and silver, urns and mugs and troughs and vessels of iron and silver. They played chess by the fires in their great halls, and they feasted and drank and quarrelled within them, and the women had sun-parlors of their own.

Among the most striking of the tales are those of the "Fate of the Sons of Usnach," telling of Deirdrè's life and love and her lamentation for her slain lover; of the "Wooing of Emer" by Cuchulain; of the "Feast of Bricriu"; and of the famous Cattle-Spoil of Cooley, the most famous romance of ancient Ireland, the story of the great raid for the Dun Bull of Cooley. But there are many others of almost equal interest; such as the story of MacDatho's pig, with its Gargantuan carouse of the quarrelsome champions; and the tale of the siege of Howth.

In these tales, which in so many points are necessarily like the similar tales that have come down from the immemorial past of the peoples of kindred race, there are also striking peculiarities that hedge them apart. The tales are found in many versions, which for the most part have been enlarged by pedantic scribes of aftertime, who often made them prolix and tedious, and added grotesque and fantastic exaggerations of their own to the barbaric exaggerations already in them, doing much what Saxo Grammaticus did for the Scandinavian tales. They might have been woven into some great epic, or at least have taken far more definite and connected shape, if the history of Ireland had developed along lines similar to those of the other nations of west Europe. But her history was broken by terrible national tragedies and calamities. To the scourge of the Vikings succeeded the Anglo-Norman conquest, with all its ruinous effects on the growth of the national life. The early poems of the Erse bards could not develop as those other early lays developed which afterward became the romances of Arthur and Roland and Siegfried. They remain primitive, as "Beowulf" is primitive, as, in less measure, "Gisli the Outlaw" is primitive.

The heroes are much like those of the early folk of kindred stock everywhere. They are huge, splendid barbarians, sometimes yellow-haired, sometimes black- or brown-haired, and their chief title to glory is found in their feats of bodily prowess. Among the feats often enumerated or referred to are the ability to leap like a salmon, to run like a stag, to hurl great rocks incredible distances, to toss the wheel, and, like the Norse berserkers, when possessed with the fury of battle, to grow demoniac with fearsome rage. This last feat was especially valued, and was recognized as the "heroes' fury." As with most primitive peoples, the power to shout loudly was much prized, and had a distinct place of respect, under the title of "mad roar," in any list of a given hero's exhibitions of strength or agility; just as Stentor's voice was regarded by his comrades as a valuable military asset. So, when the slaughter begins in Etzel's hall, the writer of the Nibelung lay dwells with admiration on the vast strength of Diederick, as shown by the way in which his voice rang like a bison horn, resounding within and without the walls. Many of the feats chronicled of the early Erse heroes are now wholly unintelligible to us; we can not even be sure what they were, still less why they should have been admired.

Among the heroes stood the men of wisdom, as wisdom was in the early world, a vulpine wisdom of craft and cunning and treachery and double-dealing. Druids, warlocks, sorcerers, magicians, witches appear, now as friends, now as unfriends, of the men of might. Fiercely the heroes fought and wide they wandered; yet their fights and their wanderings were not very different from those that we read about in many other primitive tales. There is the usual incredible variety of incidents and character, and, together with the variety, an endless repetition.

But these Erse tales differ markedly from the early Norse and Teutonic stories in more than one particular. A vein of the supernatural and a vein of the romantic run through them and relieve their grimness and harshness in a way very different from anything to be found in the Teutonic. Of course the supernatural element often takes as grim a form in early Irish as in early Norse or German; the Goddess with red eyebrows who on stricken fields wooed the Erse heroes from life did not differ essentially from the Valkyrie; and there were land and water demons in Ireland as terrible as those against which Beowulf warred. But, in addition, there is in the Irish tales an unearthliness free from all that is monstrous and horrible; and their unearthly creatures could become in aftertime the fairies of the moonlight and the greenwood, so different from the trolls and gnomes and misshapen giants bequeathed to later generations by the Norse mythology.

Still more striking is the difference between the women in the Irish sagas and those, for instance, of the Norse sagas. Their heirs of the spirit are the Arthurian heroines, and the heroines of the romances of the Middle Ages. In the "Song of Roland"—rather curiously, considering that it is the first great piece of French literature—woman plays absolutely no part at all; there is not a female figure which is more than a name, or which can be placed beside Roland and Oliver, Archbishop Turpin and the traitor Ganelon, and Charlemagne, the mighty emperor of the "barbe fleurie." The heroines of the early Norse and German stories are splendid and terrible, fit to be the mothers of a mighty race, as stern and relentless as their lovers and husbands. But it would be hard indeed to find among them a heroine who would appeal to our modern ideas as does Emer, the beloved of Cuchulain, or Deirdrè, the sweetheart of the fated son of Usnach. Emer and Deirdrè have the charm, the power of inspiring and returning romantic love, that belonged to the ladies whose lords were the knights of the Round Table, though of course this does not mean that they lacked some very archaic tastes and attributes.

Emer, the daughter of Forgall the Wily, who was wooed by Cuchulain, had the "six gifts of a girl"—beauty, and a soft voice, and sweet speech, and wisdom, and needlework, and chastity. In their wooing the hero and heroine spoke to one another in riddles, those delights of the childhood of peoples. She set him journeys to go and feats to perform, which he did in the manner of later knight errants. After long courting and many hardships, he took Emer to wife, and she was true to him and loved him and gloried in him and watched over him until the day he went out to meet his death. All this was in a spirit which we would find natural in a heroine of modern or of mediæval times—a spirit which it would be hard to match either among the civilizations of antiquity, or in early barbarisms other than the Erse.

So it was with Deirdrè, the beautiful girl who forsook her betrothed, the Over-King of Ulster, for the love of Naisi, and fled with him and his two brothers across the waters to Scotland. At last they returned to Ireland, and there Deirdrè's lover and his two brothers were slain by the treachery of the king whose guests they were. Many versions of the Songs of Deirdrè have come down to us, of her farewell to Alba and her lament over her slain lover; for during centuries this tragedy of Deirdrè, together with the tragical fate of the Children of Lir and the tragical fate of the Children of Tuirenn, were known as the "Three Sorrowful Tales of Erin." None has better retained its vitality down to the present day. Even to us, reading the songs in an alien age and tongue, they are very beautiful. Deirdrè sings wistfully of her Scottish abiding-place, with its pleasant, cuckoo-haunted groves, and its cliffs, and the white sand on the beaches. She tells of her lover's single infidelity, when he came enamoured of the daughter of a Scottish lord, and Deirdrè, broken-hearted, put off to sea in a boat, indifferent whether she should live or die; whereupon the two brothers of her lover swam after her and brought her back, to find him very repentant and swearing a three-fold oath that never again would he prove false to her until

he should go to the hosts of the dead. She dwells constantly on the unfailing tenderness of the three heroes; for her lover's two brothers cared for her as he did:

“Much hardship would I take,
Along with the three heroes;
I would endure without house, without fire,
It is not I that would be gloomy.
“Their three shields and their spears
Were often a bed for me.
Put their three hard swords
Over the grave, O young man!”

For the most part, in her songs, Deirdrè dwells on the glories and beauties of the three warriors, the three dragons, the three champions of the Red Branch, the three that used to break every onrush, the three hawks, the three darlings of the women of Erin, the three heroes who were not good at homage. She sings of their splendor in the foray, of their nobleness as they returned to their home, to bring fagots for the fire, to bear in an ox or a boar for the table; sweet though the pipes and flutes and horns were in the house of the king, sweeter yet was it to hearken to the songs sung by the sons of Usnach, for “like the sound of the wave was the voice of Naisi.”

There were other Irish heroines of a more common barbarian type. Such was the famous warrior-queen, Meave, tall and beautiful, with her white face and yellow hair, terrible in her battle chariot when she drove at full speed into the press of fighting men, and “fought over the ears of the horses.” Her virtues were those of a warlike barbarian king, and she claimed the like large liberty in morals. Her husband was Ailill, the Connaught king, and, as Meave carefully explained to him in what the old Erse bards called a “bolster conversation,” their marriage was literally a partnership wherein she demanded from her husband an exact equality of treatment according to her own views and on her own terms; the three essential qualities upon which she insisted being that he should be brave, generous, and completely devoid of jealousy!

Fair-haired Queen Meave was a myth, a goddess, and her memory changed and dwindled until at last she reappeared as Queen Mab of fairyland. But among the ancient Celts her likeness was the likeness of many a historic warrior queen. The descriptions given of her by the first writers or compilers of the famous romances of the foray for the Dun Bull of Cooley almost exactly match the descriptions given by the Latin historian of the British Queen Boadicea, tall and terrible-faced, her long, yellow hair flowing to her hips, spear in hand, golden collar on neck, her brightly colored mantle fastened across her breast with a brooch.

Not only were some of Meave's deeds of a rather startling kind, but even Emer and Deirdrè at times showed traits that to a modern reader may seem out of place, in view of what has been said of them above. But we must remember the surroundings, and think of what even the real women of history were, throughout European lands, until a far later period. In the “Heimskringla” we read of Queen Sigrid, the wisest of women, who grew tired of the small kings who came to ask her hand, a request which she did not regard them as warranted to make either by position or extent of dominion. So one day when two kings had thus come to woo her, she lodged them in a separate wooden house, with all their company, and feasted them until they were all very drunk, and fell asleep; then in the middle of the night she had her men fall on them with fire and sword, burn those who stayed within the hall and slay those who broke out. The incident is mentioned in the saga without the slightest condemnation; on the contrary, it

evidently placed the queen on a higher social level than before, for, in concluding the account, the saga mentions that Sigrid said “that she would weary these small kings of coming from other lands to woo her; so she was called Sigrid Haughty thereafter.” Now, Sigrid was an historical character who lived many hundred years after the time of Emer and Deirdrè and Meave, and the simplicity with which her deed was chronicled at the time, and regarded afterward, should reconcile us to some of the feats recorded of those shadowy Erse predecessors of hers, who were separated from her by an interval of time as great as that which separates her from us.

The story of the “Feast of Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue” is one of the most interesting of the tales of the Cuchulain cycle. In all this cycle of tales, Bricriu appears as the cunning, malevolent mischief-maker, dreaded for his biting satire and his power of setting by the ears the boastful, truculent, reckless, and marvellously short-tempered heroes among whom he lived. He has points of resemblance to Thersites, to Sir Kay, of the Arthurian romances, and to Conan, of the Ossianic cycle of Celtic sagas. This story is based upon the custom of the “champion’s portion,” which at a feast was allotted to the bravest man. It was a custom which lasted far down into historic times, and was recognized in the Brehon laws, where a heavy fine was imposed upon any person who stole it from the one to whom it belonged. The story in its present form, like all of these stories, is doubtless somewhat changed from the story as it was originally recited among the pre-Christian Celts of Ireland, but it still commemorates customs of the most primitive kind, many of them akin to those of all the races of Aryan tongue in their earlier days. The queens cause their maids to heat water for the warriors’ baths when they return from war, and similarly made ready to greet their guests, as did the Homeric heroines. The feasts were Homeric feasts. The heroes boasted and sulked and fought as did the Greeks before Troy. At their feasts, when the pork and beef, the wheaten cakes and honey, had been eaten, and the beer, and sometimes the wine of Gaul, had been drunk in huge quantities, the heroes, vainglorious and quarrelsome, were always apt to fight. Thus in the three houses which together made up the palace of the high king at Emain Macha, it was necessary that the arms of the heroes should all be kept in one place, so that they could not attack one another at the feasts. These three houses of the palace were the Royal House, in which the high king himself had his bronzed and jewelled room; the Speckled House, where the swords, the shields, and the spears of the heroes were kept; and the House of the Red Branch, where not only the weapons, but the heads of the beaten enemies were stored; and it was in connection with this last grewsome house that the heroes in the train of the High King Conchubar took their name of the “Heroes of the Red Branch.”

When Bricriu gave his feast, he prepared for it by building a spacious house even handsomer than the House of the Red Branch; and it is described in great detail, as fashioned after “Tara’s Mead Hall,” and of great strength and magnificence; and it was stocked with quilts and blankets and beds and pillows, as well as with abundance of meat and drink. Then he invited the high king and all the nobles of Ulster to come to the feast. An amusing touch in the saga is the frank consternation of the heroes who were thus asked. They felt themselves helpless before the wiles of Bricriu, and at first refused outright to go, because they were sure that he would contrive to set them to fighting with one another; and they went at all only after they had taken hostages from Bricriu and had arranged that he should himself leave the feast-hall as soon as the feast was spread. But their precautions were in vain, and Bricriu had no trouble in bringing about a furious dispute among the three leading chiefs, Loigaire the Triumphant, Conall the Victorious, and Cuchulain. He promised to each the champion’s portion, on condition that each should claim it. Nor did he rest here, but produced what the saga calls “the war of words of the women of Ulster,” by persuading the three wives of the three heroes that each should tread first into the

banquet-hall. Each of the ladies, in whose minds he thus raised visions of social precedence, had walked away from the palace with half a hundred women in her train, when they all three met. The saga describes how they started to return to the hall together, walking evenly, gracefully, and easily at first, and then with quicker steps, until, when they got near the house, they raised their robes “to the round of the leg” and ran at full speed. When they got to the hall the doors were shut, and, as they stood outside, each wife chanted her own perfections, but, above all, the valor and ferocious prowess of her husband, scolding one another as did Brunhild and Krimhild in the quarrel that led to Siegfried’s death at the hands of Hagen. Each husband, as in duty bound, helped his wife into the hall, and the bickering which had already taken place about the champion’s portion was renewed. At last it was settled that the three rivals should drive in their chariots to the home of Ailill and Meave, who should adjudge between them; and the judgment given, after testing their prowess in many ways, and especially in encounters with demons and goblins, was finally in favor of Cuchulain.

One of the striking parts of the tale is that in which the three champions, following one another, arrive at the palace of Meave. The daughter of Meave goes to the sun-parlor over the high porch of the hold, and from there she is told by the queen to describe in turn each chariot and the color of the horses and how the hero looks and how the chariot courses. The girl obeys, and describes in detail each chariot as it comes up, and the queen in each case recognizes the champion from the description and speaks words of savage praise of each in turn. Loigaire, a fair man, driving two fiery dapple-grays, in a wickerwork chariot with silver-mounted yoke, is chanted by the queen as:

“A fury of war, a fire of judgment,
A flame of vengeance; in mien a hero,
In face a champion, in heart a dragon;
The long knife of proud victories which will hew us to pieces,
The all-noble, red-handed Loigaire.”

Conall is described as driving a roan and a bay, in a chariot with two bright wheels of bronze, he himself fair, in face white and red, his mantle blue and crimson, and Meave describes him as:

“A wolf among cattle; battle on battle,
Exploit on exploit, head upon head he heaps”;

and says that if he is excited to rage he will cut up her people

“As a trout on red sandstone is cut.”

Then Cuchulain is described, driving at a gallop a dapple-gray and a dark-gray, in a chariot with iron wheels and a bright silver pole. The hero himself is a dark, melancholy man, the comeliest of the men of Erin, in a crimson tunic, with gold-hilted sword, a blood-red spear, and over his shoulders a crimson shield rimmed with silver and gold. Meave, on hearing the description, chants the hero as:

“An ocean in fury, a whale that rageth, a fragment of flame and fire;

A bear majestic, a grandly moving billow,
A beast in maddening ire:
In the crash of glorious battle through the hostile foe he leaps,
His shout the fury of doom;
A terrible bear, he is death to the herd of cattle,
Feat upon feat, head upon head he heaps:
Laud ye the hearty one, he who is victor fully.”

Bricriu lost his life as a sequel of the great raid for the Dun Bull of Cooley. This was undertaken by Queen Meave as the result of the “bolster conversation,” the curtain quarrel, between her and Ailill as to which of the two, husband or wife, had the more treasure. To settle the dispute, they compared their respective treasures, beginning with their wooden and iron vessels, going on with their rings and bracelets and brooches and fine clothes, and ending with their flocks of sheep, and herds of swine, horses, and cattle. The tally was even for both sides until they came to the cattle, when it appeared that Ailill had a huge, white-horned bull with which there was nothing of Meave’s to compare. The chagrined queen learned from a herald that in Cooley there was a dun or brown bull which, it was asserted, was even larger and more formidable.

Meave announces that by fair means or foul the dun bull shall be hers, and she raises her hosts. A great war ensues, in which Cuchulain distinguishes himself above all others. All the heroes gather to the fight, and a special canto is devoted to the fate of a very old man, Iliach, a chief of Ulster, who resolves to attack the foe and avenge Ulster’s honor on them. “Whether, then, I fall or come out of it, is all one,” he said. The saga tells how his withered and wasted old horses, which fed on the shore by his little fort, were harnessed to the ancient chariot, which had long lost its cushions. Into it he got, mother-naked, with his sword and his pair of blunt, rusty spears, and great throwing-stones heaped at his feet; and thus he attacked the hosts of Meave and fought till his death. In the Cuchulain sagas the heroes frequently fight with stones; and the practice obtained until much later days, for in Olaf’s death-battle with the ships of Hakon his men were cleared from the decks of the Long Serpent by dexterously hurled stones as well as by spears.

Partly by cunning, Meave gets the dun bull upon which she had set her heart. Then comes in a thoroughly Erse touch. It appears that the two bulls have lived many lives in different forms, and always in hostility to each other, since the days when their souls were the souls of two swineherds, who quarrelled and fought to the death. Now the two great bulls renew their ancient fight. Bricriu is forced out to witness it, and is trampled to death by the beasts. At last the white-horned bull is slain, and the dun, raging and destroying, goes back to his home, where he too dies. And this, says the saga, in ending, is the tale of the Dun Bull of Cooley and the Driving of the Cattle-Herd by Meave and Ailill, and their war with Ulster.

The Erse tales have suffered from many causes. Taken as a mass, they did not develop as the sagas and the epics of certain other nations developed; but they possess extraordinary variety and beauty, and in their mysticism, their devotion to and appreciation of natural beauty, their exaltation of the glorious courage of men and of the charm and devotion of women, in all the touches that tell of a long-vanished life, they possess a curious attraction of their own. They deserve the research which can be given only by the lifelong effort of trained scholars; they should be studied for their poetry, as countless scholars have studied those early literatures; moreover, they should be studied as Victor Bérard has studied the “Odyssey,” for reasons apart

from their poetical worth; and finally they deserve to be translated and adapted so as to become a familiar household part of that literature which all the English-speaking peoples possess in common.