

**GILL'S IRISH RECITER. A
SELECTION OF
GEMS FROM IRELAND'S
MODERN LITERATURE**

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Gill's Irish Reciter. A Selection of Gems from Ireland's Modern Literature by J. J. O'Kelly

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GILL'S IRISH RECITER

A SELECTION OF GEMS FROM IRELAND'S
MODERN LITERATURE.

CHUASAÉT SEOT AS SCRIBINNÍD ÉIREANN.

EDITED BY

J. J. O'KELLY.

Author of "SAOĀAR ĀR SEAN I SCÉIN."

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INTRODUCTION.



SINCE the inception about a decade ago of the active campaign of the Gaelic League the need for a collection of popular pieces suitable for recitation before Irish audiences is daily becoming more and more felt not only in the schools and colleges of Ireland but also in its class-rooms, concert halls, libraries, and elsewhere. Miscellaneous collections of the gems of Ireland's modern literature we have had in comparative abundance, with the happy result that, at present, the difficulty of the editor of a popular "Reciter" is less in collecting ample matter for a comprehensive volume than in selecting from an almost inexhaustible mass a limited number of the more dramatic and acceptable pieces.

The nineteenth century was singularly prolific in Anglo-Irish poetry of an intensely national character. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have left us in our native tongue volumes of prose and verse which for patriotic and religious fervour are likely to remain unsurpassed in the literature of our land. One of the aims in this work is to present a fairly consecutive summary of the events that have illumined our chequered story. With such persistency and fidelity have these events been chosen as the subject matter of stirring ballads by those of our race who wrote in an alien tongue that it would, perhaps, be as easy now to produce from their work a metrical history of Ireland as it was for Keating in his day to verify and embellish his Irish history by a judicious use of the poetry of the bards who preceded him. Nor has there been any lack, on the

contrary, there has been a very profusion of contemporary Irish poetry from Keating's time until our own. Thus, despite penal laws, bitter persecution, enforced illiteracy, incessant emigration, outlawry, exile, and all, we are to-day in the peculiar position of possessing the materials from which to compile complete and reliable metrical histories of our country in either of two languages.

"Our modern minstrelsy loses much by its recent origin," wrote Edward Hayes exactly half-a-century ago in a scholarly preface to his 'Ballads of Ireland.' . . . "The sonorous melody of the Celtic tongue would be preferable," he went on, "though the wish to return to it now might be considered impracticable. It has been well said that we can be thoroughly Irish in thought and feeling although we are English in expression." The future of our national speech must then have seemed very unenviable, and the general national outlook all but hopeless indeed. But half-a-century brings many a change; and though prominent writers of to-day are wont to refer to Moore as "our National poet," there are growing hosts who rightly prefer to associate the distinction with the name of one or other of the native singers who contributed to our literature the deathless vernacular poetry of the last three centuries.

This poetry may be said to have begun with Keating, the father, by universal consent, of modern Irish. So, too, the Irish selections presented in this volume practically commence with Keating. Only one poem written anterior to his period is included. This is a spirited appeal to the people of the historic O'Byrne country to unite in face of the English enemy. It was written in 1580 by *Donnchadh mac Donnchadh Ó Súilleabháin*. A very fine translation of the

piece will be found in Ferguson's "Lays of the Western Gael," where, not inappropriately, it follows the "Downfall of the Gael," the original of which was written also in 1580 by O'Gnive, Bard of O'Neill. O'Gnive's poem, like O'Daly's, is in its essence a rallying-cry, and reaches a high dramatic level, as will be inferred from the concluding stanzas even in their cold and foreign English dress :

Through the woods let us roam,
 Through the wastes wild and barren ;
 We are strangers at home !
 We are exiles in Erin !

And Erin's a bark
 O'er the wide waters driven !
 And the tempest howls dark,
 And her side planks are riven !

And in billows of night
 Swell the Saxon before her—
 Unite, oh, unite !
 Or the billows burst o'er her !

Such the national prospect in the period of Keating's boyhood. He had scarcely reached man's estate before Trinity College was founded as a first step, Lord Bacon said, "towards the recovery of the hearts of the people." Recovery, *ῥόμιον* ! The next step was the preparation of "versions of Bibles and Catechisms and other works of Instruction in the Irish language." Trinity's subsequent propagandism need not be discussed here ; directly or indirectly it constitutes the burthen of a big proportion of our modern literature.

Keating appropriately initiated the fight against the Anglicising methods of Elizabeth's stronghold of Ascendancy, as MacHale initiated the campaign against a later and equally

insidious scheme. Fr. Daniel O'Sullivan, in his *Cómhráð roir* *Caos agur a míleair*, blew a leg from the proselytisers' flesh-pot the moment that oily instrument of civilisation was brought to the aid of Trinity :

"The master was a rogue, his name was Darby Coggage,
He ate the mate himself, we only got the cabbage ;
The mistress, too, was sly, which no one ever doubted,
She was mighty fond of wine, and left the sick without it."

More recently, the Rev. author of "*Ceribean agur Sorca*" in the *Caoine* which he ascribes to poor *Cáit Ní Súilleabháin* has given us a luminous example of the contempt in which "the Spirit of Souperism" was held even by children gasping of thirst and hunger on their bed of death :

"Nuair a bhí an t-óráir uairé dar verasóid,
An uair nó ríad an t-óir go léir rí,
Ní hé ríadain dar zepóiré 'ndar zcléid déir
Cé ná n-arrtal ar anbhúit a éróisean."

So has the struggle been maintained for upwards of three centuries. No need to say how fares to-day the fight virtually initiated by Ireland's greatest historian.

Though Keating will probably be best remembered for his monumental *Foras Feasa*, he has also left among many other works a goodly volume of poetry, founded principally on the events of his time. The more remarkable of the poets who succeeded him, while fond of legendary and mythological allusions, limited their range of subjects, except in so far as they were of a religious character, to the great incidents of their respective periods. O'Brudair, O'Neachtain, Ferriter, Ward, O'Donoghue, O'Rahilly, M'Donnell, Eoghan Ruadh, *Caos Zsebeats*, O'Longain, and their brethren

have left us a faithful picture of the troubled era intervening between the advent of modern Irish and the inception of the more modern Anglo-Irish literature. But beyond these limits they rarely take us. Notwithstanding the illustrious record of the early Irish on the Continent, it really was not until the brilliant intellect of "Young Ireland" applied itself with a purpose to a systematic study of the available materials of Irish history that our ancient glories began to be reflected, as on a revolving mirror, before the gaze of the modern world.

It has, of course, to be borne in mind that an efficient printing-press, greater facilities for travel and for the circulation of their work, and the vastly wider auditory ensured by the language which they adopted, gave the Anglo-Irish writers of the nineteenth century immense advantages over the vernacular poets who preceded them, and the incentive thus provided resulted in the production of volume upon volume of popular ballads. Accordingly, while it is comparatively easy to cull from the best Anglo-Irish literature of the last century a most dramatic ballad history of our country, the available modern Irish poetry, with such notable exceptions as "Laoi Oirín," takes us back only to the period of the Four Masters. Not that the very cream of Irish literature was not produced anterior to their time. The translations by Ferguson and Sigerson and Hyde and O'Flannghaile, by Walsh and Mangan and Callanan and Guinee, though no other evidence were forthcoming, bear abundant testimony to the excellence of Irish poetry in all its stages of development. But Irish literature produced before the age of Keating would manifestly be now unsuitable in a popular volume, and it has therefore been

considered desirable to include a few modern prose pieces having reference to subjects which do not seem to have received specific attention from the writers of the past.

Subjects that should, and doubtless soon will, afford fitting themes to writers of Irish are Brigid addressing the Young Women of Ireland, Colm Cille entering a plea for the Irish Bards, Colonel John O'Mahony urging the possible potency of the Irish language to restore the ancient martial spirit of the Gael, Fr. O'Growney fighting the martyr's fight for the preservation and cultivation of the language, and so on. It has not been found possible to provide such original pieces for this volume, however. Accordingly it is not claimed that a thorough historical narrative is presented. Nor is rigid chronological sequence claimed for the arrangement of the work. Least of all is it pretended, as is done in other "Irish" collections, that all the pieces in our whole literature most suitable for recitation are included. Readers will almost instantly miss such stirring poems as Davis's "Lament for Eoghan Ruadh O'Neill;" Seamus MacManus's "Shane O'Neill," and "Coming of Eoghan Ruadh;" William Rooney's "Ceann Dubh Dóir;" Mangan's "Cathal Mór of the Wine-red Hand;" D'Arcy M'Gee's "Connacht Chief's Farewell;" Patrick Archer's "Dying in Exile;" Lady Dufferin's "Lament of the Irish Emigrant;" John Keegan's "Holly and Ivy Girl," and numbers of others. Their exclusion has been determined partly by a desire not to include more than a couple of pieces from any writer, and partly through many of them being so accessible elsewhere; but principally because many of the most dramatic pieces in Anglo-Irish literature are, like the *airtíng* of the Irish poets, written with a great sameness of metre, and rightly