

Writing Ireland

Lecture 3: Literary Traditions

- 1) Charlotte Brooke, *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789)
- 2) Thomas Davis, *Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (1845)
- 3) Thomas McDonagh, *Literature in Ireland* (1916)

(Reliques of Irish poetry:
consisting of heroic poems, odes,
elegies, and songs, translated into
English verse: with notes
explanatory and historical; and
the originals in the Irish character.
To which is subjoined an Irish tale.
By Miss Brooke. [Dublin],
M.DCC.LXXXIX. [1789].
Eighteenth Century Collections
Online. Gale. ECCO Consortium
Germany. 31 Oct. 2011.)

1) Charlotte Brooke, *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789)

- the first anthology of Gaelic poetry translated into English
- programmatic preface

[cf. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765)]

[cf. James McPherson, *The Works of Ossian* (1765):

*Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and
translated from the Gaelic or Erse language* (1760)

*Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books, together with Several Other
Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Gaelic
Language* (1761)

Temora (1763)]

In a preface to a translation of ancient Irish poetry, the reader will naturally expect to see the subject elucidated and enlarged upon, with the pen of learning and antiquity. I lament that the limited circle of my knowledge does not include the power of answering so just an expectation. [...]

My comparatively feeble hand aspires only (like the ladies of ancient Rome) to strew flowers in the paths of these laureled champions of my country [i.e. learned critics]. [...]

'The esteem (says Mr O'Halloran) which mankind conceive of nations in general, is always in proportion to the figure they have made in art and arms.' [...]

It is impossible for imagination to conceive too highly of the pitch of excellence to which a science must have soared which was cherished with such enthusiastic regard and cultivation as that of poetry, in this country. It was absolutely, for ages, the vital soul of the nation. [...]

True it is, indeed, and much to be lamented, that few of the compositions of those ages that were famed, in Irish annals, for the *light of song*, are now to be obtained by the most diligent research. The greater number of the poetical remains of our Bards, yet extant, were written during the middle ages; periods when the genius of Ireland was in its wane,

- Yet still, not lost

All its original brightness - .

On the contrary, many of the productions of those times breathe the spirit of true poetry, besides the merit they possess with the Historian and Antiquary [...]

With a view to throw some light on the antiquities of this country, to vindicate, in part, its history, and prove its claim to scientific as well as to military fame, I have been induced to undertake the following work. Besides the four different species of composition which it contains, (the heroic poem, the ode, the elegy, and the Song) others yet remain unattempted by translation: - the romance in particular [...] But the limits of my present plan have necessarily excluded many beautiful compositions of genius, as little more can be done, within the compass of a single volume, than merely to give a few specimens, in the hope of awakening a just and useful curiosity, on the subject of our poetical compositions.

Unacquainted with the rules of translation, I know not how far those rules may censure or acquit me. I do not profess to give a merely literal version of my originals, for that I should have found an impossible undertaking. - Besides the spirit which they breathe, and which lifts the imagination far above the tameness, let me say, the *injustice*, of such a task, - there are many complex words that could not be translated literally, without great injury to the original, without being 'false to the sense, and falser to its fame.'

I am aware that in the following poems there will sometimes be found a sameness, and repetition of thought, appearing but too plainly in the English version, though scarcely perceivable in the original Irish, so great is the variety as well as beauty peculiar to that language. [...]

It is really astonishing of what various and comprehensive powers this neglected language is possessed. In the pathetic, it breathes the most beautiful and affecting simplicity; and in the bolder species of composition, it is distinguished by a force of

expression, a sublime dignity, and rapid energy, which is scarcely possible for any translation to convey; as it sometimes fills the mind with idea altogether new, and which, perhaps, no modern language is entirely prepared to express. [...]

But, though I am conscious of having, in many instances, failed in my attempts to do all the justice I wished to my originals, yet still, some of their beauties are, I hope, preserved; and I trust I am doing an acceptable service to my country, while I endeavour to rescue from oblivion a few of the invaluable reliques of her ancient genius; and while I put it in the power of the public to form some idea of them, by clothing the thoughts of our Irish muse in a language with which they are familiar [...]

The productions of our Irish bards exhibit a glow of cultivated genius, - a spirit of elevated heroism, - sentiments of pure honor, - instances of disinterested patriotism, - and manners of a degree of refinement, totally astonishing, at a period when the rest of Europe was nearly sunk in barbarism: And is not all this very honorable to our countrymen? [...]

As yet we are too little known to our noble neighbour of Britain; were we better acquainted, we should be better friends. The British muse is not yet informed that she has an elder sister in this isle; let us then introduce them to each other!

“Elegy on the Death of Carolan” (from the *Reliques*)

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following is the Elegy mentioned in Mr. Walker’s Life of Carolan, composed on the death of that Bard, by his friend M’Cabe.

M’Cabe was rather of a humorous, than a sentimental turn; he was a wit, but not a poet. It was therefore his grief and not his muse, that inspired him, on the present occasion. The circumstances which gave rise to this Elegy, are striking, and extremely affecting. M’Cabe had been an unusual length of time without seeing his friend, and went to pay him a visit. As he approached near the end of his journey, in passing by a church-yard, he was met by a peasant, of whom he enquired for Carolan. The peasant pointed to his grave, and wept.

M’Cabe, shocked and astonished, was for some time unable to speak; his frame shook, his knees trembled, he had just power to totter to the grave of his friend, and then sunk to the ground. A flood of tears, at last, came to his relief; and still further to disburden his mind he vented its anguish in the following lines. In the original they are simple and unadorned but pathetic to a great degree; and this is a species of beauty, in composition, extremely difficult to transfuse into any other language. I do not pretend, in this, to have entirely succeeded, but I hope the effort will not be unacceptable; - much of the simplicity is unavoidably left; - the pathos which remains may, perhaps, in some measure, atone for it.

I CAME, with friendship's face, to glad my heart,
But sad, and sorrowful my steps depart!
In my friend's stead - a spot of earth was shown,
And on his grave my woe-struck eyes were thrown!
No more to their distracted sight remain'd,
But the cold clay that all they lov'd contain'd:
And there his last and narrow bed was made,
And the drear tomb-stone for its covering laid!

Alas! - for this my aged heart is wrung!
Grief choaks my voice, and trembles on my tongue.
Lonely and desolate, I mourn the dead,
The friend with whom my every comfort fled!
There is no anguish can with this compare!
No pains, diseases, suffering, or despair,
Like that I feel, while such a loss I mourn,
My heart's companion from its fondness torn!
Oh insupportable, distracting grief!
Woe, that through life, can never hope relief!
Sweet-singing harp! - thy melody is o'er!
Sweet friendship's voice! - I hear thy sound no more!
My bliss, - my wealth of poetry is fled.
And every joy, with him I lov'd, is dead !
Alas! what wonder, (while my heart drops blood
Upon the woes that drain its vital flood,)
If maddening grief no longer can be borne.
And frenzy fill the breast, with anguish torn!

The Irish Times, Tue 03 Mar 2010:

How could we forget Brooke? We owe a debt to Charlotte Brooke, the largely neglected Cavan-born translator of Gaelic poets into English, whose achievement later influenced Thomas Moore and Yeats, writes EILEEN BATTERSBY
SHE IS a woman without a face, at least in history. No portrait of the pioneering 18th-century literary translator, Charlotte Brooke, is known. Nor is her exact date of birth. [...]

[Portrait of Thomas Davis]

2) Thomas Davis, *Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (1845)

How slow we have all been in coming to understand the meaning of Irish Nationality!

Some, dazzled by visions of pagan splendour, and the pretensions of pedigree, and won by the passions and romance of the olden races, continued to speak in the nineteenth century of an Irish nation as they might have done in the tenth. They forgot the English Pale, the Ulster Settlement, and the filtered colonization of men and ideas. A Celtic kingdom with the old names and the old language, without the old quarrels, was their hope; and though they would not repeat O'Neill's comment, as he passed Barrett's castle on his march to Kinsale, and heard it belonged to a Strongbownian, that 'he hated the Norman churl as if he came yesterday;' yet they quietly assumed that the Norman and Saxon elements would disappear under the Gaelic genius like the tracks of cavalry under a fresh crop.

The Nationality of Swift and Grattan was equally partial. [...] A lower form of nationhood was before the minds of those who saw in it nothing but a parliament in College Green. [...]

Far healthier, with all its defects, was the idea of those who saw in Scotland a perfect model - who longed for a literary and artistic nationality [...] Their writings, their patronage, their talk was of Ireland; yet it hardly occurred to them that the ideal would flow into the practical, or that they, with their dread of agitation, were forwarding a revolution.

At last we are beginning to see what we are, and what is our destiny. Our duty arises where our knowledge begins. The elements of Irish nationality are not only combining - in fact, they are growing confluent in our minds. Such nationality as merits a good man's help and wakens a true man's ambition - such nationality as could stand against internal faction and foreign intrigue, such nationality as would make the Irish hearth happy and the Irish name illustrious, is becoming understood. It must contain and represent the races of Ireland. It must not be Celtic, it must not be Saxon - it must be Irish. The Brehon law, and the maxims of Westminster, the cloudy and lightning genius of the Gael, the placid strength of the Sasanach, the marshalling insight of the Norman - a literature which shall exhibit in combination the passions and idioms of all, and which shall equally express our mind in its romantic, its religious, its forensic, and its practical tendencies - finally, a native government, which shall know and rule by the might and right of all; yet yield to the arrogance of none - these are components of such a nationality.

But what have these things to do with the 'Ballad Poetry of Ireland'?

Much every way. It is the result of the elements we have named - it is compounded of all; and never was there a book fitter to advance that perfect nationality to which Ireland begins to aspire. That a country is without national poetry proves its hopeless dulness or its utter provincialism. National poetry is the very flowering of the Soul - the greatest evidence of its health, the greatest excellence of its beauty. Its melody is balsam to the senses. It is the playfellow of childhood ripens into the companion of his manhood, consoles his age. It presents the most dramatic events, the largest

characters, the most impressive scenes, and the deepest passions in the language most familiar to us. It shows us magnified, and ennobles our hearts, our intellects, our country, and our countrymen - binds us to the land by its condensed and gem-like history, to the future by examples and by aspirations. It solaces us in travel, fires us in action, prompts our invention, sheds a grace beyond the power of luxury round our homes, is the recognised envoy of our minds among all mankind and to all time. In possessing the powers and elements of a glorious nationality, we owned the sources of a national poetry. In the combination and joint development of the latter, we find a pledge and a help to that of the former.

“A Nation Once Again” (1845)

When boyhood’s fire was in my blood,
I read of ancient freemen,
For Greece and Rome who bravely stood,
Three Hundred men and Three men.
And then I prayed I yet might see,
Our fetters rent in twain,
And Ireland, long a province, be
A Nation once again.

And from that time, through wildest woe,
That hope has shone, a far light;
Nor could love’s brightest Summer glow
Outshine that solemn starlight:
It seemed to watch above my head
In forum, field and fane;
Its angel voice sang round my bed,
“A Nation once again.”

It whispered, too, that “Freedom’s ark
And service high and holy,
Would be profaned by feelings dark
And passions vain or lowly:
For freedom comes from God’s right hand,
And needs a godly train;
And righteous men must make our land
A Nation once again.”

So, as I grew from boy to man,
I bid me to that bidding -
My spirit of each selfish plan
And cruel passion ridding;
For, thus I hoped some day to aid -
Oh! can such hope be vain?
When my dear country shall be made
A Nation once again.

[Portrait/Stamp Thomas McDonagh]

3) Thomas McDonagh, *Literature in Ireland* (1916)

[“This country will be one entire slum unless we get into action, in spite of our literary movements and Gaelic Leagues it is going down and down. There is no life or heart left in the country.”]

In Ireland a period intervened between the last days of the Gaelic literature that mattered and the beginning of the new literature in the English tongue [...]

The old Gaelic polity and culture having lost their force and their integrity, Gaelic literature became decadent in the time of the Penal Laws [...] whatever is to be in the unknown future, it would be folly to deny the sickness, the decadence of the immediate past. And while Irish was decadent, English was not yet able either to carry on the tradition or to syllable anew for itself here.

The English-speaking population of Ireland had none of the qualities – social cohesion and integrity, culture, enthusiasm, joy, high and brave emotion – to stammer and then to utter clearly the new word. That word came to the call of the country. It came in the new language and was heard in the new day.

The Renaissance that stirred England to its greatest literature brought the mingling of the cosmopolitan with the national. Here the waters have been stirred by the breath of freedom: the alien language has stirred to expression on the lips of the native people.

The revival of nationalism among the Irish subject majority following the days of the Irish Volunteers, the United Irishmen, the independent Parliament; this nationalism, strengthened by O’Connell with Catholic Emancipation and the franchise; this nationalism, hardened by the austere independence of Parnell, by the land war and its victorious close; this, brought to full manhood by the renewed struggle for legislative freedom and the certainty of triumph and responsibility; this, free from alien hope and fear, craving no ease, hearing always the supreme song of victory on the dying lips of martyrs; this produced the unrest, the impetuous, intrepid adventure that shouts the song of joy for the sad things and for the glad things of life. The song in the new language demanded an intellectual effort that gave it a worth apart.

English had to be broken and re-made to serve that song. The language that had been brought to perfection for English use, and then worn by that use, that had had the fixing of the printing press and had set the printer’s word above the spoken, that language, in order to serve the different purpose of the new people, had to go back to the forge of the living speech. [...] The modern writer cannot distinguish between his idea and the set phrase that does duty for its expression, though its terms have other meanings. He alludes to things. His prose is a hint, perfectly understood no doubt by others who know the code, but not for all that a true language. Almost perfectly it does duty for a true language to the people with whom it has grown; better than perfectly in its poetry, which gains in suggestiveness more than its loss in concreteness. [...]

It was, in a word, the English language, good for the English people, redolent with English history [...] This language, now a courser of ethereal race, now a hack between the shafts of commercialism, serving Shakespeare and the stenographer, used efficiently in William Blake's lyrics and in telegrams; this differed in many of the ways of linguistic difference from the language of the Gael. In it the ideas of the Gael did not find easy expression.

But I have been led on a little too far. The language that was brought face to face with Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not the language of English commerce. The Gaelic people had for English tutors the descendants of the old English settlers, in whose mouth the language was still the language of Shakespeare. The transplanted slip of a language does not develop as does the parent tree. By comparison it rather ceases to develop. [...] And this was the English that had to be knit into a different complication from the modern complication of the central English language. [...]

The Gaelic Renaissance means to us not only the revival of interest in this old Irish literature [...] but, added to [this], the study of modern Irish as a language capable of literature. [...] And when we use the same word, Renaissance, for the Gaelic revival, springing from the rediscovery of the ancient language and literature, and branching now into a double literature in two languages, we do not claim that it is quite the counterpart of the Classic. The old literature that was to be discovered, the ancient Irish art, were not in such consonance even with what of literature and art we still held, as were Classic literature and art with those of medieval Europe, with the culture that still held allegiance to Rome and had memories of ancient Greece. Still at the heart of that lament for a Gaelic Renaissance five hundred years ago is this truth, that if history had been different the ancient culture and ancient literature of our people might have had a more powerful influence on the culture and literature of Europe. [...]

The themes of Early Irish Literature are many of them the themes of modern romantic literature – in lyric poetry, nature and humanity [...] Nothing could be more clear, more direct, more gem-like, hard and delicate and bright, than the earlier lyric poetry, nothing more surely true to nature, full of natural piety, nothing of another kind greater in suggestion, however brief in form. Not till the advent of Wordsworth comes there anything like this intimacy with nature into other modern literature. Not till we listen to the voice of Shelley do we hear in other lyric poetry such prophecy of song as has come down through folk poetry in Irish. [...]

A part of the old world lives in us; to a large part we are alien not in speech only but in feeling, in sense, in instinct, in vision. We are true to the best of the old literature when we are true to that part of it which we inherit now in the twentieth century, when we discover in ourselves something of its good tradition, something that has remained true by the changing standards and measures. [...]

[A]s we are now, we are a fresh people, fresh to literature. We have begun to produce a literature in English, a foreign tongue. This will not injure or delay the progress of Gaelic literature, which must be the work of other writers. [...] In the matter of technique – and this is all but supremely necessary in modern poetry – one language only will one poet master. Whether our people will go forward in Anglo-Irish

literature or not, some of our poets and writers of the next generation will certainly continue the production of a new literature in Irish. [...] Our nature poetry [...] will be natural and spontaneous, and our own. [...] We have now so well mastered this language of our adoption that we use it with a freshness and power that the English these days rarely have.

Bibliography Lecture 3:

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