

# IRISH POETRY

By Padraic Colum

*With a Sketch by William Saphier*

ONE of the characteristics of Irish poetry according to Thomas MacDonagh is a certain naïveté. "An Irish poet," he wrote, "if he be individual, if he be original, if he be national, speaks, almost stammers, in one of the two fresh languages of this country; in Irish (modern Irish, newly schooled by Europe), or in Anglo-Irish, English as we speak it in Ireland... Such an Irish poet can still express himself in the simplest terms of life and of the common furniture of life."<sup>1</sup>

Thomas MacDonagh is speaking here of the poetry that is being written today; of the poetry that comes out of a community still mainly agricultural, close to the soil, and with but few possessions. And yet with this naïveté there must go a great deal of subtility. "Like the Japanese," said Kuno Meyer, "the Celts were always quick to take an artistic hint; they avoid the obvious and the commonplace; the half said thing to them is dearest."<sup>2</sup> This is said of the poetry written in Ireland many hundred years ago, but the subtility that the critic credits the Celts with is still a racial heritage.

Irish poetry begins with a dedication—a dedication of the race to the land. The myth of the invasion tells that the first act of the invaders was

the invoking of the land of Ireland—its hills, its rivers, its forests, its cataraacts. Amergin, the first poet, pronounced the dedication from one of their ships, thereby dedicating the Milesian race to the mysterious land. Many poems since Amergin's time are dedications—dedications of the poet to the land, of the race to the land.

When the Milesian Celts drew in their ships they found, peopling the island, not a folk to be destroyed or mingled with, but a remote and ever-living race, the Tuatha De Danaan. Between the Milesians and the Tuatha De Danaan a truce was made with a partitioning of the country. To the Milesians went the upper surfaces and the accessible places, and to the De Danaan went the subterranean and the inaccessible places of the country. Thus, in Ireland, the Golden Race did not go down before the men of the Iron Race. They stayed to give glimpses of more lovely countries, more beautiful lovers, more passionate and adventurous lives to princes and peasants for more than a thousand years. And so an enchantment stayed in the furthest of European lands—an enchantment that gleams through the poems and stories of the ancient literature, and that has filtered into European literature through the lays of Marie de France; through the most memorable incidents in the Tristan and Iseult story; through the marvelous legend of the Grail, the germ

<sup>1</sup>Literature in Ireland. Frederick A. Stokes Co.

<sup>2</sup>Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry. E. P. Dutton and Co.

of which came to French and German story-tellers from Ireland.

## II

Anglo-Irish literature begins, as an English critic has observed, with Goldsmith and Sheridan humming some urban song as they stroll down an English laneway. That is, it begins chronologically that way. At the time when Goldsmith and Sheridan might be supposed to be strolling down English laneways, Ireland, for all but a fraction of the people, was an Irish-speaking country with a poetry that had had many centuries of cultivation. Afterward English speech began to make its way through the country, and an English-speaking audience became important for Ireland. At the end of the eighteenth century came Thomas Moore, a singer who knew little of the depth and intensity of the Gaelic consciousness, but who, through a fortunate association, was able to get into his songs a racial distinctiveness.

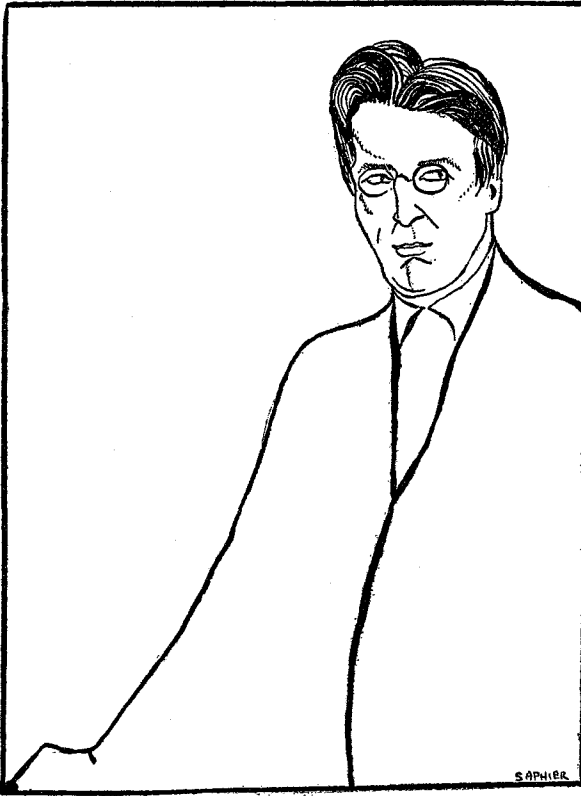
He was born in Dublin, the English-speaking capital, at a time when the Irish-speaking south of Ireland had still bards with academic training and tradition—the poets of Munster who were to write the last chapter of the unbroken literary history of Ireland. From the poets with the tradition, from the scholars bred in the native schools, Moore was not able to receive anything. But from those who conserved another part of the racial heritage, from the musicians, he was able to receive a good deal.

At the end of the eighteenth century the harpers who had been wandering through the country, playing the beautiful traditional music, had been gathered together in Belfast. The music that they were the custodians of had been noted down and published by Bunting. With Bunt-

ing's collection before them the Irish who had been educated in English ways and English thought were made to realize that they had a national heritage. Thomas Moore, a born song writer, began to write English words to this music. Again and again the distinctive rhythms of the music forced a distinctive rhythm upon his verse. Through using the mold of the music, Moore, without being conscious of what he was doing, reproduced again and again the rhythms and sometimes the structure of Gaelic verse. When Edgar Allan Poe read the lyric of Moore's that begins, "At the mid hour of night", he perceived a distinctive metrical achievement. The poem was written to an ancient Irish air, and its rhythm, like the rhythm of the song that begins, "Through grief and through danger", wavering and unemphatic, is distinctively Irish. Moore not only reproduced the rhythm of Gaelic poetry, but sometimes he reproduced even its metrical structure:

Silent, O Moyle, be the roar of thy water,  
Break not, ye breezes, your chain of repose,  
While murmuring mournfully, Lir's lonely  
daughter,  
Tells to the night star her tale of woes.

Back in 1760 MacPherson's "Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland" was published. That medley, unreadable by us today, affected the literatures of England, France, Germany, and Italy. In the British Islands eager search was made for the Gaelic originals. There were no originals. MacPherson's compositions which he attributed to the Gaelic bard Ossian were in every sense of the word original. And yet, as the historian of Scottish Gaelic literature, Dr. Magnus MacLean, has said, the arrival of James MacPherson marked a great moment in the history



WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

*Sketched by William Saphier*

of all Celtic literatures. "It would seem as if he sounded the trumpet, and the graves of ancient manuscripts were opened, the books were read, and the dead were judged out of the things that were written in them." Those who knew anything of Gaelic literary tradition could not fail to respond to the universal curiosity aroused by the publication of MacPherson's compositions. In Ireland this led to the revelation of a fragment of the ancient poetry and romance. And now names out of the heroic cycles begin to come into Anglo-Irish poetry. "The words of this song were suggested by a very ancient Irish story called 'Deirdri, or the lamentable fate of the Sons of Usneach' which has been translated

literally from the Gaelic by Mr. O'Flanagan, and upon which it appears that the 'Darthula' of MacPherson is founded," Thomas Moore writes in a note to the song "Avenging and bright fell the swift sword of Erin". Slowly fragments of this ancient literature were revealed and were taken as material for the new Irish poetry.<sup>3</sup>

After Moore there came another

<sup>3</sup>The Ossian of MacPherson (in Ireland Oisín, pronounced Usheen) was supposed to be the poet who had celebrated the lives and actions of the heroic companionship known as the Fianna. The Irish term for this class of poetry is "Fianaidheacht". At the time when "Ossian" was appealing to Goethe and Napoleon, the great mass of the poetry that was the canon of MacPherson's apocrypha was lying unnoticed in the University of Louvain, brought over there by Irish students and scholars. Recently this poetry has been published by the Irish Texts Society (Dunáire Finn, the Book of the Poems of Finn, Edited and translated by Eoin MacNeill).

poet who reached a distinctive metrical achievement through his study of the music that Bunting had published. This poet was Samuel Ferguson. He took the trouble to learn Irish, and when he translated the words of Irish folk songs to the music that they were sung to, he created, in half a dozen instances, poems that have a racial distinctiveness. Ferguson had what Moore had not—the ability to convey the Gaelic spirit. Take his “Cashel of Munster”:

I'd wed you without herds, without money or  
rich array,  
And I'd wed you on a dewy morn at day-dawn  
grey;  
My bitter woe it is, love, that we are not far  
away  
In Cashel town, though the bare deal board  
were our marriage bed this day.

Here is the wavering rhythm, the unemphatic word-arrangement, that is characteristic of Irish song. Callinan, too, gets the same effects in his translation of “The Outlaw of Loch Lene”:

O many's the day I made good ale in the glen,  
That came not from stream nor from malt like  
the brewing of men;  
My bed was the ground, my roof the green  
wood above,  
And all the wealth that I sought, one fair, kind  
glance from my love.

Ferguson's translation of “Cean Dubh Dilis” (Dear Dark Head) makes one of the most beautiful of Irish love songs; it is a poem that carries into English the Gaelic music and the Gaelic feeling; the translation, moreover, is more of a poem than is the original.

Sir Samuel Ferguson was the first Irish poet to attempt a retelling of any of the ancient sagas. He aimed at doing for “The Tain Bo Cuilligne”, the Irish epic cycle, what Tennyson at the time was doing for the Arthurian cycle, presenting it, not as a continuous narrative, but as a series of poetic studies. The figures of the heroic cycle, however, were too primitive, too

elemental, too full of their own sort of humor for Ferguson to take them on their own terms. He made them conform to Victorian rectitudes. And yet it has to be said that he blazed a trail in the trackless region of Celtic romance; the prelude to his studies, “The Tain Quest”, written in a heady ballad metre, is quite a stirring poem, and his “Conairy” manages to convey a sense of vast and mysterious action. It was to Ferguson that W. B. Yeats turned when he began his deliberate task of creating a national literature for Ireland.

With Sir Samuel Ferguson there is associated a poet whom he long outlived, James Clarence Mangan. Mangan was a great rhapsodist if not a great poet. He was an original metrical artist, and it is possible that Edgar Allan Poe learned some metrical devices from him.<sup>4</sup> The themes that this poet seized on were not from Irish romance, but were from the history of the Irish overthrow. And what moved him to his greatest expression were the themes that had a terrible desolation or an unbounded exultation—Brian's palace overthrown and his dynasty cut off; the princes of the line of Conn dying unnoted in their exile; the heroic chief of the Clann Maguire fleeing unfriended through the storm; or else Dark Rosaleen with her “holy, delicate white hands” to whom all is offered in a rapture of dedication. Mangan incarnated in Anglo-Irish poetry the bardic spirit of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and the sigh that Egan O'Rahilly breathed “A mo Thir, A mo Ghradh” (O my Land, O my love), is breathed through all his memorable poetry. He had the privilege of creating the most

<sup>4</sup>Mangan published in the Dublin University Magazine, a publication which Poe could have seen in various places. Compare Mangan's use of repetitions and internal rhymes with Poe's.

lovely of all the feminine representations of Ireland, and in "Dark Rosaleen" he has made the greatest, because the most spiritual, patriotic poem in the world's literature. One has to describe the best of Mangan's poems as translations, although in doing so one is conscious of having to extend unduly the meaning of the word. For the impulse and the theme came to him through the work of another, and this not only in the case of the poetry that he took from Irish sources, but in the poetry that he drew from German and Arabic origins.

Mangan's poems were published in the 'forties. There was then a conscious literary movement in Ireland. It went with the European democratic movement, with the coming to consciousness of many of the European nationalities. At the time the Finns were collecting their Magic Songs that were to be woven into the enchanting epic of the Kalevala, and the Bohemians were making their first efforts to revive their distinctive culture. Among the minor European nationalities Ireland might have been thought to be in the best position to create a literature that would be at once national and modern, heroic and intellectual, for there was behind her an ancient cultivation and a varied literary production. Under the leadership of Thomas Davis a movement of criticism and scholarship was inaugurated—a movement that might have been expected to have fruit in a generation.

Then came the disaster of the famine—the double famine, for the famine of '47 followed on that of '46. The effect of this disaster (until 1914 no European people in two hundred years had suffered such a calamity) was a great rent in social life. How it affected everything that belonged to the

imagination can be guessed at from a sentence written by George Petrie. He made a great collection of Irish music, but in the preface to his collection he laments that he entered the field too late. What impressed him most about the Ireland after the famine was, as he says, "the sudden silence of the fields". Before, no one could have walked a roadway without hearing music and song; now there was cessation, and this meant a break in the whole tradition. What Petrie noted with regard to music was true for poetry and saga. The song perished with the tune. The older generation who were the custodians of the tradition, were the first to go down to the famine graves. And in the years that followed the collapse the people had little heart for the remembering of "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago". The history of Ireland since is a record of recovery and relapse from an attack that almost meant the death of the race.

### III

That Ireland stirs so powerfully today means that a recovery has been made. There is a national resurgence, and as part of that resurgence there has come that literary movement, beginning in the 'eighties, which is generally termed the Irish Literary Renaissance. There are three writers who have each contributed a distinctive idea to this literary movement—W. B. Yeats, George W. Russell ("A. E."), and Douglas Hyde. The idea that Mr. Yeats has contributed is that of a culture that would be personal and aristocratic. Irish poetry, when he began his work, was in close alliance with political journalism. The Irish political movement had become parliamentary and argumentative, and this spirit had influenced the work of the

poets. Irish poetry, with some notable exceptions, was poor in form and impersonal in mood. Mr. Yeats, by devoting his artistic energy to the creation of subtle and beautiful forms, brought a creative idea to the younger writers. He preached to them continuously on the discipline of form. In his early volume "The Wanderings of Oisín" he opened up a fresh world for the poets of the new time. And soon he was able to convince them that they were most racial, most Gaelic, when they were disciplining themselves for the creation of exact forms. Gaelic poetry, as it was easy to show, had ever for its ideal the creation of highly wrought forms.

He insisted that personality was the root of poetry, and that the expression of opinion and of collective feeling was for the journalists and the political orators. Mr. Yeats is regarded as a mystical poet: he is not mystical, however, but intellectual, and the poems in "The Wind Among the Reeds" that have given him a reputation for being a mystic, are esoteric rather than mystical; they belong to the same movement that produced the French symbolists. The Irish mind is intellectual rather than mystical, but it is very prone to take an interest in what is remote, esoteric, and cryptic. Mr. Yeats, in Irish letters, has distinctly stood for the intellectual attitude.

But the poet who had been his comrade in the Art School in Dublin was really a mystic. This was George W. Russell who was to publish his poems under the initials "A. E." Like all mystics "A. E." is content to express a single idea, and when one has entered into the mood of one of his poems one can understand the whole of his poetry. In his three books of verse, and in his book on national eco-

nomics, "A. E." has stated his single, all-sufficing thought. Men are the strayed Heaven-dwellers. They are involved in matter now, but in matter they are creating a new empire for the spirit. This doctrine, which might form the basis for a universal religion, has been put into an Irish frame by the poet. "A. E." too has been drawn to the study of the remains of Celtic civilization. He sees in Celtic mythology a fragment of the cosmology once held by the Indians, the Egyptians, and the Greeks. And he alludes to Celtic divinities as if Lugh, Angus, Manannan, Dagda, Dana were as well known as Apollo, Eros, Oceanus, Zeus, Hera.

"A. E.'s" vision is not for all Irish writers who have come under his influence. But he has taught every one of them to look to the spiritual significance of the fact or the event that he writes about. Like the other two representative writers, W. B. Yeats and Douglas Hyde, "A. E." takes a large part in the public life of Ireland. He deals with the most practical of all affairs—agriculture, and he is one of the leaders of the movement for agricultural cooperation. He edits an agricultural journal, and he writes every week on economics and agriculture.

Dr. Douglas Hyde has written in Gaelic and in English; he has written poems, plays, and essays, but it is by his collections of folk poetry that he has most influenced contemporary Irish poetry. He came into contact with the Gaelic tradition by living with the farmers and fishers of the west of Ireland. The Gaelic-speaking population of Ireland had now shrunk to some remote and poverty-stricken districts along the Atlantic Ocean. But in them this poet-scholar was able to make a considerable gleanings. He



has published "The Love Songs of Connacht" and "The Religious Songs of Connacht", two sections of a great collection he has made, and the publication of these songs has been one of the greatest influences on the new Irish literature.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Hyde, in translating these Gaelic folk songs into English, reproduced in many instances the distinctive metrical effects of Gaelic poetry, and showed how various interesting forms might be adopted by Irish poets in using the English language. But the collections were to have an influence over more than language and metrical form. The young Irish poets who had been brought up in a culture remote from their racial inheritance, were to find in these poems not only the racial spirit, but the character of their people and the distinctive features of their country; they were to find in them too an intensity and a moving simplicity—"The Love Songs of Connacht" became the breviary of many of the younger poets.

The attempt at the re-Gaelicizing of Ireland by the Gaelic League has had a powerful effect on Irish poetry. Padraic Pearse, one of the truest poets that Ireland has ever produced, wrote his poems in Gaelic, bringing a new material into Gaelic poetry. And the kernel of Thomas MacDonagh's book of creative criticism, "Literature in Ireland", is in this declaration:

<sup>5</sup>The influence has been exerted not only on poetry, but on the dialogue of the Irish drama as well. In making literal prose renderings of some of the songs he used the idiom and rhythm of the Irish peasant speaking English. Lady Gregory made use of the idiom in her versions of the old romances. Mr. Yeats praised Dr. Hyde's discovery and spoke of it to John M. Synge. Synge's rhythmic and colored idiom is very close to Dr. Hyde's prose versions of the Connacht songs. Here is a verse from one of them: "If you were to see the Star of Knowledge and she coming in the mouth of the road, you would say that it was a Jewel at a distance from you, who would disperse fog and enchantment: her countenance red like the roses, and her eye like the dew of the harvest: her thin little mouth very pretty, and her neck of the color of lime."

The Gaelic revival has given to some of us a new arrogance. I am a Gael and I know no cause but of pride in that. *Gaedhal me agus no h-eol dom gur nair dom e.* My race has survived the wiles of the foreigner here. It has refused to yield even to defeat, and emerges strong to-day, full of hope and of love, with new strength in its arms to work its new destiny, with a new song on its lips and the word of the new language, which is the ancient language, still calling from age to age.

#### IV

Whether it has or has not to do with the prosaic issue of self-determination, it is certain that Irish poetry in these latter days is becoming more and not less national. But it is no longer national in the deliberate way that Thomas Davis would have it national, as "condensed and gem-like history".<sup>6</sup>

No, Irish poetry is no longer national in the deliberate or in the claimant way. But it is becoming national as the Irish landscape is national, as the tone and gesture of the Irish peasant is national. It is national in "A. E.'s" poetry—if not in those mystical reveries that transcend race and nationality, then in those impassioned statements in which he celebrates or rebukes the actions of some group or some individual; it is national in W. B. Yeats's poetry, in his range from invective to the poetry of ideal love; it is national in the landscape that Joseph Campbell evokes; in the bardic exuberance of language that James Stephens turns into poetry; in the delicate rhythms of Seumas O'Sullivan's lyrics and in the remoteness that they hold; in the hedgerows and the little fields that Francis Ledwidge's poetry images; in the dedication that is in Joseph Plunkett's, and in the high and happy adventurousness that is in Thomas MacDonagh's poetry.

<sup>6</sup>"National poetry... binds us to the land by its condensed and gem-like history. It... fires us in action, prompts our invention, sheds a grace beyond the power of luxury round our homes, it is the recognized envoy of our minds among all mankind, and to all time."

# GEORGE ADE

By Thomas L. Masson

*With a Sketch by Ivan Opffer*

IN the introduction to "Ivanhoe" Sir Walter Scott, with the genial candor that was one of his most charming traits, laments that hitherto he has been unable to break away from the uninterrupted course of the Waverley novels. "It was plain, however," says Sir Walter, "that the frequent publication must finally wear out the public favor, unless some mode could be devised to give an appearance of novelty to subsequent productions. Scottish manners, Scottish dialect, and Scottish characters of note, being those with which the author was most intimately and familiarly acquainted, were the groundwork upon which he had hitherto relied for giving effect to his narrative." He then adds: "Nothing can be more dangerous for the fame of a professor of the fine arts than to permit (if he can possibly prevent it) the character of a mannerist to be attached to him, or that he should be supposed capable of success only in a particular and limited style." Indeed, Sir Walter was so much impressed by the truth of his observation, that he insisted upon publishing "Ivanhoe" anonymously, and it was only upon the assurance of its success from his publishers that he consented to the use of his name.

This danger has long been recognized by authors, and during the last half century—inspired quite possibly by the example of Sir Walter—British writers have quite largely succeeded

in overcoming the handicap. We have Mr. Kipling starting out as a writer of short sketches from India, creating a new vein of Anglo-Indian literature; but shortly breaking away from his environment and becoming a short story writer of universal appeal, a first-rank novelist, and the only poet who has voiced in rugged song the heart and soul of Imperial England. We have Jerome K. Jerome whose "Three Men in a Boat" and whose housemaid's knee fastened upon him the reputation of a professional humorist, suddenly turning into a dramatist of high order. There was Thackeray of "Punch", likewise a professional humorist and satirist, breaking bounds and becoming the author of "Vanity Fair"; and after him Du Maurier, who used to write his own jokes to his own drawings and who, leaving the conference table (they say in a fit of pique) built forthwith his "Trilby", surely a work of real literary art. Still more recently we have A. A. Milne, in the beginning a chance contributor to "Punch", rapidly achieving a reputation not only as a humorist and dramatist of the first rank, but as a writer whose breadth of vision is constantly increasing. There are numerous other examples in Great Britain of authors who have risen above their first reputations. Mr. Wells is a notable instance, for it would be difficult to say whether he is most preeminent as a