

THE IRISH HARP

IRELAND'S NATIONAL MUSIC

'It is thought (writes Mr. M. Nolan in the *Lyttelton Times*) that there was no Irish harper in that famous band of which Mr. W. F. Gordon has lately been telling us in the columns of the *Lyttelton Times*, for if there had been the Book of Daniel would certainly have told us all about it, and the aspect of affairs at the performance would have been entirely changed. It is certain that those three gentlemen who flatly refused to prostrate themselves before the golden image set up by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, would have willingly bowed down before the captivating influence of the Irishman's music. Ireland, from time immemorial, has not only been called 'The Island of Saints,' but the 'Island of Song' also, and pre-eminently the island of the harp. In the recently published *Story of the Harp*, by W. H. Grattan Flood, that writer says that there exists to-day evidence to prove that the harp was known and practised in Ireland four hundred years before Christ. In the very earliest records of the Gael the harp has a prominent place, for the ancient harpers and minstrels were the historians of the race and the companions of kings. Nay, many of the kings themselves were harpers. King David sang his wonderful Psalms upon the harp and turned his skill on that instrument to the praises of the Lord. The harp is

The National Standard of Ireland,

and it was under that standard that Brian Boromhe broke the power of the Norsemen in that country for ever. Brian's own harp may now be seen, with many another relic of Ireland's ancient civilisation, in Trinity College, Dublin. It is doubtful whether the instrument alluded to as a harp in the Bible had any likeness whatever to the instrument known by that name to-day; and I quite agree with Mr. Gordon when he says that the translators of the Bible bestowed such names on the instruments as would be understood by their readers. What the ancient Hebrew musical instruments were like we have no means of knowing, nor did the translators themselves know. The psalter is mentioned in Ps. xxxii., 2 (Douay version), as an instrument of ten strings. The ancient Irish harp was an instrument of eight strings. The old harpers of Ireland, many of whom were blind, must have had a wonderful grasp of the technicalities of music to produce such fine melodies on such imperfect instruments. Irish national music cannot be compared with that of any other country. It is *sui generis*. It stands on a pedestal of its own, perhaps not very lofty, but firmly set, and well rooted. It defies all the known laws of harmony, and smiles disdainfully at the critic. Now it laughs and leaps and dances like the new-born sun on Easter morn, and anon it weeps and croons like Niobe wailing for her children. The true explanation of these varying moods of expression must be sought for in

The Chequered Annals

of our country's history. Without going into raptures about Irish music (for much of it is but poor stuff), it may be safely asserted that no other nation in Europe or perhaps in the world has produced anything like it. Mr. Grattan Flood tells us that from Ireland the practice of singing in parts was introduced by Irish monks into England. St. Aidan ruled Northumbria from A.D. 635 to 651, and St. Finan and St. Colman from A.D. 651 to 664, all Irish monks. The difficulty of rendering Irish music in English has always been recognised by Irishmen everywhere. This difficulty confronted Moore so forcibly that he was driven to alter, to mutilate, and to spoil many of our finest melodies before he could ally them to English words.

Such combinations as *lm*, in balm, helm, etc., are not to be found in Irish, and *ch*, *qu*, *th*, *r*, initial and final *z*, in such words as *zeal*, *azure*, etc., are entirely wanting in that language. Thus the beautiful and melodious Celtic tongue admits of a greater and easier flow of the passion than does the colder and more

subtle language of the English. This beyond doubt is the reason why it is so much easier and pleasanter to make love in Irish than in English. It is well known to every student of Irish history that the Norman barons, and even the Saxons in the time of Henry II., who went over to Ireland, soon discarded their own language in favor of the sweeter and softer language of the Celt. The irregular structure of many of the finest of the old Irish airs and the sudden transitions of feeling often in the same melody, render them difficult for anyone to sing but one who is swayed by the feelings of the composer. Irish folk music (and it is of that I am writing) must be sung from

From the Very Depths of the Soul.

In a miserable cabin on the bleak hillside of an Irish bog, cheered by no ray of light beyond the flickering gleam of a turf fire on the open hearth, I have often heard the weird and plaintive melodies of my country sung as I have never heard then sung since then, but those singers felt every note of the music and every word of the song as if they were portions of their own being. Irish song music is racy of the soil which gave it birth. It refuses to flourish except in that one spot in which it is indigenous. Of the influence which it exercised over the passions in its pristine glory we can have but little conception to-day. In the Statutes of Kilkenny, 1367, it was enacted that no Irish minstrel should be permitted to enter the English pale. The law, however, soon fell into abeyance until in the time of Henry VIII. it was revived, and the Lord Marshal in Ireland was instructed to imprison all the harpers that he could lay his hands on. In the reign of Elizabeth, Lord Barrymore was empowered to hang every man in Ireland who got his living by playing on the harp. 'The fierce legislation of the pale,' says Moore, 'had during many centuries of persecution done its utmost to extinguish the minstrelsy of Ireland, but it had too much vitality, it had too strong a hold upon the people to be extinguished utterly. However, at the close of the eighteenth century the deadly pressure of the penal laws' (which made it an act of treason to sing an Irish song in public) 'had almost accomplished the work which the persecutions of the pale had left undone.' Owing to those persecutions many of

Our Best National Melodies

have been lost to us for ever. There must be something very alluring and seductive in Irish music, for it is stolen, pilfered, purloined, and appropriated by people who are too indolent and lazy, or too club-headed, to compose such music for themselves. One can scarcely pick up a child's pianoforte instructor without coming on such airs as 'The Campbells are coming,' 'O, Nanny wilt thou gang wi me,' 'John Anderson, my Jo,' 'Robin Adair,' etc., marked as Scotch melodies, the music of which has been written by Irishmen and was originally adapted to Irish words. 'John Anderson' is 'The Cruiskeen Laun,' an old Irish air. 'Robin Adair' is O'Daly's 'Eileen aroon,' of which Handel said when he first heard it in Dublin that he would rather be the author of it than the 'Messiah.' 'Lochnabar no more' was written by O'Daly on the fall of Limerick, and was called 'Limerick's lamentation.' The music of 'O, Nanny wilt thou gang wi' me' was written by Thomas Carter, a wandering Irish harper, and the words by Bishop Percy, an Englishman, and so on, and so on. 'The last rose of summer' is embodied in his opera of 'Martha' by Flo'ow, but this was purely because of his great admiration of the melody.

While the ancient music of Ireland is the true reflex of the national character, tender, noble, pathetic and light-hearted, it must be confessed that the travesties of it which we are often called upon to witness on the concert stage in this Dominion do not tend to convey a very high opinion of its beauties, and the day has passed for ever when those beauties can be revived.

'Mute, mute the harp—and lost the magic art,
Which once aroused to rapture the Milesian heart,
In cold and rust its lifeless strings decay,
And all their soul of song has died away.'

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