

**A BOOK OF
IRISH VERSE**

SELECTED FROM MODERN WRITERS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

AND NOTES

BY W.B. YEATS

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PREFACE

I HAVE not found it possible to revise this book as completely as I should have wished. I have corrected a bad mistake of a copyist, and added a few pages of new verses towards the end, and softened some phrases in the introduction which seemed a little petulant in form, and written in a few more to describe writers who have appeared during the last four years, and that is about all. I compiled it towards the end of a long indignant argument, carried on in the committee rooms of our literary societies, and in certain newspapers between a few writers of our new movement, who judged Irish literature by literary standards, and a number of people, a few of whom were writers, who judged it by its patriotism and by its political effect; and I hope my opinions may have value as part of an argument which may awaken again. The Young Ireland writers wrote to give the peasantry a literature in English in place of the literature

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they were losing with Gaelic, and these methods, which have shaped the literary thought of Ireland to our time, could not be the same as the methods of a movement which, so far as it is more than an instinctive expression of certain moods of the soul, endeavours to create a reading class among the more leisured classes, which will preoccupy itself with Ireland and the needs of Ireland. The peasants in eastern counties have their Young Ireland poetry, which is always good teaching and sometimes good poetry, and the peasants of the western counties have beautiful poems and

stories in Gaelic, while our more leisured classes read little about any country, and nothing about Ireland. We cannot move these classes from an apathy, come from their separation from the land they live in, by writing about politics or about Gaelic, but we may move them by becoming men of letters and expressing primary emotions and truths in ways appropriate to this country. One carries on the traditions of Thomas Davis, towards whom our eyes must always turn, not less than the traditions of good literature, which are the morality of the man of letters, when one is content, like A.E. with fewer readers that one may follow a more hidden beauty; or when one

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endeavours, as I have endeavoured in this book, to separate what has literary value from what has only a patriotic and political value, no matter how sacred it has become to us.

The reader who would begin a serious study of modern Irish literature should do so with Mr Stopford Brooke's and Mr Rolleston's exhaustive anthology.

W.B.Y.

August 15, 1899

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MODERN IRISH POETRY

THE Irish Celt is sociable, as may be known from his proverb, 'Strife is better than loneliness,' and the Irish poets of the nineteenth century have made songs abundantly when friends and rebels have been at hand to applaud. The Irish poets of the eighteenth century found both at a Limerick hostelry, above whose door was written a rhyming welcome in Gaelic to all passing poets, whether their pockets were full or empty. Its owner, himself a

famous poet, entertained his fellows as long as his money lasted, and then took to minding the hens and chickens of an old peasant woman for a living, and ended his days in rags, but not, one imagines, without content. Among his friends and guests had been O'Sullivan the Red, O'Sullivan the Gaelic, O'Heffernan the blind, and many another, and their songs had made the people, crushed by the disasters of the Boyne and Aughrim, remember their ancient greatness. The bardic order, with its perfect artifice and imperfect art, had gone down

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in the wars of the seventeenth century, and poetry had found shelter amid the turf-smoke of the cabins. The powers that history commemorates are but the coarse effects of influences delicate and vague as the beginning of twilight, and these influences were to be woven like a web about the hearts of men by farm-labourers, pedlars, potato-diggers, hedge-schoolmasters, and grinders at the quern, poor wastrels who put the troubles of their native land, or their own happy or unhappy loves, into songs of an extreme beauty. But in the midst of this beauty was a flitting incoherence, a fitful dying out of the sense, as though the passion had become too great for words, as must needs be when life is the master and not the slave of the singer.

English-speaking Ireland had meanwhile no poetic voice, for Goldsmith had chosen to celebrate English scenery and manners; and Swift was but an Irishman by what Mr Balfour has called the visitation of God, and much against his will; and Congreve by education and early association; while Parnell, Denham, and Roscommon were poets but to their own time. Nor did the coming with the new century of the fame of Moore set the balance even, for all but all of his Irish melodies are artificial and mechanical when

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separated from the music that gave them wings. Whatever he had of high poetry is in 'The Light of other Days,' and in 'At the Mid Hour of Night,' which express what Matthew Arnold has taught us to call 'the Celtic melancholy,' with so much of delicate beauty in the meaning and in the wavering or steady rhythm that one knows not where to find their like in literature. His more artificial and mechanical verse, because of the ancient music that makes it seem natural and vivid, and because it has remembered so many beloved names and events and places, has had the influence which might have belonged to these exquisite verses had he written none but these. An honest style did not come into English-speaking Ireland, until Callanan wrote three or four naïve translations from the Gaelic. 'Shule Aroon' and 'Kathleen O'More' had indeed been written for a good while, but had no more influence than Moore's best verses. Now, however, the lead of Callanan was followed by a number of translators, and they in turn by the poets of 'Young Ireland,' who mingled a little learned from the Gaelic ballad-writers with a great deal learned from Scott, Macaulay, and Campbell, and turned poetry once again into a principal means for spreading

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ideas of nationality and patriotism. They were full of earnestness, but never understood that though a poet may govern his life by his enthusiasms, he must, when he sits down at his desk, but use them as the potter the clay. Their thoughts were a little insincere, because they lived in the half illusions of their admirable ideals; and their rhythms not seldom mechanical, because their purpose was served when they had satisfied the dull ears of the common man. They had no time to listen to the voice of the insatiable artist, who stands erect, or lies asleep waiting until a breath arouses him, in the heart of every craftsman. Life was their master, as it had been the master of the poets who gathered in the Limerick hostelry, though it conquered them not by unreasoned love for a woman, or for native land, but by reasoned enthusiasm,

and practical energy. No man was more sincere, no man had a less mechanical mind than Thomas Davis, and yet he is often a little insincere and mechanical in his verse. When he sat down to write he had so great a desire to make the peasantry courageous and powerful that he half believed them already 'the finest peasantry upon the earth,' and wrote not a few such verses as

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'Lead him to fight for native land,
His is no courage cold and wary;
The troops live not that could withstand
The headlong charge of Tipperary,'

and to-day we are paying the reckoning with much bombast. His little book has many things of this kind, and yet we honour it for its public spirit, and recognise its powerful influence with gratitude. He was in the main an orator influencing men's acts, and not a poet shaping their emotions, and the bulk of his influence has been good. He was, indeed, a poet of much tenderness in the simple love-songs 'The Marriage,' 'A Plea for Love,' and 'Mary Bhan Astór,' and, but for his ideal of a Fisherman, defying a foreign soldiery, would have been as good in 'The Boatman of Kinsale'; and once or twice when he touched upon some historic sorrow he forgot his hopes for the future and his lessons for the present, and made moving verse. His contemporary, Clarence Mangan, kept out of public life and its half illusions by a passion for books, and for drink and opium, made an imaginative and powerful style. He translated from the German, and imitated Oriental poetry, but little that he did on any but Irish subjects is permanently interesting. He is usually classed

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with the Young Ireland poets, because he contributed to their periodicals and shared their political views; but his style was formed before their movement began, and he found it the more

easy for this reason perhaps to give sincere expression to the mood which he had chosen, the only sincerity literature knows of; and with happiness and cultivation might have displaced Moore. But as it was, whenever he had no fine ancient song to inspire him, he fell into rhetoric which was only lifted out of commonplace by an arid intensity. In his 'Irish National Hymn,' 'Soul and Country,' and the like, we look into a mind full of parched sands where the sweet dews have never fallen. A miserable man may think well and express himself with great vehemence, but he cannot make beautiful things, for Aphrodite never rises from any but a tide of joy. Mangan knew nothing of the happiness of the outer man, and it was only when prolonging the tragic exultation of some dead bard, that he knew the unearthly happiness which clouds the outer man with sorrow, and is the fountain of impassioned art. Like those who had gone before him, he was the slave of life, for he had nothing of the self-knowledge, the power of selection, the harmony of mind, which enables the poet to

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be its master, and to mould the world to a trumpet for his lips. But O'Hussey's Ode over his outcast chief must live for generations because of the passion that moves through its powerful images and its mournful, wayward, and fierce rhythms.

'Though he were even a wolf ranging the round green woods,
Though he were even a pleasant salmon in the unchainable sea,
Though he were a wild mountain eagle, he could scarce bear, he,
This sharp, sore sleet, these howling floods.'

Edward Walsh, a village schoolmaster, who hovered, like Mangan, on the edge of the Young Ireland movement, did many beautiful translations from the Gaelic; and Michael Doheny, while out 'on his keeping' in the mountains after the collapse at Ballingarry, made one of the most moving of ballads; but in the main the poets who gathered about Thomas Davis, and whose work has come down to us in 'The Spirit of the Nation,' were of

practical and political, not of literary importance.

Meanwhile Samuel Ferguson, William Allingham, and Mr Aubrey de Vere were working apart from politics, Ferguson selecting his subjects

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from the traditions of the Bardic age, and Allingham from those of his native Ballyshannon, and Mr Aubrey de Vere wavering between English, Irish, and Catholic tradition. They were wiser than Young Ireland in the choice of their models, for, while drawing not less from purely Irish sources, they turned to the great poets of the world, Mr de Vere owing something of his gravity to Wordsworth, Ferguson much of his simplicity to Homer, while Allingham had trained an ear, too delicate to catch the tune of but a single master, upon the lyric poetry of many lands. Allingham was the best artist, but Ferguson had the more ample imagination, the more epic aim. He had not the subtlety of feeling, the variety of cadence of a great lyric poet, but he has touched, here and there, an epic vastness and naïveté, as in the description in 'Congal' of the mire-stiffened mantle of the giant spectre Mananan macLir, striking against his calves with as loud a noise as the mainsail of a ship makes, 'when with the coil of all its ropes it beats the sounding mast.' He is frequently dull, for he often lacked the 'minutely appropriate words' necessary to embody those fine changes of feeling which enthrall the attention; but his sense of weight and size, of action and tumult, has set

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him apart and solitary, an epic figure in a lyric age. Allingham, whose pleasant destiny has made him the poet of his native town, and put 'The Winding Banks of Erne' into the mouths of the ballad-singers of Ballyshannon, is, on the other hand, a master of 'minutely appropriate words,' and can wring from the luxurious sadness of the lover, from the austere sadness of old age, the last

golden drop of beauty; but amid action and tumult he can but fold his hands. He is the poet of the melancholy peasantry of the West, and, as years go on, and voluminous histories and copious romances drop under the horizon, will take his place among those minor immortals who have put their souls into little songs to humble the proud. The poetry of Mr Aubrey de Vere has less architecture than the poetry of Ferguson and Allingham, and more meditation. Indeed, his few but ever memorable successes are enchanted islands in grey seas of stately impersonal reverie and description, which drift by and leave no definite recollection. One needs, perhaps, to perfectly enjoy him, a Dominican habit, a cloister, and a breviary.

These three poets published much of their best work before and during the Fenian movement, which, like 'Young Ireland,' had its poets, though

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but a small number. Charles Kickham, one of the 'triumvirate' that controlled it in Ireland; John Casey, a clerk in a flour-mill; and Ellen O'Leary, the sister of Mr John O'Leary, were at times very excellent. Their verse lacks, curiously enough, the oratorical vehemence of Young Ireland, and is plaintive and idyllic. The agrarian movement that followed produced but little poetry, and of that little all is forgotten but a vehement poem by Fanny Parnell, and a couple of songs by Mr T.D. Sullivan, who is a good songwriter, though not, as the writer has read on an election placard, 'one of the greatest poets who ever moved the heart of man.' But while Nationalist verse has ceased to be a portion of the propaganda of a party, it has been written, and is being written, under the influence of the Nationalist newspapers and of Young Ireland societies and the like. With an exacting conscience, and better models than Thomas Moore and the Young Irelanders, such beautiful enthusiasm could not fail to make some beautiful verses. But, as things are, the rhythms are mechanical, and the metaphors

conventional; and inspiration is too often worshipped as a Familiar who labours while you sleep, or forget, or do many worthy things which are not spiritual things.

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For the most part, the Irishman of our times loves so deeply those arts which build up a gallant personality, rapid writing, ready talking, effective speaking to crowds, that he has no thought for the arts which consume the personality in solitude. He loves the mortal arts which have given him a lure to take the hearts of men, and shrinks from the immortal, which could but divide him from his fellows. And in this century, he who does not strive to be a perfect craftsman achieves nothing. The poor peasant of the eighteenth century could make fine ballads by abandoning himself to the joy or sorrow of the moment, as the reeds abandon themselves to the wind which sighs through them, because he had about him a world where all was old enough to be steeped in emotion. But we cannot take to ourselves, by merely thrusting out our hands, all we need of pomp and symbol, and if we have not the desire of artistic perfection for an ark, the deluge of incoherence, vulgarity, and triviality will pass over our heads. If we had no other symbols but the tumult of the sea, the rusted gold of the thatch, the redness of the quicken-berry, and had never known the rhetoric of the platform and of the newspaper, we could do without laborious selection and

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rejection; but, even then, though we might do much that would be delightful, that would inspire coming times, it would not have the manner of the greatest poetry.

Here and there, the Nationalist newspapers and the Young Ireland societies have trained a writer who, though busy with the old models, has some imaginative energy; while Mr Lionel Johnson, Mrs Hinkson, Miss Nora Hopper, and A.E., the

successors of Allingham and Ferguson and Mr de Vere, are more anxious to influence and understand Irish thought than any of their predecessors who did not take the substance of their poetry from politics. They are distinguished too by their deliberate art, and with their preoccupation with spiritual passions and memories. Mr Lionel Johnson and Mrs Hinkson are both Catholic and devout, but Mr Lionel Johnson's poetry is lofty and austere, and, like Mr de Vere's, never long forgets the greatness of his Church and the interior life whose expression it is, while Mrs Hinkson is happiest when she embodies emotions, that have the innocence of childhood, in symbols and metaphors from the green world about her. She has no reverie nor speculation, but a devout tenderness like that of S. Francis for weak instinctive things, old gardeners, old

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fishermen, birds among the leaves, birds tossed upon the waters. Miss Hopper belongs to that school of writers which embodies passions, that are not the less spiritual because no Church has put them into prayers, in stories and symbols from old Celtic poetry and mythology. The poetry of A.E., at its best, finds its symbols and its stories in the soul itself, and has a more disembodied ecstasy than any poetry of our time. He is the chief poet of the school of Irish mystics, which has shaped Mr Charles Weekes, who published recently, but withdrew immediately, a curious and subtle book, and Mr John Eglinton, who is best known for the orchestral harmonies of his 'Two Essays on the Remnant,' and certain younger writers who have heard the words, 'If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them,' and thought the labours that bring the mystic vision more important than the labours of any craft.

Except some few Catholic and mystical poets and Prof. Dowden in one or two poems, no Irishman living in Ireland has sung excellently of any but a theme from Irish experience, Irish history,

or Irish tradition. Trinity College, which desires to be English, has been the mother of many verse-writers and of few poets; and this can

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only be because she has set herself against the national genius, and taught her children to imitate alien styles and choose out alien themes, for it is not possible to believe that the educated Irishman alone is prosaic and uninventive. Her few poets have been awakened by the influence of the farm-labourers, potato-diggers, pedlars, and hedge-schoolmasters of the eighteenth century, and their imitators in this, and not by a scholastic life, which, for reasons easy for all to understand and for many to forgive, has refused the ideals of Ireland, while those of England are but far-off murmurs. An enemy to all enthusiasms, because all enthusiasms seemed her enemies, she has taught her children to look neither to the world about them, nor into their own souls where some dangerous fire might slumber.

To remember that in Ireland the professional and landed classes have been through the mould of Trinity College or of English Universities, and are ignorant of the very names of the best writers in this book, is to know how strong a wind blows from the ancient legends of Ireland, how vigorous an impulse to create is in her heart to-day. Deserted by the classes from among whom have come the bulk of the world's intellect, she struggles on, gradually ridding

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herself of incoherence and triviality, and slowly building up a literature in English which, whether important or unimportant, grows always more unlike others; nor does it seem as if she would long lack a living literature in Gaelic, for the movement for the preservation of Gaelic, which has been so much more successful than anybody foresaw, has already its poets. Dr Hyde, who can

only be represented here by some of his beautiful translations, has written Gaelic poems which pass from mouth to mouth in the west of Ireland. The country people have themselves fitted them to ancient airs, and many that can neither read nor write, sing them in Donegal and Connemara and Galway. I have, indeed, but little doubt that Ireland, communing with herself in Gaelic more and more, but speaking to foreign countries in English, will lead many that are sick with theories and with trivial emotion, to some sweet well-waters of primeval poetry.

W.B.Y.

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The editor thanks Mr Aubrey de Vere, Mr T.W. Rolleston, Dr J. Todhunter, Mr Alfred Perceval Graves, Dr Douglas Hyde, Mr Lionel Johnson, A.E., Mr Charles Weekes, Mr John Eglinton, Mrs Hinkson, Miss Dora Sigerson (Mrs Clement Shortes), and Miss Nora Hopper for permission to quote from their poems, Lady Ferguson and Mrs Allingham for leave to give poems by Sir Samuel Ferguson and William Allingham, and Messrs Chatto & Windus for permission to include a song of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's. Two writers are excluded whom he would gladly have included—Casey, because the copyright holders have refused permission, and Mr George Armstrong, because his 'Songs of Wicklow,' when interesting, are too long for this book.

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OLD AGE

From the 'Deserted Village'

In all my wanderings round this world of care,
In all my griefs—and God has given my share—
I still had hopes my later hours to crown,
Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
To husband out life's taper at the close

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