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Rev. Dr. Owen B. McGuire
A Christmas Ode By An Irish Nun 1400 Years Ago

ISACAN—Part 2

The "other reasons" that make St Ita's little poem interesting will be of special interest to the poets actual and would be to all in fact who take an interest in the art of verse construction.

The translation given in that Doctor Sigerson in his book "The Bards of the Gael and Gael." He divided his book so far as I remember, for I haven't it at hand into seven sections corresponding to the different periods of Gaelic literature. In the first section he gives specimens of the pagan period and the first of these is St Ita's ode. The Doctor was a poet himself and the father of a greater poet, Dora Sigerson Shorter, whose work received high praise from George Meredith. Doctor Sigerson was an enthusiast for Gaelic literature, and for this reason some of his statements must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. But this book of his he wrote several is intensely interesting. In his translations he has endeavored to reproduce all the peculiarities of the original in rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, diminutives, etc. This, as he says, was no easy matter owing to the great difference between the two idioms. We have seen an example in his having to coin a word to translate "Isacan". Like Italian and Spanish, Gaelic is very rich in diminutive terminations. Those that did exist in Old English have, for some regrettable reason, practically become obsolete. No child now says lambkin for little lamb.

In speaking of the two Teresas I might have added that Padraig Pearse, executed in 1916 as leader of the "Rising" of that year, has a

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poem on the same theme and with the same title. Rather it is a little drama meant to be acted by the boys of his private school. The title of the drama is "Isacan" because the modern Irish for "Jesus" is "Iosa", and the diminutive termination, "gon".

Returning to Ita's poem it consists of six stanzas of four verses, or lines, each. It will be noticed that the end-words of the first and second lines in each stanza rhyme with the end-words of the fourth; and the monotony that might result is avoided by making the end word of the third line rhyme with an internal word of the fourth.

GAELIC INFLUENCE

As already noted, Doctor Sigerson is an enthusiast in these matters. He claims not only that inland rhyme was peculiar to Gaelic but that end-rime when it appeared on the Continent was due to Gaelic influence introduced by Irishmen. He claims further that such rhythm, metre and assurance as are found in Christian Latin verse—for instance in the Breviary hymns some of which are attributed to St. Ambrose was due to the same source.

The Doctor was countered in this last claim by the argument that these things are evident in Continental Latin before Ireland became Christian. But the Doctor had an answer—several of them. He says, and truly, that there were Christians in Ireland before the arrival of St. Patrick, that some of these made their way to Rome through the South of Britain (then partly Christian) and Gaul, that certainly some Irish men-of-letters appeared in Rome before St. Patrick went to Ireland, and even before he was born.

Modern research shows that these claims are not so groundless as they appeared to be formerly. Pelagius, the heresiarch is an illustrious example. It is certain that he was living in Rome before the year 400. It is now generally conceded that his native country was Ireland. German scholars among them my old friend, Dr. Pohle, have settled that definitely. We have the authority of St. Jerome that he was a "Scot" which at that time and down through the Middle Ages meant Irish.

The famous passage in St. Jerome is interesting and not for its poetry. St. Jerome did not mince words when he flagnellated heresy, nor did he spare the heretics either. "Stupidissimus et Scotorum pulibus praegravatus" is the way he describes Pelagius. Some years ago a writer in the London Tablet said that this is the oldest recorded joke on the Irish! His translation of the passage, while not literal, is substantially correct—"an ignorant dolt whose brain has been clogged with Irish stirabout!"

ALLITERATION

But to return again to Ita's ode. It will be noticed that it abounds in alliteration. For instance: "What were wealth," "Nursing nurtured," "Fostering nor formed to fade," "Sons of Kings and Kingly Kin." Alliteration, though a big word, is nothing more than the riming of first syllables. Doctor Sigerson says this was frequent in Gaelic and adds to the beauty of its poetry. Still, attempts at beautifying poetry might easily be overdone—for instance with the lipstick; and it is certain that in the decadence of Gaelic poetry in the 17th and 18th century it was overdone. However it must be conceded that even then, during the worst period of the penal code, they produced some soul-stirring verse. As the late Doctor Kelly has finely written "They sang songs of victory when there was not a star in the sky."

I have dwelt on Doctor Sigerson's work for personal but understandable reasons. He was an old and dear friend of mine. I had reviewed one of his books in an American magazine and soon after,

(Continued on Page 19)

Marks Silver Jubilee

Fort McCallan, Ala. The Rev. Roman J. Nauer, who holds the rank of lieutenant colonel as chaplain of the 104th Field Artillery, 27th Division, has just celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

Christmas

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