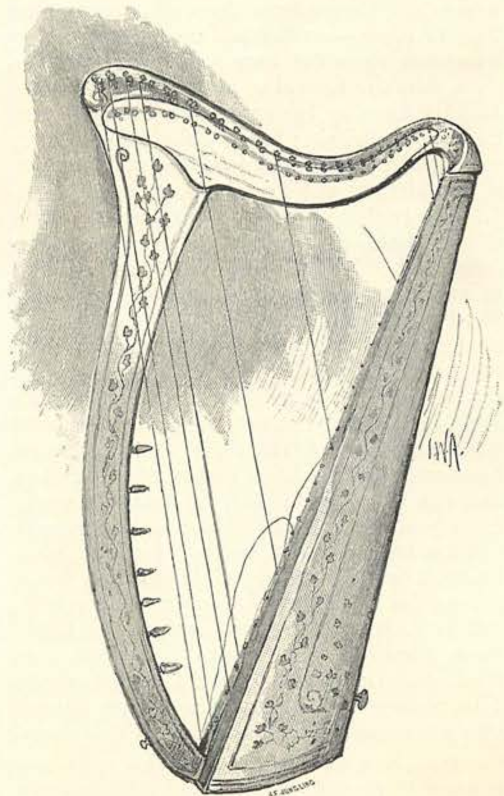
THE OLD POETIC GUILD IN IRELAND.

A BAGPIPER.
(FROM THE IMPERIAL DICTIONARY.)

FRIEND and foe of the Irish agree to allow them preëminence in two matters — poetry and music. Welsh history states that music came to Wales from Ireland, and nowhere do we find records of a poetic guild so abundant and minute as in the literature of Ireland gradually being brought to the notice of the world. A sketch of this caste is all that can be given at present.

The guild of poets has been as elaborately subdivided in Ireland as in Wales, where the common term is "bard," while in Ireland that word is either not at home or at some period sunk in the social scale, "filé" being the proper word. But without doubt the arrangement of the profession conformed to the political fashion of the day. We hear of Ollaves or Doctors of Poetry, with an Ard-Ollave at their head; of Anruiths or Masters, who formed the next rank; of Clis, and so on. The corporation was called the Filidecht, and seems to have reached importance between the fall of Druidism and the time when Columbkille, the saint of royal Irish blood, established thoroughly the supremacy of the Church as St. Patrick understood it, by eloquence, by mortification of the flesh, by political moves, and even by the sword. Before his time the guild was a great nuisance to chiefs and people, owing to the religious or superstitious awe with which the poets were regarded. Outwardly Christian, filés were merely Druids deprived of some of the terrors which pertained to them. The old histories refer to several occasions when the exactions of the poets caused their banishment; but only with the age of St. Columbkille do we get anything that affords a firm basis. In A. D. 574 the saint came back from the island of Ī to Drom-Ceata, not far from Derry, at the invitation of Aedh, son of Ainmiré, who wished to drive all the troublesome singing and piping gentry out of Ireland. "I do not wish to continue to maintain the Filedha," answered Aedh when the saint begged him not to expel the poets, "so extreme is their insolence, and so great are their numbers; for the ollave has an attendant train of thirty followers, and the anruith has a train of fifteen; so of the other members of that order downwards, each person has his special number of attendants allotted to him according to his rank, so that now almost one-third of the men of Ireland are members of the order."

In reward for conforming at least outwardly to Christianity the filés were so well defended by Columbkille that the chief king retained his chief ollave, subordinate kings their particular ollaves, and filés were allowed to chieftains. We find in the Highlands of Scotland the piper attached to the person of each chief of note. It is probable that the custom there represents a very primitive and simple form of entertainment common to all parts of Europe, not excluding Rome, in which the performer was a bagpiper, a flute player, or a harper. Wherever instruments were introduced which do not require the breath, the voice of the performers became important. Yet the name originally signifying the instrument would come to mean the person. Filé may be considered equivalent to piper in its origin, but in


MOORE'S HARP, DUBLIN MUSEUM.

LARGE BRONZE CALDRON.
(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY W. G. MOORE.)

Ireland it was of such old standing to signify a person of higher rank than a performer on flute or bagpipe, that its first meaning was entirely unknown to the Irish speakers of Gaelic.[1]

The difference between the Welsh bard and the Irish filé appears to be merely in name, and springs from the difference in the instrument used at different epochs. Welsh history records that music was revived in Wales from Irish examples not long before the Norman conquest; with that revival we may consider that the term of "bard" came in. But the word bard refers to the "burden" (French *bourdon*), the humming sound of a stringed instrument; while "filé" arose from the shrill sound of the flute or pipes—earlier and more primitive instruments than the harp. We may consider, then, that the revival of music in Wales in the Middle Ages by Irish minstrels brought back the harp to Britain; but in Caledonia the early colonists from Ireland introduced the bagpipes, if not already the favorite instrument there. In the twelfth century Giraldus de Barry draws these distinctions between the three countries: "Ireland only uses and delights in two instruments, the harp and the tabor. Scotland has three, the harp, the tabor, and the crowth, or crowd; and Wales the harp, the pipes, and the crowd." So that we find the bagpipes even in Wales according to this Welsh authority, but may well doubt whether the remote parts of Ireland, into which he never penetrated, could have lacked the bagpipes, and can be quite sure that he omitted them in error from the musical instruments of Scotland.

That Ireland and Caledonia had the tabor, or small drum, we may well believe, for that is the special instrument for summoning spirits; but as such the tabor was disliked by Christians, since its monotonous noise was used while the Druid or poet went into a trance. The process by which a poet threw himself into an ecstasy is very similar to that found by Castrèn among the Lapps and Samoyeds of Siberia, even to the eating of dog's flesh as a preliminary. A curious story of the pursuit of the Fomori by the Dagdé, or "good god," has an invocation of a captured harp, in which the Dagdé cries: "Come summer, come winter, from the mouths of harps and bags and pipes!" And a later legend, containing in verse an adventure of Fion, says:

> The household harp was one of three strings,
> Methinks it was a pleasant jewel:
> A string of iron, a string of noble bronze,
> And a string of entire silver.

The initial shows a bagpipe common to the British Isles. Minstrels of Finland still employ a harp when singing the long runes of the Kalewala; the latter resembles a large zither. A harp like this must have existed in Ireland down to the Middle Ages, when the small upright harp as it appears on the coins of Ireland and on the flag became the fashion. The harp in Dublin Museum called the harp of Brian of the Tribute, but probably an instrument of the fourteenth or the fifteenth century, not the eleventh, is the modern type. The harp of Tom Moore is given in order to show the most modern form of this harp. It belongs to a revival of harpistry at the close of the last century, when very fine harps were made for some years in Dublin.

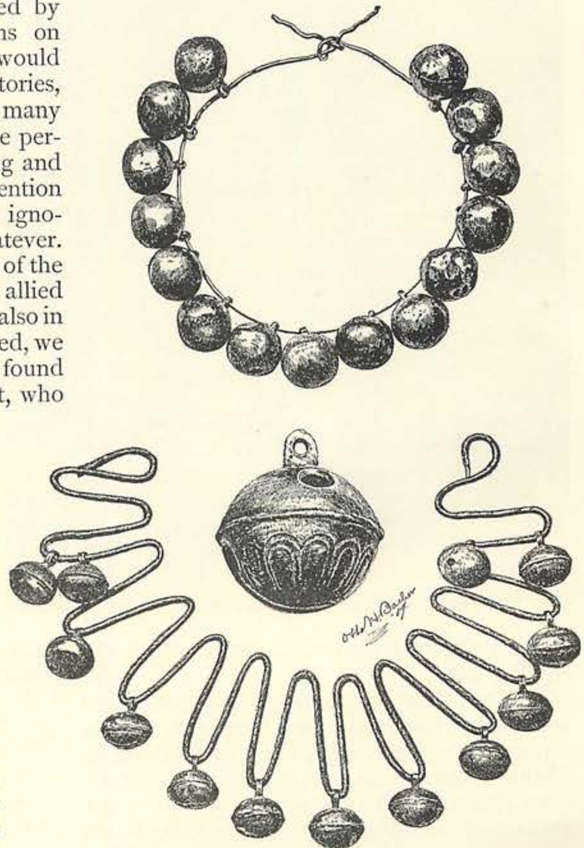
The poetic guild suffered during the later Middle Ages from the bad character of many of its members, who became degraded into strolling adventurers ready to commit depredations; they became bad "fellows" in England and *filous* in France. The Bulgarians called certain fairies or elemental spirits *vilas*. In Ireland they had bad and good characteristics very sharply expressed long before the Middle Ages. The laureate, or official poet, of Ireland, who had shown himself the possessor of a wonderful memory, was distinguished by a seat at banquets and public ceremonies, a certain arrangement of his hair, and a special cloak decorated with the feathers of song birds. In the last point, and in the superstition that his satires could produce disfigurement or blemishes on persons satirized, the Irish filé again recalls to the wizards of the medieval Finns and modern Samoyeds. Another very ancient musical instrument was a stand of crotals, or small bronze bells, now used only on animals. The cut shows these adapted for young girls, children, and pets.

The dread of satire is yet alive in Ireland. Within the last decade a local bard of Lim-

[1] Through Keltic *F*, for Finno-Ugrian *P*, this word is traced in Finnish and Esthonian *pilli*, Esthonian *wile*, a pipe, a bagpipe, a flute. Proscription of minstrelsy brought the filés so low that *filou* was degraded in French to the meaning of thief, and *gwilliad* in Welsh to that of stroller, vagabond.

erick is said to have procured for himself an office by satirizing in verse the town council. Aenghus O'Daly, one of a famous family of bards, who is supposed to have lived about A. D. 1600, has left a most venomous satire on the Irish septs of his day, which has been published by John O'Donovan under the title of "The Tribes of Ireland." Edmund Spenser was concerned at the number of "caroughs, bardes, jesters, and such like" who straggled up and down Ireland, or "miche in corners amongest theyr frendes idlye." Yet the great poet, while reproving their tendency to laud the greatest robbers of the country, remarked of their songs: "I have caused diverse of them to be translated unto me that I might understand them; and surely they savoured of sweete witt and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornamentes of Poetrye; yet were they sprinckled with some prety flowers of theyr owne naturall devise which gave good grace and comeliness unto them." Had Spenser been able to read Gaelic; had he learned the language and made himself one with the people whom he helped to oppress,— and who destroyed his castle at Kilcolman after all,— what a difference there would have been in the estimate placed by English grammarians, poets, politicians on matters relating to the Gaels! Spenser would have brought to light not only the histories, legends, and poems we now have, but many others which have disappeared under the persecutions from which the Gaelic-speaking and Catholic natives have suffered, not to mention the loss of manuscripts through sheer ignorance that they possessed any value whatever.

That vileness which was the dark side of the Druid, and which reflects itself in words allied to the same root in many languages, was also in some degree part of the early filé. Indeed, we have notice of the period when it was found necessary to define the duties of a poet, who among other things was at one time very much the same as an advocate at law, while his magical verses made him a physician, or caused him to be feared like a Druid. At the foundation of the tripartite rule, or rule in succession, of three kings at the Navan, near Armagh, the compact was witnessed by Druids, poets, and champions —"the seven Druids to crush them by their incantations, the seven filés to lacerate them by their satires, and the seven young champions to slay and burn them, should the proper man not receive the sovereignty at the end of each seventh year." We have also an amusing instance of the obscurity of phrases used by two great poets in a contest of words. This reached such a pitch that the court revolted and the guild of poets was deprived of some of its privileges. The Druidic side is shown in the famous circuit made by Aithirné the Importunate, a poet whose virulence was such that no one dared say him nay, and whose greed and luxury finally brought many chiefs to death. His purpose was to stir up strife and give a chance for champions to collect human heads and acquire fame. Secure in his privilege, he asked whatever the chiefs most objected to part with, not excluding their wives, of whom he collected a troop and marched them off into slavery. The prophetic powers of a poet are shown on this circuit. A clod of earth containing a big brooch having fallen into the lap of a king, flung there from the hoof-stroke of a horse, Aithirné not only explained what was in the clod, but told exactly who had buried the brooch. On the hill of Howth, near Dublin, are the remains of an earthwork which is said to be the fort into which Aithirné fled when his insolence finally overcame the fears and hospitality of the men of Leinster. There he warded off their attacks under circumstances in which he showed bar-



BRONZE CROTALS IN THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY.
(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY W. G. MOORE.)

SEA-CAVE NEAR GIANT'S CAUSEWAY, NORTH OF IRELAND.

large pot, or caldron, called "The Pot of Avarice." This was presumably the sign of an intention on their part to claim food from the chief they visited, though in the legend it was meant for the gold and silver they expected as perquisites. Caldrons of ancient make are found in the Dublin Museum, and one of bronze is figured on page 894. "The Pot of Avarice" was swung from the points of nine spears by nine chains, and was said to be made of silver. When they approached a house the leader of one of these parties, at one end of the line of minstrels, would begin with a verse. The second verse would be recited by the poet at the other end, and the third by the one next the leader. Thus the song jumped from one end of the line to the other. We have inferred that at one time the filé was no other than a piper and that the poet became also the singer, after a change of instrument left his mouth free for vocal music. But the separation of *Filé* from *Cruitiné*, or harper, must have been very ancient, for the Psalter of Cashel makes a distinction between northern and southern Ireland on this very point, giving the finest music to the south, the greatest poetry to the north.

The sweetness of string music, blandness, valor,
In the south, in the south of Erinn are found,
It so shall be to the end of time
With the illustrious race of Eimher.

barity to his own men of Ulster who were defending him.

The extortions of the poets were conducted with a good deal of system. They were at times supported by the people; but it was difficult for them to collect tithes from the folk, or to get pay from chiefs whom they eulogized and whose genealogy and tributes they knew by heart. Often they went in bands, attended as fully as they could afford, and carried with them a

There fell to the share of the northern man
The professor of poetry with his noble gifts.
It is a matter of boast with the north that with them has remained
Excellence in poetry and its chief abode.

The native brought up to speak Gaelic rarely obtained sufficient ease and mastery of the English language to achieve greatness as a poet. If he devoted himself to the tongue through which he might hope for some

OLD DRINKING VESSELS OF WOOD. (FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY W. G. MOORE.)

of the prizes offered by the wealthier nation and the English-speaking settlers in Ireland, he lost his hold on his own fine language. Talents of the highest order have been stifled in Ireland owing to this unlucky situation, for the land was too impoverished by bad government to allow of a modern literature in Gaelic.

The filés who wrote and sung their ballads in Irish, how shall they be estimated fairly? It is a task that cannot be undertaken with any hope of useful conclusions until far more of the old ballads and legends shall be translated and their age, their historical elements, and their allusions explained. Almost everything is still to be done before the old literature of Ireland is sifted and annotated to the point where it can be compared with that of other lands. A beginning has been made by Professor Arbois de Jubainville of the Collége de France, for whose "Essai d'un Catalogue de la Littérature Épique de l'Irelande" and his two volumes of "Cours de Littérature Celtique" all Irishmen, and all who hope to learn something of primitive Europe through the remains of Irish literature, must be profoundly grateful. Very thorough studies of the music and musical instruments are found in Eugene O'Curry's "Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish," with an introductory volume by W. K. Sullivan.

The apparently complete independence of Irish literature of the early writings by Britons is a constant surprise, and the professors of poetry among the Irish have no parallels in England. One must go to the Gaelic Highlands, to the bards from whom Macpherson obtained very late variants on many of the old stories and legends common to both countries, before a correspondence is discovered. In Iceland, on the other hand, we get figures among the scalds which are practically identical, and some of them bear Irish names. But we must give up the idea long cherished by students of Norse that the Icelandic literature antedates the Irish. Everything points the other way. The Icelanders appear to have had political as well as commercial reasons for knowing more about Ireland than about Norway, for their natural neighbors were the Faroe, Shetland, and other islanders who are connected by blood as well as by language with the Kelts. Their scalds found it easier and more profitable to study in Ireland and Great Britain than in the countries about the Baltic. Viollet-le-Duc says that in the Middle Ages the best harpers came from Brittany and Ireland.

In the later centuries there is apparent among the filés a tendency to be lavish of adjectives, florid in narration, given to the grotesque and absurd. In the more ancient lays there are grotesque and far-fetched things, but these appear to come from some root of cosmology, mythology, legend; not from that striving after novelty which destroys literature in the eyes of judges. The effect of the Norman conquest is very clear in many of the later stories. This could hardly fail to be the case

GROUP OF MEDIEVAL HARPERS. (FROM VIOLLET-LE-DUC'S "DICTIONNAIRE DU MOBILIER FRANÇAIS.")

APPROACH TO GLENGARIFF, BANTRY BAY, KERRY.

if, as we may be pretty sure, the fashion of writing down and reading off pieces, instead of reciting them from memory, only began to be general after the Normans arrived. Yet the wildest, most turgid Irish poem can hardly be said to contain comparisons so far-fetched as a large number of the Icelandic sagas, though written down about the same time, say from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. Alliteration, which is the chief artifice in the Kalewala of the Finns, and only less popular with the Saxon poets of England and Norse poets of Iceland, is used with the utmost discretion, so that even in those poems where it is the rule it does not force itself on the ear. The ordinary or end rhyme is common to Irish verse and has been thought to have driven alliteration out of English. The memorized tariff of tributes preserved in the "Book of Rights" has a good deal of rude rhyme; but so far as the present writer has observed, rhyme never became in Irish so fixed and artificial as it now appears in English and French poetry.

A medieval version of the battle of Magh Rath (Moyrà), which retains the metrical parts of an older version scattered through a prose account, after a fashion usual with Irish bards, shows slight traces of alliteration except in the lists of names of heroes, and hardly any of rhyme proper—at the most one may say of assonant rhyme. The battle was fought A. D. 637, between Domnall, the chief king of Ireland, and Congall Claen, a fugitive prince of Ulster, assisted by a large army composed of Highlanders, Picts, and Saxons.

Congall had exiled himself because he took it as an insult at the banquet of the king that poor food was set before him. The king sends a band of monks after him. When Congall sees them he is so fierce that they run away, but do not fail to curse him with bell and book. Then the king sends the poets of Erin after him, when Congall exclaims: "The munificent character of Ulster is tarnished forever, for we gave the poets no presents at the banqueting house, and they are following us to upbraid us." So that the man who is depicted as crazily fierce and violent, a ruthless, insufferable tyrant, receives the poets well and gives them presents according to custom.

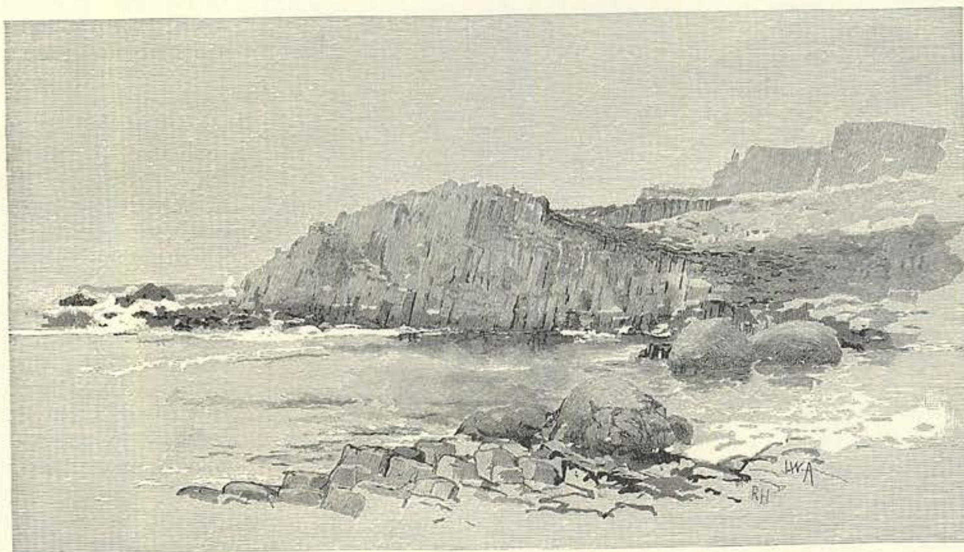
On reaching Scotland in his flight, Congall is met by the four sons of the king of Scotland with a demand from each that he shall make his stay with him. But each wants a certain caldron belonging to his father which has very convenient traits. "Why was it called Caire Ainsicen?" asks the writer. "It is not difficult. It was the *caire*, or caldron, which was used to return his own proper share to each, and no party ever went away from it unsatisfied; for whatever quantity was put into it, there was never boiled of it but what was sufficient for the company according to their

grade and rank." From a caldron like the one in the illustration, king, poet, and hero obtained their porridge, their boiled beef and mutton, and their venison. They ate flesh without forks, using their short skeans and their fingers to tear the meat. Their drink was ale or milk, kept in large receptacles like vats and served in wooden *methers*, or mead-cups, like those figured on page 897. The wooden mether was of course copied in metals or overlaid with thin shells of metal, but the great bulk of the people used those of wood. They are found from time to time in the bogs where they were concealed and forgotten, sometimes full of a curious substance which is supposed to be petrified butter.

The Druid of the exile's camp, going out to view this king and his army, returns and, to the great fury of Congall Claen, makes a magniloquent report of their appearance. As to Domnall himself:

> Oh the size of the expert blue sword
> Which is in his valiant right hand!
> And the size of his great shield beside it!
> The size of his broad green spear!
>
> There are three clouds over his head —
> A blue cloud, a black cloud, a white cloud;
> The blue cloud of fine bright valor
> And the white cloud of truth.

Families in Ireland, as in Scotland, maintained their harpers to celebrate the deeds of ancestors and of the living, and we have most tragical instances of their devotion to such patrons, like the story of Loyal Ronins in Japan. But all is not tragic with them.



GIANT'S CAUSEWAY, NORTH OF IRELAND.

The Battle of Moyrà is a very curious and beautiful medieval poem, containing later as well as ancient traits, some primitive pagan, others old Keltic, and not a few Norman. The night before the battle Domnall did not sleep, though some, remarks the poet, may have slept soundly to the "thrilling, agreeable, and symphonious musical strings," and to the "low, mournful, soft strains of minstrels." When addressing his army Domnall compares himself to the sledge that drives the nail home, and his five sons to sparks driven from an anvil.

> My own five sons of ruddy aspects —
> Fergus, Aengus of troops,
> Ailel and Colgu not penurious,
> And the fifth Conall.
>
> These are the sparks of my body,
> The safety of all lies in their attack,
> Ready in each road, furious their action
> When coming against foreigners.

Craftiné the harpist was an early prototype of the crowders and blind harpers now vanished from Ireland, but still found in Finland, and in other countries even less popular with the tourist. Of him the pleasing tale is told how he outwitted the parents of a princess who fell in love with his young master. Cobhtach, by a crime the king of the greater part of Ireland,— for he had killed his elder brother and poisoned his nephew, the chief of Leinster,— sought at first to keep his grandnephew Maen an idiot, since Maen was dumb from his birth and could not be chosen king. But Maen destroyed these hopes by suddenly developing the power of speech in an altercation with a schoolmate on the play-ground. As this made him eligible to the throne, Cobhtach banished him and his

WITCH'S STAIRCASE, BLARNEY CASTLE, CORK.
(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY W. G. MOORE.)

tutor Craftiné on the first good excuse; whereupon they took refuge with a powerful chief near Bantry Bay, Kerry. Here Maen fell desperately in love with the daughter of his host, but without the aid of his harper would have failed, as all previous lovers had, because a watch was kept on the girl by night and day, her parents themselves taking turns.

Craftiné chose the hour of banquet as the time when people were least on their guard; he called for his harp and played with such expression and skill that all eyes were fixed on him. The lovers stole away from the hall, and then Craftiné began a measure which lulled the court into a slumber or state of trance, during which the prince and princess had time to exchange pledges of eternal affection. As soon as they returned to their seats the harper changed from the Suantraighe, or sweet measure, to the Geantraighe, or lively measure, the effects of which were not only to awaken people from their trance, but to throw them into the happiest mood. Perhaps he changed again to a third measure generally mentioned in turn—the Goltraighe, or lament. At any rate the mother of the lovely Moriath heard the sound of sighs, which the maiden was too artless to suppress, and managed to extract from her the unwelcome news that she had pledged her troth to the exile. As the princess was inflexible, Maen obtained Moriath for his wife.

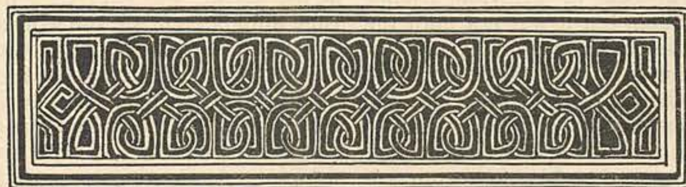
The poets of Ireland have been the men who collected the legends of Finno-Ugrian and Kelt and fused them into early songs out of which a later generation composed the literary treasures extant. They took the cosmological ideas common to each of these two races, made them more human, brought the gods from their sublime or malicious positions into flesh and blood, and made history serve as a framework on which to hang the curious, stirring, sometimes beautiful thoughts of the past races. The poets recorded the actual warfare between the fierce pagan Finns still lingering on the islands off Ireland and Scotland, and the mixed Keltic-Ugrian tribes of Erin and Caledonia. But to make it interesting they identified the Finns with the autumn or winter, and with night, calling them Fomoraigh (Fowri), and attributing to them complexions unnaturally dark, and magical powers of great virulence, as noted in "Early Heroes of Ireland" in the June CENTURY. The Finns treat the Lapps in the same way.

Whether as giants or as magicians who turn into seals, these men are still remembered on

the north coast. To coast-dwellers the Giant's Causeway is nothing but the remains of a line of stepping-stones joining Britain with Ireland, once used by the Fomoraigh. The basaltic columnar groups of rock are called *clochan na-bh Fomoraigh*, and the sea-caves thereabouts are thought to be haunted. Everything related is on a scale suited to giants, so that it is plain that the historical element in the tradition is faint compared with the mythological. The poet, as well as the tale-teller who does not compose in verse but uses prose, has preserved all these ideas after a fashion, so that one may still hear how Fion mac Cumhal met a giant who came across the sea by this causey, and how he fought or did not dare to fight him. The old myths, developed by the more learned poets into tragedies and comedies fitted for the listeners of their age, have retained in some places their early bigness and vagueness, and are merely nursery tales. In the grounds at Blarney Castle is a small flight of steps under a rock which has been seized by the imaginative in the same way, though apparently quite modern, and dubbed the "Witch's Staircase." But the great number of past filés has given to all the landmarks of Ireland a wealth of legend which can hardly be exhausted for many years, let ever so many volumes be published. Nearly every lake has its story of a city overwhelmed for the sins of its inhabitants, or its dragon slain by Fion mac Cumhal, St. Patrick, or some other favorite of the people.

The long training of the people in verse-composing and verse-reciting predisposes them to the composition of poetry of some degree of excellence. Irishmen and Irishwomen as a rule have a knack at writing if they receive any education at all, and are natural journalists and writers at an early age. The last remarkable poet of the filé kind known in Ireland was Carolan, the blind bard of the last century, whose portrait, and some of whose verses, translated and in the original, were published by James Hardiman. He was as peripatetic as Homer is said to have been, blind also, and certainly a fine if not a great poet. Though the race is not extinct, little except the most ordinary verse is published in Irish to-day, the audience being too small to tempt the most ardent patriot. With all its inherited shortcomings, and with the evils that befell it owing to circumstances, the poetic guild of ancient Ireland did the world a great service in keeping from destruction historical and national data lost from other parts of Europe. It also added not a little to the world's stock of tragic, of noble, and of comic fiction.

Charles de Kay.



ROBERT BROWNING.

MOURN, Italy, with England mourn, for both
He sang with song's discriminating love,
Thy towers that flash the wooded crag above;
Thy trellised vineyard's purple overgrowth;
Thy matin balm; thy noontide's pleasing sloth;
Thy convent bell, dim lake, and homeward dove;
Thine evening star, that through the bowered alcove
Silvers the white flight of the circling moth.
He sang thy best and worst — false love, fierce war,
Renaissance craft, child graces, saintly art,
Old pomps from "Casa Guidi Windows" seen.
There dwelt he happy; there that minstrel queen,
Who shared his poet crown but gladdened more
To hold, unshared, her poet's manly heart.

Aubrey de Vere.