Douglas Hyde, LL.D. ‘Early Irish Literature’, in *Irish Literature*, gen. ed. Justin MacCarthy, Vol. III (Philadelphia: John Morris & Company 1904), Vol. II.

[Note: *Irish Literature* was published under the nominal editorship of Justin MacCarthy and the managing editorship of Charles Welsh of Notre Dame University. Published in Philadelphia by Morris in 10 vols., it also appeared in as ten bound in 5 from other printers) was the largest anthology of Irish writing ever produced before the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry [with Notre Dame University] 1991). Vol. III is available online at Internet Archive - http://www.archive.org/details/irishliteratur03mccauoft.

THE editors of *Irish Literature* have very wisely decided to represent in their volumes, so far as literal translations will allow them, the real autochthonous literature of Ireland as it existed both before any of the modern languages of Europe had made their appearance as literary vehicles, and since that time. The great and revivifying movement which is at present pulsing through Ireland, and creating, wherever it is felt, new hopes and a new spirit, has indeed rendered it impossible to produce a work upon Irish literature in which, as has happened too often before, the real Irish element was calmly ignored, and the scope of Irish literature narrowed to the productions of English-Irish writers, who after all were, for the most part, too often only imitations of Englishmen.

For the literature of Ireland does not begin with Ware or with Swift, with Molyneux or with Sheridan. Hundreds of years before the English language had risen out of a conglomeration of Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French, hundreds of years before the *langue d’oïl* and the *langue d’oc* struggled for mastery upon the plains of France, hundreds of years before the language of the *Nibelungen Lied* had risen upon the ruins of Gothic, Ireland swarmed with bards, scholars, poets, saga-tellers, and saga-writers; while “the countless hosts of the illuminated books of the men of Erin” (as Angus the Culdee had called them more than two centuries before the birth of William the Conqueror) filled the island from shore to shore; and Erin, at that time civilizer and Christianizer of the western world, was universally known as the “Island of Saints and Scholars.”

There are two points about the native literature of Ireland which entirely differentiate it from the rest of the vernacular literatures of Europe, Greek excepted. The first of these is the extraordinarily early period at which it took its rise, and the enormous length of time during which it flourished. The other is the absolute originality of this literature, which was self-evolved, which was utterly unaffected by classic models, and in the syntax of which [vii] scarcely a trace is to be found of those Latinisms upon which are really founded and built up so many other modern languages. It is only right, accordingly, that a word of warning should at the outset be addressed to the reader of these volumes, and that he be reminded, when reading, of how necessary it is to place the occasional pieces culled from this antique literature in their proper perspective. In other words, he should be invited to approach them with a certain historic sense of the early date at which they were written, and of the strange and self-developed people that produced them, so different from the rest of Europe in their manners, thoughts, feelings, civilization, and, beyond all, in their mode of expression. Ireland’s wonderfully copious and extraordinarily early literature is, without doubt, her greatest glory; but its very wildness of flavor and strange extravagance of manners are likely sometimes to render it of only moderate interest to the ordinary reader of English more to him I imagine than to readers of other languages although it can never fail to be piquant and delightful to the literacy connoisseur, who is sure to be captivated by its unique originality. There are a sufficient number of pieces included in these volumes for the reader to sample their flavor for himself, but to do so to the full he must, as I have said, remember that many of them were composed and written before the English language, through the medium of which he now reads them, had been heard of. He must also remember that it is universally acknowledged that the extracts from Ireland’s heroic past portray pictures of a far older and more primitive civilization than any that either the Slavs, the Teutons, or the Latin-speaking races have preserved, pictures of an age more primitive in point of social development though it is later in point of time than even those depicted in the lays of Homer.

There has seldom been a literature pursued with greater malignity and a prey to greater misfortune than that of Ireland. The Norsemen, who first made their appearance toward the close of the eighth century, made it a point to “drown” the Irish books, since fire was a less certain agent than water in the

destruction of the parchment volumes. When the worst storms of the Norse invasions, which had lasted for over two hundred years, had come to an end, on [viii] the 23d of April, 1014, by the crushing defeat of Clontarf, “the countless hosts of the illuminated books of the men of Erin” had almost disappeared, and the literati of Ireland, under the great Brian, began laboriously to gather together their fragments and to rewrite them. It is from this period that the most important still existing Irish MSS. date, and these contain largely a re-editing in the language of the twelfth century of things originally composed in old Irish, many of which were first written centuries and centuries before.

But it may well be asked, how is it possible or how can it be proved that the Irish had a written literature centuries before the rest of western Europe, and preserved an accurate history of their own past when the contem porary history of so much of the western world is sunk in the blackest oblivion? A conclusive answer to this question is furnished by the Irish Annals, which have been proved by the discoveries of modern science to be exceedingly reliable. There is only one class of entries by which the credibility of the Irish Annals can be absolutely tested, and that is by their accounts of natural phenomena. If, for instance, we find, on calculating backward, as modern science has luckily enabled us to do, that such events as, for instance, occurrence of eclipses, are recorded to the day and hour by the Annalists, we can then know with something like certainty that these phenomena were recorded at the time of their appearance by writers who observed them; whose writings must have been actually seen and consulted by those later Annalists whose books we possess. Nobody could think of saying of natural phenom- ena thus accurately recorded, as they might of mere his- torical narratives, that they were handed down by tradition only, and reduced to writing for the first time many centuries later. Now the Annals of Ulster, to mention one alone of many, treat of Irish history from about the year 444 onward; and in the Annals we find between the year 496 and the year 884 as many as eighteen records of eclipses and comets which agree exactly, even to the day and hour, with the calculation of modern astronomers. How impossible it is to keep such records accurately, unless written memoranda are made of them by eye-witnesses, is shown by the fact that the great Bede, the glory of the [ix] Anglo-Saxon church, in recording the striking solar eclipse which took place only eleven years before his own birth, is yet two days astray in his date. On the other hand, Cathal Maguire, the compiler of the Annals of Ulster, gives not only the exact day but the exact hour, thus showing that he had access to the original account of an eye-witness, or to a copy of it.

Indeed, it is almost certain that the Irish had written books before the coming of Saint Patrick. Keating expressly mentions one such volume, the *Book of Dromsneachta*, which is often quoted as a source of information in our oldest manuscripts; and O’Curry seems to have proved that this book was compiled by a Pagan, son of a man who died in the year 379.

Then, too, the Irish Celts invented for themselves at what period is doubtful a very ingenious alphabet, and one unknown to the rest of Europe. Inscriptions in this alphabet are found, chiefly upon stone monuments, only in Ireland and in those parts of Great Britain, Scotland, and Wales where the Irish Celts had made settlements. This curious script is known as Ogham. It consists of a number of lines, some short, some long, some straight, and some slanting, drawn either below, above, or through one long stem line. This stem line, in the stone monuments, is usually the sharp angle or corner between two sides of the upright rectanglar stone. Dots or nicks represent the vowels. Thus :

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MA Q I L I AG MA Q I E R C A

(The above is a simple inscription MAQI LIAG MAQI ERICA, i.e. “ of Mac Liag the son of Ere.”)

Over two hundred monuments have been found inscribed in Ogham, and the language appears to be that of the old Gaulish inscriptions, infinitely older in its forms than the very oldest language preserved in the oldest manuscripts. So much for the age of the most ancient Irish records. Now let us glance at their extent.

The exact amount of Irish literature still remaining has never been accurately determined. M. d'Arbois de Jubainville [x] has noted 133 existing MSS., all of them over three hundred years old, and some over 1,000 years, and the whole number which he found existing in public libraries on the Continent and in the British Isles was 1,009. But hundreds upon hundreds of other MSS. exist in private collections scattered throughout the country, and hundreds upon hundreds more have been destroyed since the so-called "National" Schools were established by the English Government in Ireland, to train up the children of Irishmen as though they were the children of people in Birmingham or Liverpool. Jubainville quotes a German as estimating that the literature produced by the Irish before the seventeenth century, and still existing, would fill a thousand octavo volumes. O'Curry, O'Longan, and O'Berne Crowe catalogued something more than half the manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy, and the catalogue of the contents filled thirteen volumes containing 3,448 pages. From a rough examination of these I should calculate the number of different pieces catalogued at about eight or ten thousand, and varying from single ranns or quatrains to long epic poems and sagas. And the Academy is only one of many libraries where Irish MSS. are deposited.

The contents of these volumes are not all pure literature. Law, medicine, science, annals, and genealogies fill many of them. But the Sagas, the Lives, and the Poems are what chiefly interest us from a literary point of view.

There are three well-marked classes of sagas, dealing with different periods and different materials, and outside of these are many isolated ones dealing with minor incidents. The three chief cycles of saga-telling are the mythological, the Red Branch, and the Fenian cycles. The first of these is really concerned with the most ancient tales of the early Irish pantheon, in which what are obviously supernatural beings and races are more or less "euhemerized," or presented as real men and heroes. Lugh the long-handed, the Dagda, and Balor of the Evil Eye, who figure in these stories, are evidently ancient gods of Good and Evil, while the various colonizations of Ireland by Partholan, the Nemedians, and the Tuatha De Danann, may well be the Irish equivalent of the Greek legend of the three successive ages of gold, silver, and brass. The next great cycle of story-telling, the Heroic, Ultonian, or Red Branch [xi] cycle, as it is variously called, is that in which Cuchulain and Conor mac Nessa king of Ulster are the dominating figures, and the third great cycle deals with Finn mac Cum hail, his son Oisin, or Ossian, the poet, his grandson Oscar, and the High Kings of Ireland, who were their contemporaries. In addition to these there are a number of short groups of tales or minor cycles, and many completely independent sagas, most of them dealing, as these greater cycles do, only with pre-Christian times, though a few belong to the very early medieval period.

All these Irish romances are compositions upon which more or less care was evidently bestowed in ancient times, as is evident by their being shot through and through with verses. These verses often amount to a considerable portion of the whole saga, and Irish versification is usually very elaborate and not the work of any mere inventor or story-teller, but of a highly trained technical poet. Very few sagas, and these chiefly of the more modern ones, are written in pure prose.

In the *Book of Leinster*, a manuscript made nearly eight hundred years ago, we find a list in which the names of 187 of these sagas are given. An ollamh, as the holder of the highest bardic degree was called, was obliged to know by heart two hundred and fifty prime sagas, and one hundred secondary ones. The prime stories combinations of epic and novel, of prose and poetry are divided in the Book of Leinster and other manuscripts unto the following catalogue: Destructions of fortified places, Cow-spoils (i.e. Cattle-raiding expeditions), Courtships or Wooings, Battles, Cave stories, Navigations, Tragical deaths, Feasts, Sieges, Adventures, Elopements, Slaughters, Water-eruptions, Expeditions, Progresses (migrations), and Visions. "He is no poet," says the *Book of Leinster*, "who does not synchronize and harmonize all the stories." Besides the 187 stories whose names are given in the *Book of Leinster*, we have a second list giving the names of a great number of other sagas. This list is contained in the tenth or eleventh century tale of Mac Coise. Now what is most noticeable in these lists is that, while the known sagas contained in them deal with subjects of Irish history from the sixth century before Christ onward, not one of them treats of matters later than the seventh century after Christ. The [xii] very essence of the national life of Ireland was embodied in these compositions, but unfortunately few specimens of this

enormous mass of literature have survived to our day, and many of these are mutilated or are mere digests. Some, however, exist at full length, quite sufficient to show us what our romances were like, and to cause us to regret the irreparable loss inflicted upon the Irish race by the ravages of Danes, Normans, and English. Even as it is, O'Curry computes that the contents of the strictly historical tales known to him would be sufficient to fill 4,000 quarto pages. He computed that the stories about Finn, Ossian, and the Fenians would fill another 3,000 pages, and the miscellaneous imaginative stories that are neither historical nor Fenian would fill 5,000 pages more. So much for the extent of the saga literature; now let us glance at its style.

The romantic, as opposed to the realistic, dominates Irish utterance from first to last. Allied to this we find an exuberance of minute description and a love of adjectival thunder, which last, by the way, is a trait that has not wholly departed even to this day from among Irishmen even those who have lost their language. Its love of rhetoric, its peculiar mode of hyperbole, and its copiousness of synonyms lend to early Irish literature a charm and a flavor that are wanting to early German, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman-French. On the other hand, Irish writers, despite their weakness for a multitude of alliterative adjectives, go fairly straight to the point. Their sentences are not obscure or involved, and there is very little of mysticism or cloudiness about them. "*Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français*," say the French, and the same with much truth may be said about the Irish. They begin their sentences with the verb instead of ending with it, as do the Germans. Some witty linguist once remarked that had the Irish through some philological catastrophe been forced to speak in German half the race would have died through heart disease within a couple of generations. This is perhaps poking an undue fun at the rapidity and vigor of the out-pourings of an Irishman's mouth, but it is not without an element of truth in it, all the same. The ancient Gael did not avoid similes, but he did not make an excessive use of them. In this respect the Welsh books are more demonstrative and less chastened than the Irish. Both offer [xiii] a curious contrast to the Anglo-Saxon. In the whole seven thousand lines of *Beowulf* we meet with scarcely one simile.

Yet in spite of their exuberant number of expletives and other peculiarities, the early Irish were masters of story-telling, and pursue their sagas to the end, without over-redundancy or chasing of side issues, so that each presents a fairly perfect unity of its own. In this way their best poetry often reminds us of the marvelous drawings in their illuminated manuscripts, which, despite the thousand-fold involutions and twistings of their lines and knots and other ornaments, never fail, when looked at from a distance, to present a perfect unity of figure. The naiveté of Irish similes is also striking, and they are usually introduced in a natural manner of their own, completely different from the severe and self-possessed similes of the Latin and Greek epics. There is more of quaintness, more of originality, and, if I may say so, more of humanity about them. Thus in describing the appearance of Cuchulain, the romancist exclaims in admiration of his white teeth, "it seemed as though it were a shower of pearls that were flung into his head." When his steeds have the reins flung loose upon their necks their career is "like a hawk's swooping from a cliff on a day of hard wind." The watchman who beholds Froech and his suite flashing past him in crimson and gold relates it to the listeners, and adds, "from the perfumed breeze that floated over them it is the same with me as if my head were over a vat of wine." When Lughaidh (Lewy) is pursued by Conall Cearnach, his servant looking behind him sees the pursuing chariot and tells his master that a warrior is on his track : "you would believe," said the servant, " that all the crows of Ireland were flying above him, and flakes of snow are whitening the plain before him." "Those birds you see," said Lewy, "are the earthclods thrown up by the hooves of the Dewy-Red, Conall's steed, and those flakes of snow are the foam from his nostrils." ['The Death of Cuchulain,' *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* by Lady Gregory, Volume IV.]

We also find in early Irish literature a disinclination to indulge in anything like generalization or metaphysical abstractions, even of the simplest kind, a disinclination which perhaps accounts for the particularity of description [xiv] which is such a marked feature in the sagas. Everything there is described in detail, with a minute individual analysis. Thus the board on which Queen Medb (Meve) plays chess is "a beauteous chess table a chess board of fine metal on it, four ears and elbows on it," " a candle of precious stone illuminating it for them"; "of gold and silver are the chessman on that table." This faculty for close description is nearly allied to the love of expletives by which nearly all Irish

writers, not the unknown writers of the sagas alone, but biographers, historians, and theologians, are more or less affected. Thus in the almost contemporary account of the Danish wars, the blow which Murrough deals the Earl of Orkney is “a fierce powerful crushing blow,” the right hand that deals it is “ valiant, death-dealing, active,” the helmet on which it alights is “the hateful foreign helmet,” and so on.

Another trait which distinguishes even the earliest Irish literature from that of the rest of Europe is the marvelous way in which it is interpenetrated by the love of nature in all its aspects. The songs of summer and winter, and the dialogue of the King and the Hermit contained in these volumes are instances of what I mean. When the Fenian poet describes the delights and pastimes of the famous Finn mac Cumhail, the commander of the Fenian bands in the third century, he expresses himself thus:

“The desire of my hero who feared no foe,
Was to listen all day to Drumderrig’s sound,
To sleep by the roar of the Assaroe,
And to follow the dun deer round and round.

“The warbling of blackbirds in Letter Lee,
The Strand where the billows of Ruree fall,
The bellowing ox upon wild Moy-mee,
The lowing of calves upon Glen-da- vaul,

“The blast of the horns around Slieve Grot,
The bleat of the fawns upon Cua’s plain,
The sea bird’s scream in a lonesome spot,
The croak of the raven above the slain,

“The wash of the waves on his bark afar,
The yelp of the pack as they turn Drimliss,
The baying of Bran upon Knock-in-ar,
The murmur of fountains below Slieve-mis,

[xv]

“The call of Oscar upon the chase,
The tongue of the hounds on the Fenians plain,
Then a seat with the men of the bardic race,
Of these delights was my hero fain.”

And the poet Oisin or Ossian is supposed to describe to Saint Patrick the exquisite singing of the Blackbird of Derrycarn, and the delight which his father Finn had taken in listening to it. My friend Dr. Sigerson has thus translated these verses:

“The tuneful tumult of that bird,
The belling deer on ferny steep,
This welcome in the dawn he heard,
This soothed at eve his sleep.

“Dear to him the wind-loved heath,
The whirr of wings, the rustling brake,
Dear the murmuring glens beneath,
And sob of Droma’s lake.

“The cry of hounds at early morn,
The pattering deer, the pebbly creek,
The cuckoo’s call, the sounding horn,
The swooping eagle’s shriek.”

In fact the glowing rendering of nature-scenes, which appear to have perfectly intoxicated the early Irish, frequently transcends mere descriptive and borders upon the interpretative. This is no doubt what prompted Matthew Arnold to write as follows:

> The Celt's quick feeling for that which is noble and distinguished gave his poetry style; his indomitable personality gave it pride and passion; his sensibility and nervous exaltation give it a better gift still the gift of rendering with wonderful felicity the magical charm of nature. The forest solitude, the bubbling spring, the wild flowers, are everywhere in romance. They have a mysterious life and grace there: they are nature's own children and utter her secret in a way which makes them quite different from the woods, waters, and plants of Greek and Latin poetry. Now of this delicate magic Celtic romance is so pre-eminent a mistress that it seems impossible to believe the power did not come into romance with the Celts; magic is just the word for it the magic of nature; not merely the beauty of nature that the Greeks and Latins had; not merely an honest smack of the soil, a faithful realism that the Germans had; but the intimate life of nature, her weird power and fairy dream.

Even the animals in the Irish sagas have often an interest attached to them for their own sake, which may have had its origin in the Druids once teaching a doctrine of metempsychosis. Bran, the hound of Finn mac Cumhail, was no mere dog, and Oisin himself was descended from a mother who had once been a deer. Cuchulain's great war-horse, the "Grey of Macha," knows when its master is going to his fate, and unwillingly allows itself to be yoked to his chariot. The magnificent white bull of Meve, Queen of Connacht, had been once a man, reborn a bull, who, "thinking it dishonorable" to remain under a woman's control, passed over to the herds of Meve's husband, thus giving rise to the greatest of all Irish epics, the Cattle-Spoil of Cuailgne. The very trees and plants have a life of their own. The mountain ash in which Diarmuid conceals himself while the Fenians play at chess below sprung from an enchanted berry; the branch which the little boy shakes before King Cormac has power to dispel sorrow and sick- ness. The hard rock is gifted with a voice and can both an- swer and prophesy. Even the billows of Ocean are inspired with a spirit, and when a catastrophe is impending the Wave of Cliodhna rolls in upon the shore in thunder. The very air is tenanted by supernatural beings. When "the battle-fighting battle-winning hero Cuchulain" springs into his chariot, there shout around him "spirits and goblins and spirits of the air and demons of the glens." Venomous witches ride upon the wind, and the direction from which the breeze blows at the time of birth influences the rest of a man's existence.

Even among the early Christians this sympathy with the animal creation remained. Saint Columcille when in exile at Iona is made aware that a heron from Ireland with long-drawn weary strokes of its wounded wings has alit half frozen upon the furthest point of his island, and he sends one of the brothers to care for the bird and chafe its wings and feed it, because it had come from Erin, from the land he should not see with his eyes again forever. And when Columcille himself is about to die, although seemingly in health, the old white horse, the faithful servant of the monks of Iona, is mysteriously aware of what the monks themselves did not know, and approaching the saint thrusts its head into [xvii] his bosom and weeps copious tears. And the story runs that one of the early Irish saints, finding that while immersed in prayer and meditation a blackbird had made a nest upon his hand, which was extended through the window, refused to chase the bird away or to withdraw his hand until she had hatched her eggs!

This excessive love of nature among the early Irish is all the more remarkable when we remember that it has always been believed that the Aryan races owe their appreciation of the beauties of nature to the introduction among them of Christianity. Religion for the first time taught them that the same God that created them created also all their surroundings, and thereby made these surroundings an object of increased interest. Any esthetic sensibility, where nature was concerned, seems to have been practically unknown among the Pagans of Greece and Rome. According to Humboldt, we discern the first faint traces of it in Cicero and the younger Pliny. But the Irish Pagan seems to have been penetrated with it to his profoundest depths, for there can be little doubt that such descriptions as I have quoted do not take their color from Christianity, but are a real legacy from pre-Christian times.

No account of Irish literature, however brief, can be given without mentioning the elaborate system of bards, poets, and meters, which seems to have assumed shape in very early days. There was probably never any race of people who so reverenced, admired, and, better still, rewarded their poets, as did the

Irish. The complexity of the bardic system almost takes one's breath away. There were two classes of poets, the *filès* (fillas) and the bards, the latter being quite inferior in rank to the former. The bards were divided into Free and Un-Free, or Patrician and Plebeian. There are eight grades of Patrician and eight of Plebeian bards, each with his own restrictions and laws. These shared between them, with the more powerful *filès*, the three hundred or more meters which had been invented in pre-Danish times. The names, and specimens of the greater part of these meters, have come down to us in the surviv ing fragments of the poets' books and they are of intense interest,

It is a tremendous claim to make for the Celt that [xviii] he taught Europe to rhyme, yet this claim has been made for him over and over again, not by himself, but by some of the greatest European linguists. The illustrious Zeuss, the founder of Celtic studies, is emphatic upon this point. "The form of Celtic poetry," he writes, " to judge both from the older and more recent examples, appears to be more ornate than the form of any other nation, and even more ornate in the older forms than in the modern ones; from the fact of which greater ornateness it undoubtedly came to pass that at the very time when the Roman empire was hastening to its ruin, the Celtic forms at first entire, afterward in part passed over not only into the songs of the Latins but also into those of other nations and remained in them." He unhesitatingly ascribes the advance toward rhyme, made by the Anglo-Saxons in their Latin hymns, to Irish influence. "We must believe," he said, "that this form of composition was introduced amongst them by the Irish, as were the arts of writing and of painting and of ornamenting manuscripts, since they themselves in common with the other Germanic nations made use in their poetry of nothing but alliteration." "Final assonance or rhyme can have been derived only from the laws of Celtic phonology," says Constantine Nigra.

One thing at least is certain, that already in the seventh century the Irish not only rhymed but used intricate and beautiful meters of their own, while for many centuries after this period the Germanic nations could only rudely alliterate. After the seventh century the Irish brought their rhyming system to a pitch of perfection undreamed of by any other nation, even to this day. The elaborateness of the system they evolved, the prodigious complexity of the rules, the subtlety, delicacy, and intricacy of their poetical code, are astounding, and wholly unparalleled by anything that the rest of the western world has produced.

After the coming of the Normans, Irish art and Irish literature began to decline, and the next four centuries produced little except the rather stereotyped poems of the bardic houses, whose imaginative faculties were too much overridden by the artificial difficulties of their art difficulties which they seem to have almost taken a delight in creating for themselves. In the seventeenth century the [xix] great Gaelic houses, overthrown by incessant wars with English invaders, began to succumb to fire and sword and banishment, and the fortunes of the hereditary bards fell with the fortunes of their patrons. Then a new school arose from among the people themselves, untrammeled by technicalities, and produced an exquisite new growth of poetry throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. The motto of the new school might have been couched in the words which Uhland addressed to the poets of Germany:

"*Formel hält uns nicht gebunden,*
Unsere Kunst heisst Poesie!"

Scores and scores of new and brilliant meters, based upon an accentual instead of the old syllabic system, made their appearance, and the Irish deprived by law of their trade, their education, their lands, and all the rights and possibilities of free men, could do nothing else but sing, which they did in almost every county in Ireland, with all the sweetness of the dying swan.

Irish literature never quite ceased to be written, but the nineteenth century produced little worth remembering. It is only within the last few years that a new and able school of Irish writers has sprung up, with a sympathetic public to encourage it, and bids fair to do something once again that may be worthy of the history of our island once one of the spots most desirous of learning and of literature to be found in the whole world. The tenth volume of *Irish Literature* contains some specimens of this new school with translations.

[End]