

**ALFRED PERCEVAL
GRAVES**



**A CELTIC
PSALTERY**

Alfred Perceval Graves

A Celtic Psalter

**Enriched edition. Being Mainly Renderings in English
Verse from Irish & Welsh Poetry**

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tristan West

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PREFACE

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I have called this volume of verse a Celtic Psalter because it mainly consists of close and free translations from Irish, Scotch Gaelic, and Welsh Poetry of a religious or serious character. The first half of the book is concerned with Irish poems. The first group of these starts with the dawning of Christianity out of Pagan darkness, and the spiritualising of the Early Irish by the wisdom to be found in the conversations between King Cormac MacArt—the Irish ancestor of our Royal Family—and his son and successor, King Carbery. Here also will be found those pregnant ninth-century utterances known as the "Irish Triads."

Next follow poems attributed or relating to some of the Irish saints—Patrick, Columba, Brigit, Moling; Lays of Monk and Hermit, Religious Invocations, Reflections and Charms and Lamentations for the Dead, including a remarkable early Irish poem entitled "The Mothers' Lament at the Slaughter of the Innocents" and a powerful peasant poem, "The Keening of Mary." The Irish section is ended by a set of songs suggested by Irish folk-tunes.

Of the early Irish Religious Poetry here translated it may be observed that the originals are not only remarkable for fine metrical form but for their cheerful spirituality, their open-air freshness[1q] and their occasional touches of kindly humour. "Irish religious poetry," it has been well said, "ranges from single quatrains to lengthy compositions dealing with all the varied aspects of religious life. Many of

them give us a fascinating insight into the peculiar character of the early Irish Church, which differed in so many ways from the Christian world. We see the hermit in his lonely cell, the monk at his devotions or at his work of copying in the scriptorium or under the open sky; or we hear the ascetic who, alone or with twelve chosen companions, has left one of the great monasteries in order to live in greater solitude among the woods or mountains, or on a lonely island. The fact that so many of these poems are fathered upon well-known saints emphasises the friendly attitude of the native clergy towards vernacular poetry."^[A]

I have endeavoured as far as possible to preserve in my translations both the character of these poems and their metrical form. But the latter attempt can be only a mere approximation owing to the strict rules of early Irish verse both as regards alliteration and vowel consonance. Still the use of the "inlaid rhyme" and other assonantal devices have, it is to be hoped, brought my renderings nearer in vocal effect to the originals than the use of more familiar English verse methods would have done.

The same metrical difficulties have met me when translating the Welsh sacred and spiritual poems which form the second division of this volume. But they have been more easy to grapple with—in part because I have had more assistance in dealing with the older Cymric poems from my lamented friend Mr. Sidney Richard John and other Welsh scholars, than I had in the case of the early Irish lyrics—in part because the later Welsh poems which I have rendered into English verse are generally in free, not "strict," metres, and therefore present no great difficulty to the translator.

The poems in the Welsh section are, roughly speaking, arranged in chronological order. The early Welsh poets Aneurin and Llywarch Hen are represented by two singular pieces, Llywarch Hen's curious "Tercets" and Aneurin's "Ode to the Months." In both of these, nature poetry and proverbial philosophy are oddly intermingled in a manner reminiscent of the Greek Gnostic Poets. Two examples are given of the serious verse of Dafydd ab Gwilym, a contemporary of Chaucer, who though he did not, like Wordsworth, read nature into human life with that spiritual insight for which he was so remarkable, yet as a poet of fancy, the vivid, delicate, sympathetic fancy of the Celt, still remains unmatched. Amongst Dafydd's contemporaries and successors, Iolo Goch's noble poem, "The Labourer," very appropriate to our breadless days, Lewis Glyn Cothi's touching elegy on his little son John, and Dr. Sion Cent's epigrammatic "The Noble's Grave" have been treated as far as possible in the metres of the originals, and I have gone as near as I could to the measures of Huw Morus' "The Bard's Death-Bed Confession," Elis Win's "Counsel in view of Death," and the Vicar Pritchard's "A Good Wife."

A word or two about these famous Welsh writers: Huw Morus (Hugh Morris) was the leading Welsh poet of the seventeenth century and a staunch Royalist, who during the Civil War proved himself the equal if not the superior of Samuel Butler as a writer of anti-Republican satire. He was also an amatory lyrist, but closed his career as the writer of some fine religious verses, notably this "Death-Bed Confession." Elis Win (Ellis Wynne) was not only an excellent writer of verse but one of the masters of Welsh prose. His

"Vision of the Sleeping Bard" is, indeed, one of the most beautifully written works in the Welsh language. Though in many respects indebted to "Quevedo's Visions," the matter of Elis Win's book is distinctly original, and most poetically expressed, though he is none the less able to expose and scourge the immoralities of his age.

The Vicar Pritchard, otherwise the Rev. Rhys Pritchard, was the author of the famous "Welshmen's Candle," "Cannwyll y Cymry," written in the free metres, first published in 1646—completed in 1672. This consisted of a series of moral verses in the metres of the old folk-songs (Penillion Telyn) and remained dear to the hearts of the Welsh people for two centuries. Next may be mentioned Goronwy Owen, educated by the poet Lewis Morris, grandfather of the author of "Songs of Two Worlds" and "The Epic of Hades." As the Rev. Elvet Lewis writes of him: "Here at once we meet the true artist lost in his art. His humour is as playful as if the hand of a stern fate had never struck him on the face. His muse can laugh and make others laugh, or it can weep and make others weep." A specimen is given of one of his best known poems, "An Ode on the Day of Judgment," reproducing, as far as my powers have permitted, its final and internal rhymes and other metrical effects.

We now reach the most individual of the modern Welsh religious and philosophical poets, Islwyn (William Thomas), who took his Bardic title from the hill of Islwyn in his native Monmouthshire. He was greatly influenced by the poetry of Wordsworth, but was in no sense an imitator. Yet whilst, in the words of one of the Triads, he possessed the three

things essential to poetic genius, "an eye to see nature, a heart to feel nature: and courage that dares follow nature"—he steadfastly refused to regard poetry as an art and, by declining to use the pruning-knife, allowed the finest fruits of his poetic talents to lie buried beneath immense accumulations of weedy and inferior growth. Yet what his powers were may not be ill judged of, even in translation, by the passage from his blank verse poem, "The Storm," entitled "Behind the Veil," to be found on p. 94.

Pantycelyn (the Rev. William Williams) was a co-worker with Howel Harris and Daniel Rowlands in the Methodist revival. Professor W.J. Gruffyd writes of him: "It is not enough to say he was a hymnologist—he was much more. He is the National Poet of Wales. He had certainly the loftiest imagination of all the poets of five centuries, and his influence on the Welsh people can be gauged by the fact that a good deal of his idiom or dialect has fixed itself indelibly in modern literary Welsh." The Hymn, "Marchog Jesu!" which represents him was translated by me at the request of the Committee responsible for the Institution Ceremony of the Prince of Wales at Carnarvon Castle.

Of the more modern Welsh poets represented in this volume let it be said that Ceiriog (John Hughes), so called from his birth in the Ceiriog Valley, is the Burns of Welsh Poetry. Against the spirit of gloom that the Welsh Revival cast over the first half of the nineteenth century he threw himself in sharp revolt. But while the joy of life wells up and overflows in his song he was also, like all Welshmen, serious-minded, as the specimens given in my translation from his works go to prove.

According to Professor Lewis Jones, no poem in the strict metre is more read than Eben Farrd's "Dinistur Jerusalem" ("The Destruction of Jerusalem"), translated into kindred verse in this volume, unless indeed its popularity is rivalled by Hiraethog's ode on "Heddwch," ("Peace"). Two extracts from the former poem are dealt with, and Hiraethog is represented by a beautiful fancy, "Love Divine," taken from his "Emanuel."

Finally, three living poets are represented in the Welsh section—Elvet Lewis by his stirring and touching "High Tide"; Eifion Wyn, upon whom the mantle of Ceiriog has fallen, by two exquisitely simple and pathetic poems, "Ora pro Nobis" and "A Flower-Sunday Lullaby"; and William John Gruffydd, the bright hope of "Y Beirdd Newydd" ("The New Poets"), by his poignant ballad of "The Old Bachelor of Ty'n y Mynydd."

There is no need for me to dwell upon the rest of the verse in this volume beyond stating that "The Prodigal's Return" is a free translation from a poem on that theme by an anonymous Scotch Gaelic Bard to be found in Sinton's "The Poetry of Badenoch"; that "Let there be joy!" is rendered from a Gaelic poem in Alexander Carmichael's "Carmina Gadelica," and that, finally, "Wild Wine of Nature" is a pretty close English version of a poem hardly to have been expected from that far from teetotal Scotch Gaelic Bard, Duncan Ban McIntyre.

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July 11, 1917

[A]

From "The Ancient Poetry of Ireland," by Professor Kuno Meyer, to whose beautiful prose translations from Irish verse in that volume, and in his "Hail, Brigit!" I am greatly indebted.

I. Irish Poems

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THE ISLE OF THE HAPPY

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(From the Early Irish)

Once when Bran, son of Feval, was with his warriors in his royal fort, they suddenly saw a woman in strange raiment upon the floor of the house. No one knew whence she had come or how she had entered, for the ramparts were closed. Then she sang these quatrains of Erin, the Isle of the Happy, to Bran while all the host were listening:

A branch I bear from Evin's apple-trees
Whose shape agrees with Evin's orchard
spray;
Yet never could her branches best belauded

Such crystal-gaused bud and bloom display.

There is a distant Isle, deep sunk in shadows,
Sea-horses round its meadows flash and flee;
Full fair the course, white-swelling waves
enfold it,
Four pedestals uphold it o'er the sea.

White the bronze pillars that this Fairy
Curragh, ^[A]
The Centuries thorough, glimmering uphold.
Through all the World the fairest land of any
Is this whereon the many blooms unfold.

And in its midst an Ancient Tree forth flowers,
Whence to the Hours beauteous birds
outchime;
In harmony of song, with fluttering feather,
They hail together each new birth of Time.

And through the Isle glow all glad shades of
colour,
No hue of dolour mars its beauty lone.
'Tis Silver Cloud Land that we ever name it,
And joy and music claim it for their own.
[2] Not here are cruel guile or loud
resentment,
But calm contentment, fresh and fruitful
cheer;
Not here loud force or dissonance distressful,
But music melting blissful on the ear.

No grief, no gloom, no death, no mortal
sickness,
Nor any weakness our sure strength can

bound;
These are the signs that grace the race of
Evin.
Beneath what other heaven are they found?

A Hero fair, from out the dawn's bright
blooming,
Rides forth, illuming level shore and flood;
The white and seaward plain he sets in
motion,
He stirs the ocean into burning blood.

A host across the clear blue sea comes
rowing,
Their prowess showing, till they touch the
shore;
Thence seek the Shining Stone where Music's
measure
Prolongs the pleasure of the pulsing oar.

It sings a strain to all the host assembled;
That strain untired has trembled through all
time!
It swells with such sweet choruses
unnumbered,
Decay and Death have slumbered since its
chime.

Thus happiness with wealth is o'er us stealing,
And laughter pealing forth from every hill.
Yea! through the Land of Peace at every
season
Pure Joy and Reason are companions still.

Through all the lovely Isle's unchanging hours
There showers and showers a stream of silver

bright;

A pure white cliff that from the breast of Evin
Mounts up to Heaven thus assures her light.

Long ages hence a Wondrous Child and Holy,
Yet in estate most lowly shall have birth;
Seed of a Woman, yet whose Mate knows no
man

To rule the thousand thousands of the earth.

[3]

His sway is ceaseless; 'twas His love all-seeing
That Earth's vast being wrought with perfect
skill.

All worlds are His; for all His kindness cares;
But woe to all gainsayers of His Will.

The stainless heavens beneath His Hands
unfolded,

He moulded Man as free of mortal stain,
And even now Earth's sin-struck sons and
daughters

His Living Waters can make whole again.

Not unto all of you is this my message
Of marvellous presage at this hour revealed.

Let Bran but listen from Earth's concourse
crowded

Unto the shrouded wisdom there concealed.

Upon a couch of languor lie not sunken,
Beware lest drunkenness becloud thy speech!
Put forth, O Bran, across the far, clear waters.
And Evin's daughters haply thou may'st reach.