

THE LEGENDS OF SAINT PATRICK

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The legends of Saint Patrick by Aubrey De Vere

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SAINT PATRICK**

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BY
AUBREY DE VERE



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TO THE MEMORY
of
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PREFACE.

IN most parts of Ireland the traveller hears quaint stories about Saint Patrick, and sometimes perhaps imagines that the Saint visited the island for the benefit of witty guides, and to promote mirth in wet weather. He would hardly suspect that, during fourteen centuries, the subject of these stories has been regarded, at countless hearths, as the greatest man and the greatest benefactor that ever trod the Irish soil; and that there remains respecting him a vast cycle of legends, serious, pathetic, and profound. It could not have been otherwise. Ireland was a land of legends many ages before Saint Patrick visited it.) There existed in all parts of it Colleges of Bards, whose duty it was to preserve in song the history of every clan and ruling House. Such a people could not have

forgotten the heroic man who had led them forth in their Exodus from the bondage of Pagan darkness. In many instances, doubtless, as the tale became a tradition, the foliage of an ever-active popular imagination gathered round the central stem of fact ; but the fact remained.

To this class of legends belong the poems respecting Saint Patrick and the old Irish warrior-poet, Oisín, with whom the modern reader is better acquainted under the name of Ossian. They are to this day chaunted in those parts of Ireland in which the Gaelic language is spoken, and consist chiefly of poetic contentions in which the blind bard, represented as the guest of Saint Patrick in his friendless old age, responds to the Saint's preaching by singing the praises of his father, Fionn (the Fingal of Macpherson), of his son, Oscar, and of the friends of his youth. Oisín had died two centuries before St. Patrick's mission ; and, earlier still, the whole of that polity to which he was devoted had perished, with his son and the warriors he loved so well, upon the fatal field of Gahbra : yet those dialogues, referred by Professor O'Curry to the ninth and tenth centuries, though disfigured

by subsequent interpolations, do not the less vividly illustrate the relations, partly friendly, partly hostile, between the new religion of Ireland and her old world of bards and chiefs. Many of them are to be found, beside those included in the publications of the 'Ossianic Society,' in a striking volume published by J. Hawkins Simpson, Esq., who, during a residence in Mayo, had often been struck by the vehement effect they produced on the listeners. It is called, 'Oisín, the Bard of Erin.'¹ The first two of the poems relating to Oisín in the present volume embody, in substance, two of the traditional Ossianic poems of Ireland: and several of the other poems in lyrical metres are drawn from the same sources.

But the earlier legends respecting Saint Patrick are at once the more authentic and the nobler. Not a few have a character of the sublime; many are pathetic; some have a profound meaning under a strange disguise; but their predominant character is their brightness and gladsomeness. A large tract of Irish history is dark: but the time of Saint Patrick, and the three centuries which

¹ See note on page 244.