

**INISFAIL: A LYRICAL CHRONICLE OF
IRELAND. THE IRISH SISTERS; EARLY
POEMS, MEDITATIVE OR DEVOTIONAL;
POEMS FOR THE MOST PART CONNECTED
WITH THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE, 1846-
1849; URBS ROMA; ST. PETER'S CHAINS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649016396

Inisfail: a lyrical chronicle of Ireland. The Irish sisters; early poems, meditative or devotional; poems for the most part connected with the Great Irish famine, 1846-1849; urbs Roma; St. Peter's chains by Aubrey De Vere

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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AUBREY DE VERE

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PR 4542
I 4
1897

INISFAIL.

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1861.

PREFACE.

(EDITION OF 1877.)

'INISFAIL' is an attempt to represent, as in a picture, the most stormy, but the most poetic period of Irish History. In simpler days than ours, when even rude feelings were tender, and when thought had not separated itself from action, poetry and history were more akin than they have been in recent times. In England and in Spain a series of ballads had early grown up, out of which rose the later literature of each country, ballads that recorded many a precious passage of old times, and embodied the genius, as well as the manners, of the past. Irish History no longer stands thus related to letters. Nowhere in Ireland can we move without being challenged by the monuments of the past; yet, for many of her sons, and those who ought to be the best instructed, and for the traveller from afar, there exists no Alfred, and no Wallace. For the English-speaking part of the population nearly the whole of the old bardic literature has perished, and with it much of a history admirable for the manner in which it exhibits

the finer, together with the more barbaric, traits of a society the spiritual civilisation of which had been early developed, and the civil early checked. Yet for centuries the bards occupied a more important position in Ireland than in any other part of the West: their dignity was next to the regal; their influence over the people unbounded; and they possessed all the secular learning then in the land. The Gael required that even the precepts of the law should be delivered to him in verse, as well as that the lines of the Princes and Chiefs should be thus traced. The influence of the priest alone equalled that of the bard, and between these two orders a rivalry often existed. We have the testimony of Spenser as to the merit and power of the latter as late as the sixteenth century. He admired them and he feared them. The love of the bard for his country was a lover's passion. To him of course his Erin was in some degree an Ideal Erin. He could see the crimes of individuals, and denounce judgment on them; but beneath the accidents of the hour he ever recognised in his Land the child of a divine predilection. The closer the hunters beset her, the more thickly the 'winged wounds' came about her, the more vehemently he hailed her as one 'doomed to death, yet fated not to die.' The name 'Inisfail' signified the 'Isle of Destiny.'

In Ireland the alliance between poetry and love of country was, perhaps, closer than elsewhere. For ages her History was but a record of calamity; and to every generous nature his country becomes endeared by her sufferings. But even in earlier days the bards must have found their best subjects for song among the picturesque and romantic details of Irish story. The antiquity to which it mounted

excited imaginative sympathies: the dimness with which large tracts of it were invested gave a more striking prominence to what remained of it—those great, half-isolated Records which loomed through the mist like mountain behind mountain retiring into more and more remote distance. Some reference to those records, wild as the wildest 'Irish airs,' may perhaps render more easily intelligible an enterprise of verse which many will deem rash, an attempt to add a Gaelic note to that large concert of English poetry enriched long since by strains indirectly drawn from almost every age and land.

Long before those three golden centuries succeeding her conversion to Christianity, Ireland possessed culture, laws, and a time-honoured monarchy. It was in part for this reason that she at once became the great missionary land of the North, while foreigners flocked in crowds to her colleges. Her Faith was a tree that rapidly 'covered the lands with its branches,' because it had been planted 'by the water side.' If Ireland had to 'wait long for her martyrs,' it was because the genius of her early institutions was less opposed than that of other Western Nations to Christianity. Most of Europe, including Britain and Gaul, had received the Roman civilisation. With Pagan Rome Ireland had had no dealings, closely as she became linked with Christian Rome. She was an Eastern nation in the West, and a Southern in the North. Her civilisation was patriarchal, not military, in essence; its type was the family, not the army; it had more affinity with the Church, when the Church yet dwelt in tents, than with the complex fabric of the State. It was a civilisation of clans. The clan system would have

been fatal to a people whose vocation was to create a great political dominion. To a country whose greatness was destined to be a missionary greatness it proved an auxiliary, at once affording to her the type of those spiritual clans, her convents, of which those ruled by the great monastic family of St. Columba proved the most potent, and also withdrawing her from the larger worldly ambitions. Had the clan system met with no external interference, civil society might possibly in Ireland, as in India, have preserved its original type substantially unchanged to modern times, without decay, though also without progress. But, on the other hand, the missionary progress of Ireland in three centuries, exceeded that made by half the countries of Europe in twice the time. Clan fights were her sports ; but Religion was her Reality. To it her genius was attracted. Another Eastern characteristic, 'Fatalism,' has been attributed to the Irish race. Her Fatalism meant simply a profound sense of Religion. The intense Theism which has ever belonged to the East survived in Ireland as an instinct no less than as a Faith. The Irish have commonly found it more easy to recognise the Divine hand than secondary causes. They have regarded Religion as the chief possession of man. Such nations are ever attached to the Past.

That Past was indeed too great a thing to be forgotten. Even in our own days, remote and prosaic, by the banks of the Boyne, amid more troubled memorials, we stand and wonder at tumuli the winding galleries of which are supposed to retain the ashes of those kings of the Tuatha de Danann, who ruled in Ireland before the Milesian race. In the isles of Aran, in Kerry, and in Donegal, we still find the

remains of cairn and cromlech and rath, of stone forts, and of those singular houses called 'cloghauns' with their steep beehive roofs. The Royal Irish Academy shows us its silver shields, golden crowns, cups, torques, spear-heads of bronze, &c. The illuminated Missals and Breviaries of the Dublin University prove to us that no sooner had the land become Christian than it applied to sacred purposes the skill it had long before possessed. Centuries earlier, when the neighbouring countries were barbarous, its Brehon Laws had constituted a complete code of civil rule; while many of its social usages, fosterage, for instance, and the clan tenure of land, hereditary offices, *eric*, &c., were as deeply rooted in the national heart, as when, 1500 years later, arbitrary laws endeavoured in vain to eradicate them. The long list of 118 kings, previous to the time of St. Patrick, astonishes us at first; but, on examining the material records still existing, we find abundant proofs of the antiquity of Irish civilisation. The traces of the husbandman's labour remain on the summit of hills which have not been cultivated within the records of tradition, and the implements with which he toiled have been found in the depth of forest or bog.

If the ancient memorials of Ireland are interesting to us, much more so must they have proved to the Irish of an earlier day. A green and woody knoll beside Lough Derg is all that for us remains of Kin-cora, the Palace of the Munster Kings, and home of Brian the Great. But to a Gael in the fifteenth century its ruins must have spoken a language as intelligible as that in which old castles battered by Mountjoy address us. To the Irishman, prince or peasant, Nial of the Nine Hostages was as familiar

a name as Bruce was to the Scottish. Bard and chronicler told how, before St. Patrick had summoned King Laeghaire to believe, Nial had ruled over all Ireland; how he had been the ancestor of the tribe of Hi-Nial, from which were descended the Princes of Tirconnel and Tyrone, at whose name the children of Norman nobles in the *Pale*, the four counties round Dublin, trembled; how he had sent against Britain and Gaul those naval expeditions, still for us recorded in Roman verse; * how he had leagued with his countrymen in Scotland, those Scoti who with the Picts had again and again driven back the Romans behind their further wall till they left the land defenceless; and how, at last, he had fallen at sea, in the port of Boulogne, by the hand of his rival, Eochy. From priest as well as bard he would have heard of the Irish Numa, King Cormac; how he had succeeded to his father, A.D. 227; how he had established three colleges, one for war, one for history, and one for jurisprudence; how he had reduced the old Brehon law into a code; how he had assembled at his palace of Tara his bards and chroniclers, and commanded them to collect all the ancient annals of Ireland into a series—the ‘Psalter of Tara’; how he had himself written a book called ‘The Institutions of a Prince,’ and stored in it the civil wisdom of his time; how, in obedience to law, he had resigned his throne on becoming disfigured by a wound; and how it was piously believed that, before his death, Christianity had reached him, and he had become a Believer.

* Totam cum Scotus Iernem
Movit, et infesto spumavit remige Tethys.’

CLAUDIUS.

Still more often would he have heard the tale of King Cormac's grandfather, Conn of the Hundred Fights, who succeeded to the crown of all Ireland, A.D. 123, and who was at last compelled to surrender one half of it to Eoghan More (Eugene the Great), King of Munster. He would have heard how the latter, on the war breaking out again, had sought and found allies in Spain, and with them had perished in a night surprise; how his rival, Conn of the Hundred Fights, was slain, in the hundredth year of his age, by a king of Ulster; and how from a king who united the blood of Conn and of Eugene were descended the great houses of Munster, those of the Dalcassian race, as the OBriens, who held sway in Thomond or north Munster, and those of the Eugenic race, as the MacCarthys, who retained it for so many centuries in Desmond or south Munster, and were at last obliged to share it with the Norman Geraldines.

But the records of which every song-loving Gael heard went up to periods long before the Christian Era. He heard how, at a time when the bards had long enjoyed the dignities in Christian times bestowed on the clergy, a storm had arisen against this song-church, accused of inordinate wealth and abused power. He heard also how it had been saved by the interposition of St. Columba, himself a Poet. He heard how, earlier still, King Eochy had constituted the five provincial kingdoms, as centuries previously King Ugony More had divided Ireland into twenty-five for the benefit of his twenty-five sons, compelling his people to swear by the 'sun and the moon, the dew, and all elements visible and invisible,' that their inheritance should not be taken from them for ever.