

**TRAITS AND STORIES OF
THE IRISH PEASANTRY. IN
FOUR VOLUMES, VOL. I**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649723447

Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry. In Four Volumes, Vol. I by William Carleton

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WILLIAM CARLETON

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IN FOUR VOLUMES
VOL. I



H. Carleton -

Revised 3-6-37 jfm 09 ju 11: 12

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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM CARLETON is universally recognised as the greatest delineator of the manners and customs of the Irish peasantry. His "Traits and Stories" is not merely a work of remarkable literary merit. It has great historical value, and is a monument of national importance. It is incontestably the best of all his writings. It is unequal, it is often carelessly and roughly finished, and there are some badly-written passages; but still, taken as a whole, there is nothing in Irish literature within reasonable distance of it for completeness, variety, character-drawing, humour, pathos, and dramatic power. When Carleton gave these stories some necessary revision, about ten years after their first appearance, he did not do it thoroughly. There are still some excrescences, some useless digressions and preachings, and not a few violent outbursts which might with advantage be modified; but, such as they are, the "Traits and Stories" form an immortal picture of national life. The historical importance of the work lies in the fact that the Ireland of Carleton's early years no longer exists. The Ireland mirrored for all time in his pages is not the Ireland of our days. One may occasionally meet even yet an odd character, a quaint type, who seems to belong to such a vanished world as Carleton has pictured; but such types are now few and far between. In pre-famine and pre-Emancipation days they were common in every parish and every village—they kept up the distinctiveness of the race. But that time is long past. The mass of the people have lost most of the peculiarities, the characteristic qualities which are so well developed in the figures who move and live in the stories of Carleton. Not merely the lapse of time, but the

famine and the subsequent clearances are responsible for the radical change which has come over the people. In essentials, no doubt, Carleton's Ireland is the same as ours, but the typical peasant, the "genuine article," seems to have disappeared, or is fast disappearing, with his faction and party fights, his wakes and "patterns," his pipers and his native Gaelic. As an eulogist of Carleton has expressed it, the best of the older Ireland has vanished "in the swamps and savannahs of the Irish exile's distant home." It might be added that the courts and alleys of London and other great English cities have seen some of its last fading traces, and it has been but a memory or a tradition with the past and present generation of Irishmen. Carleton has preserved its image intact, and in his stories one may live again with the Ireland of the past. In no other writer do you get the Irish atmosphere so clearly, so unmistakably. There have been and are many admirable Irish novelists, but their transcripts of Irish peasant life seem the faintest outlines in comparison with the stern reality—the forcible truth of Carleton's descriptions. Their peasants are half English and their landscapes almost wholly so. Carleton is Irish through and through—intensely Irish, exclusively Irish.

He is not, however, a mere local chronicler, interesting (in the long-run) only to the limited audience of a single parish, or county, or province. He is a national historian—the historian of the people's lives from infancy to old age, concerning himself little with the events of the "world," as generally understood, but occupied with his task of depicting Irish life and Irish human nature. Average human nature abounds in his books. Every one sees that his personages are genuine creatures of flesh and blood, and not simply puppets or fanciful shadows. The contemporaries who saw the publication of the "Traits and Stories" were startled at the truth of the work, no less than at its graphic power, pathos, and humour; and they did not, perhaps, exaggerate its value when they compared its author in certain aspects to Shakespeare and Cervantes. Carleton's humour is quite as notable as any in modern literature, and is more nearly akin to that of Molière than to any one else's. The Irish novelist's methods of developing character are somewhat similar to those employed by the

French dramatist, and there is considerable resemblance between the pedants and the comic servants of both. The wheedlers, too, the "deludherers" of the "Traits and Stories," are not without their congeners in Molière's plays. The appearance of his work revealed a new world of life and of fantasy to the astonished public of 1830-33. Even France and Germany were interested; and in England Carleton was unreservedly praised, and his stories recommended to the perusal of those who wished to *know* the Irish people. In America Carleton's popularity has always been very great.

He has been called the "prose Burns," and the description is fairly exact. He had the same knowledge of his countrymen, the same intense love of nature (witness "Tubber Derg" and many other examples), the same sympathy for humanity, and almost the same deep poetical feeling. The literary comparison need not be pursued further; but he resembled Burns, a being, like him, a peasant, and his life presents other points of similarity to that of the Ayrshire poet. Carleton also reminds one not a little of Goldsmith. Some of his glimpses of rustic gatherings and smiling homesteads are quite in the Goldsmith manner. But he did not choose to let his mind dwell for long upon the brighter and joyous side of Irish life; his personal sorrows were poignant throughout the greater part of his career, and his writings are strongly coloured by them. No other Irish writer is quite his equal in the description of appalling calamity. There are terrible scenes in these "Traits and Stories," which are probably the least gloomy of his writings, as they are almost his earliest. But they are insignificant and tame compared to the famine scenes of "The Black Prophet," which are Dantean in intensity and accumulated horror. His dramatic power is always notable—and here especially.

In supreme moments Carleton exhibits strong imagination, but, in general, it must be confessed that it is to his memory we owe most of his best work. He described what he had actually *seen*—rarely inventing his incidents. When eventually the stores of his memory were exhausted, when the stock of quaint types and moving experiences had run out, his books became almost unreadable. The strength of his