

**FOLK-LORE  
RECORD, VOL. V**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649081455

Folk-Lore Record, Vol. V by Various

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**VARIOUS**

**FOLK-LORE  
RECORD, VOL. V**



THE  
FOLK-LORE RECORD,

VOL. V.

CONTAINING—

MABINOGION STUDIES. By ALFRED NUTT.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FOLK-LORE PUBLICATIONS IN ENGLISH  
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NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN LEGENDS AND FABLES.

NOTES, QUERIES, NOTICES, AND NEWS.

THE ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1881 (including Report of Folk-Tale  
Committee.)

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LONDON :  
PRINTED FOR THE FOLK-LORE SOCIETY,  
BY MESSRS. NICHOLS & SONS,  
25, PARLIAMENT STREET, WESTMINSTER, S.W.

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1882.

# MABINOGION STUDIES.

BY ALFRED NUTT.

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## I.—BRANWEN, THE DAUGHTER OF LLYR.

### BOOKS QUOTED.

- Mab.* The Mabinogion . . . translated with notes by Lady Charlotte Guest. London, 1877.
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- Vestiges.* Vestiges of the Gael in Gwynedd, by the Rev. W. B. Jones (the present Bishop of St. David's). London, 1851.
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- Geffroy, Tysilio.* Quoted from Schulz's edition, 1854.
- Stephens.* The Literature of the Kymry. Second edition. London, 1876.
- A.F.M.* The Annals of the Four Masters, edited by John O'Donovan. 7 vols. Dublin, 1851.
- Keating.* Quoted from Halliday's translation. Dublin, 1811.
- O'Curry.* Lectures on the MS. materials of Ancient Irish History. Dublin, 1861.
- Edzardi.* Altdeutsche und Altnordische Helden-Sagen. Bd. iii. Stuttgart, 1880. The Volsunga-Saga (*V.S.*) is quoted from this.
- Rassmann.* Die deutsche Heldensage und ihre Heimat. Second edition. 2 vols. Hanover, 1863. The Thidrekssaga (*Th.S.*) is quoted from this.
- The Niebelungen Lied (*N.L.*), the Niebelungen Noth (*N.N.*), and *Guðrun* are quoted from Bartsch's last texts; the *Edda* from Simrock's last translation.

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**T**HE statement of Lady Charlotte Guest that the Mabinogion contained in the Red Book of Hergest, and translated by her, "may be considered as forming two distinct classes, one of which generally celebrates heroes of the Arthurian eycles, while the other refers to personages and events of an earlier period," has been accepted by all subsequent investigators; and the earlier class,—which comprises the Mabinogion of Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed; Branwen, the daughter of Llyr; Manawyddan, the son of Llyr; Math, the son of Mathonwy,—

has been shown by Mr. Skene (F. A. B. i. pp. 201, &c.) to refer not to Wales as the country of the Cymry but to the period when Mona and Arvon were possessed by a Gwyddel population, the legendary kings of which are the main actors in these tales. There is substantial agreement as to the fact that a Gwyddel population did at one time possess the whole of North Wales, whence it was driven in the fourth and fifth centuries by Cunedda and his sons coming from the north. But whether the Cuneddian conquest represents an expulsion of invaders or the seizure by Cymric tribes of land long held previously by the Gael, and whether the traditions of Cunedda were the last echo of actual events, or the form merely in which a long continued war of races is expressed, are still moot points.

The Bishop of St. David's, in his *Vestiges of the Gael in Gwynedd*, looks upon the Gwyddel as the first wave of the Celtic invasion of Britain. The succeeding Cymry drove them into the nooks and fastnesses of the island, much as they themselves were driven thereto later on by the Saxons. The Gael, forced to abandon Lloegria, took refuge among the mountain retreats of Gwynedd, and there preserved their independence until the fifth century, when Caswallawn Law Hir, whom the legend terms a grandson of Cunedda, finally established a Cymric rule over the whole of Gwynedd, and ended thereby a struggle that had lasted probably through the entire period of the Roman occupation. Long even after these events the Gwyddel gave trouble to their Cymric rulers, and up to the ninth century there are traces of fresh Cymric immigration from Strathelyde and Cumbria. This conflict of races extending over centuries took the shape in the mediæval chronicles of the invasion and conquest of Gwynedd by Cunedda and his sons.

This theory is stated by Mr. Skene (i. p. 44) "to run counter to the real probabilities of the case." It is certainly opposed to tradition from the days of Nennius to those of Iolo Morganwg. Mr. Skene's own views may be summarised somewhat as follows: About the middle of the fourth century the Scots of Ireland began to assail the Roman province, on the coasts of which they made numerous settlements, more especially in Gwynedd and portions of Dyfed. Meanwhile the Piets, swarming down from the highlands of Scotland, broke in upon and ravaged the tracts between the walls. Repelled in 368 by Theodosius, who had been sent from Rome at the appeal of the

province, they renewed their attack twenty years later, and met with little resistance, as Britain had been denuded of troops by Maximus. Rome, appealed to a second time, sent a legion, and the barbarians were forced to withdraw. But in 402 the legion was recalled; fresh attacks of the Picts necessitated the dispatch of more troops, who were finally withdrawn by Constantine in 409, after which the province was left to defend itself. Cunedda the Guledig withdrew finally within the southern wall, and the Cymrie population, finding its territory thus limited, turned against the Scottish (Gwyddel) invaders of Gwynedd and Dyfed, and drove them thence after a struggle which lasted the better part of a century. In the meantime the Britons of the north and north-east were contending under the leadership of the Guledig Ambrosius against both the Picts and the Saxons. Ambrosius was succeeded as Guledig by Arthur, who in a series of battles overcame both Picts and Saxons, and re-established Cymric dominion over what is now Southern Scotland and Northern England, at about the same time that Caswallawn Law Hir had finally brought Gwynedd under his power. The northernmost portion of this district he parcelled out, after the decisive victory of Mount Badon in 516, among Urien, Llew, and Arawn. For a while Arthur had peace, but in 537 Modred, the son of Llew, rebelled and marched against him at the head of an army of Picts, Scots, and Saxons combined. In the battle of Camlan, which ensued, Arthur fell. He was essentially a Christian hero warring against the Pagans, whether Picts or Saxons, and the rebellion of Modred may be looked upon as a relapse of the Picts into Paganism. A Pagan power arose for a time in South Scotland, but finally broke down when in 573 Maelgwyn (who had succeeded Caswallawn Law Hir as chieftain over Gwynedd) together with Ryddereh Hael, King of Strathelyde, and Aedan, the Scottish King of Dalriada, overthrew the Pagan Gwenddolew in the great battle of Arderydd.

Mr. Skene does not of course mean that this "should be accepted as literal history, but as a legendary account of events which had assumed that shape as early as the seventh century." This, however, is of little moment as far as the effect on subsequent tradition is concerned, as the mediæval annalists, if they had any such legendary account before them, undoubtedly accepted it as history. And, whether it be looked upon as a record of fact or a reconstruction of



tradition, Mr. Skene's theory rouses suspicion by its very completeness and finish. It seems scarcely possible that such a coherent narrative should be constructed out of the bald and obscure jottings of conflicting chroniclers, and the fuller but even more obscure poems of the Welsh bards. And Mr. Skene himself furnishes arguments against it; for, after stating, on p. 201, that the personages of the Mabinogi are in the main legendary kings of the Gwyddel, whom, in accordance with Welsh tradition, he looks upon as intruders in Gwynedd, he proceeds immediately to show that many of them (notably Arawn and Llew) were connected with the North, and that Gwydion in particular took a leading part in Modred's insurrection against Arthur. Indeed, "the exaltation Gwydion gave the Brython—the alliance with the speckled race of the Piets," is a prominent feature in Mr. Skene's interpretation of the poems. But if the Bishop of St. David's is wrong and the Welsh tradition right, if the Gwyddel were intruders driven out of Gwynedd in the course of the fifth century by Cunedda and his descendants, how come they to be allied with the Piets of South Scotland in 537? They must then have possessed, not Gwynedd alone, but the greater portion of Cumbria, and the success of Caswallawn must have been of a very slight nature. This may well be; but both suppositions run counter to the received tradition championed by Mr. Skene, and makes rather for the Bishop's views.

The mere statement of conflicting views is sufficient to show how many and interesting are the points at issue. It is not a little surprising that more light has not been sought from the Mabinogion themselves upon the nature of the Gwyddel population, whose mythic tales they are presumed to be. But the Mabinogion have had the ill fortune to be more studied as a means of depreciating or exalting the bardic poems than on account of their own merits. A thoroughly critical edition of these tales, which should take into account the immense progress made of late in the field of Celtic research,\* could not fail to clear up much that is still doubtful in Welsh literary history and folk-belief. The following short notes may perhaps direct the attention of more competent investigators to some points which seem to have escaped due notice hitherto.

\* Lady Charlotte Guest's edition, admirable beyond all praise as it is, through no fault of omission or commission on her part, but by the mere lapse of time, is in some ways out of date.

The Mabinogi of Branwen, daughter of Llyr, may be summarised as follows :—

Branwen, daughter of Llyr and sister to Bendigeid Vran, crowned king of the island of Britain, exalted from the throne of London, was wooed by Matholweh, king of Ireland. Bendigeid Vran hearkened favourably to his suit and bestowed her upon him; but his half-brother Evnissyen, son of Eurosswydd (a man who would cause strife between two brothers when they were most at peace), angry at his sister having been bestowed without his consent, mutilated the horses of Matholweh, who determined to return at once to Ireland in revenge for such an insult; but Bendigeid Vran, after sending to him two embassies, persuaded him by offer of full compensation to stay. The chief thing he offered was a cauldron the property of which was that if any man be slain one day and cast therein the morrow he would be as well as ever. Matholweh accepted the compensation and told the following tale concerning the cauldron: Hunting one day, he came to the Lake of the Cauldron, issuing whence he beheld a yellow-haired man of vast size and horrid aspect, followed by a woman and bearing a cauldron upon his shoulders. The woman, they said, was pregnant, and her son would be a warrior fully armed. He took them with him and had them with him, not grudgingly; but they harassed the land and molested nobles and people so that he was bade choose between the strangers and his dominions. He consulted his council, and had a chamber made of iron, wherein the man, the woman, and their children, having been made drunk, were confined. Every smith in Ireland was then called together, coals were heaped around the chamber, and it was blown with bellows until it was red hot. The man and the woman tarried until the iron plates were white, when they burst through them and escaped, but the children were slain. They afterwards came to Britain, where Bendigeid Vran received them and dispersed them through every part of his dominions, and they fortified the places where they were with men and arms of the best that were ever seen.

Matholweh then set sail for Ireland with Branwen, and for a year her time was spent pleasantly and in honour, and she bore a son Gwern. But in the second year the foster brother of Matholweh, dissatisfied with the compensation offered him for the wrong done in mutilating his horses, caused Branwen to be driven from his chamber

and made cook for the court; and every day the butcher came and gave her a blow on the ear. All communication with Wales was hindered that this be not known; but Branwen reared a starling and taught it to speak, and what manner of man her brother was, and she sent it to Wales with a letter tied to its wing. The starling came and alighted upon Bendigeid Vran's shoulders and ruffled its wing. He read the letter and learnt his sister's woes. He took counsel with seven seore and four countries, and resolved upon invading Ireland with a great host, leaving Britain to the charge of seven men, Caradawe his son chief among them. The swineherds of Matholweh beheld his fleet appoaching, and they took it for a wood, Bendigeid Vran for a mountain, and his eyes for lakes, upon either side a lofty ridge. They asked Branwen what this might be; she told them, and the warriors of Ireland counselled Matholweh that he should retreat over the Linon and break the bridges, for there was a loadstone in the river which kept boats from crossing it. But Bendigeid Vran laid himself across the river, and served as a bridge to his men. The Irish then yielded, and, as a token of submission and as an honour to Bendigeid Vran, built for him a house (hitherto none had been made that was large enough to hold him); but they planned at the same time a crafty device, placing brackets upon each side of the hundred pillars which held up the roof, and a leather bag upon each bracket, and an armed man in each bag. But Evnissyen came first into the house and seanned it with fierce and angry looks. "What is in this bag?" asked he. "Meal," said they; whereupon he felt about in the meal until he came to the man's head, and squeezed it until he felt his fingers meet together in the brain, and so did he unto every man hid in the bags. Thereupon the hosts entered the house and peac was struek. Sovereignty was given to Gwern, whom Bendigeid Vran called to him, and after him Nissyen his half-brother. The boy went to them cheerfully. "But wherefore comes he not to me?" asked Evnissyen. The boy went, and Evnissyen, seizing him, thrust him headlong into the blazing fire. Branwen leapt forward to save him, but her brother held her baek. A tumult arose, in which the Irish had the advantage, as they kindled a fire under the cauldron of renovation, and, easting their slain therein, brought them to life again. Seeing this, Evnissyen hid himself among the Irish dead, was thrown into the cauldron, stretched himself so that he broke it, but burst his