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VOL. II.- PART I.
IRISH LEXICOGRAPHY: AN
INTRODUCTORY LECTURE**

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ROBERT ATKINSON

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ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY.

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IRISH LEXICOGRAPHY:

An Introductory Lecture.

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IRISH LEXICOGRAPHY:

*AN INTRODUCTORY LECTURE.**

WHEN I first heard of the proposition to found a Todd Lectureship of the Celtic Languages in honour of that eminent scholar, I felt that there could have been paid to his memory no tribute that was more in harmony with his thoughts when living and working amongst us. It is not necessary for me now or here to dwell on the character of his work, or on his earnest zeal in behalf of Irish studies. To us of the younger generation his name carries with it a charm that is full of regret; the older generation, in this case rightly "*laudator temporis acti*," still dwells on the memories of the past with a sadness that is tempered by the thought that in our Academy we have at least done what lay in our power to shield an honoured name from the "*scythe and crooked knife*" of time.

I am sure that I am but speaking the sentiments of all who hear me in saying that Dr. Todd loved deeply, as he prosecuted zealously, the study of Ireland's past history. It is not needful that we should agree with all he said, or accept all his theories, to enable us to value his labours in antiquarian research: he had a true feeling of the worth of this order of studies, a keen perception of the class of facts to which prominence is to be given, and a subtle skill in arranging artistically his collected material—an extremely rare combination which, in my opinion, belongs to only one living man amongst us—the author of the "*Life of St. Columba*."

* Delivered, April 18, 1885.

Dr. Todd was not a linguist in the narrow sense of the word; he had studied, and carefully studied, the monuments of the ancient language of Ireland, but it was more particularly with a view to the elucidation of the history than of the language of the past. But he would have been the first to recognize the supreme importance, for that end, of the minutest investigation of the Irish language in its various epochs, and his swift intellect would have instantaneously grasped the bearing, and acknowledged the utility of the study of Irish in connexion with its sister languages, as well as with the wider family of which they are members. It was with this view that this Professorship was founded, and with no name could it be more appropriately connected than with the name of James Henthorn Todd.

The position, indeed, of these Celtic languages is sufficiently remarkable: the old Hindu records of the far East have been made to yield up their contents; their secret has been forced from the mystic arrow-heads that tell of the achievements of Oriental despots; and now, as one after another the members of the great Indo-Germanic family have entered the magic circle of linguistic, in which their hidden essence is wiled from them, so it has come that the westernmost of them all has fallen under the enchantment, and is waiting for the powerful voice of the magician to evoke the long silent soul.

There are phenomena in these Celtic languages that make them the delight and the despair of the linguist. The derivatives exhibit an abundant growth that speaks of a luxuriant soil, but the roots are covered deep down beneath layers of structure presenting a sturdy resistance to excavation—the stem breaks sooner than yield its hidden origin.

The known grammar of Irish is full of the strangest and most perplexing puzzles: thus, when we look at the compound preposition

liun,	linn,
leat,	libh,
leis,	leo,

we are involuntarily hurried into a different field of languages: these combinations, one fancies, might be Hebrew or Hungarian, Tibetan or Tamil! No wonder that in the early stages of the study a Vallancey or a Betham connected the ancient Irish language with the languages of the East, and gravely compared Celtic roots with Chinese or Phenician vocables. But the days of pardonable ignorance are past, though

occasionally a belated philologist emerges from the depths of a thorny linguistic forest with a proud shout of "Eureka" as he holds up to view his long-cherished whims.

Criticism is more severe now that definite progress has been made, and perhaps some of the charm has been taken away by the accumulation of positive knowledge. Still there is abundant scope for discovery; for even since the foundation of this Todd Professorship a rich treasure has been recovered from the depths of the long past: the resolute student has successfully wrestled with the stubborn sphinx. Last year I delivered a lecture in Trinity College on the nature of a law, to which at the time I gave the name of "Zimmer's Law," in honour of its discoverer. [I did not, and could not, know that there was in print at the time, though unpublished, the narrative of substantially the same investigation by M. Thurneysen, with whom, therefore, apparently, Professor Zimmer will have to share the honour of discovery.] The importance of this 'find' can hardly be overrated: the study has been renewed with fresh zeal, and I trust that a generous rivalry will animate the leaders of this study to further efforts and yet more successful issues.

In times not so long past there were in Ireland societies that vied with each other in publishing Irish texts, but they have yielded now, as it would seem, to the all-devouring exigencies or desires of the present; and the modern societies, in urging the study of Irish as a vernacular tongue, have not had the slightest result in the way of increasing the number of students willing to devote themselves to the requisite training for the further prosecution of their studies in the right direction.

It is true something may be said also in their behalf; for, it may be asked, What facilities are afforded them for taking the right course? The Academy has indeed placed in the hands of the public the excellent facsimiles, far plainer to read than the original MSS.; but how is the Irish student to get at them, and how shall he procure for himself the key to unlock the wicket-gate at the entrance? That is a side in which the Academy is bound, I think, to give some help, and therefore, during my tenure of office as the Academy's Todd Professor, I shall endeavour not to leave out of sight the wants of the class whose sympathies and assistance I would seek to enlist. The field then is open, the labour is abundant. I propose to consider in this Paper,

What are the lexicographical means at the command of the student who desires to take part in the work?

The grammar is fairly understood, but the dictionary is as yet not in existence; and each student will have for some time to make his own dictionary out of already published matter, until the time arrives for the birth of a Celtic Thesaurus.

The natural source of the modern vernacular goes only a slight way towards the goal; we must have recourse to the written memorials; we must go back to the earliest times of the existence of this family of speech, and trace its course through all the points of its orbit.

I. In speaking of the sources whence our knowledge of Irish is derived, we naturally turn to the earliest records, the inscriptions in the Old Gaulish language. These inscriptions, which unluckily are not numerous, are besides of extremely uncertain rendering. There is hardly a single word read in these monuments concerning which doubts are not legitimately felt. But, from the very nature of the case, perhaps all that these inscriptions will ever avail to us is, that the case-endings which are recognizable correspond fairly with the inferences made from other sources as to the prehistoric case-endings in Old Irish.

Quite as much difficulty awaits the student in the case of the Irish stone-records, commonly known as *ogam*-stones, which in any case are not likely to contribute important knowledge, either historical or linguistic. It is not easy to see at what point of Ireland's history these inscriptions could have been made. From the time of the introduction of Christianity, to the period of the Zeussian glosses of one thousand years ago, there must have been a considerable literary activity in Ireland, and the young, flourishing Church, was very unlikely to neglect or corrupt the language with which they sought to persuade and control the people. The very fact that these clerics studied carefully the Latin language would have made them the more desirous to preserve forms of their mother-tongue so extraordinarily like those of Latin as some of these *ogamic* inscriptions seem to possess. And besides, it is not to be left out of consideration, that even the early Zeussian codices are only fragments of a continuous activity, and that therefore they would have preserved relics of that older [assumed *ogamic*] state of the language, had any such existed, handed down from the first missionaries, who must have left Ireland at a time when

the language was still in possession of these wonderful primeval case-endings. But nothing of the kind I refer to is found in these codices. The suggestions hitherto made appear to me to demand a rate of change which the circumstances of the case do not permit, and which nothing but a phonetic epidemic of a malignant type could possibly explain. But the course of linguistic transformation in a country at rest from serious troubles, and where, too, no external shock precipitates the progress, is far too slow to permit the assumption that such forms as *gurimitirros* and *glasiconas* [Ir. *glas-chon*] could be real living genitives at any period subsequent to the introduction of Christianity. Either, therefore, these inscriptions are much older than they are generally considered to be (which I do not think possible), or, we have not got at the right solution. For my own part, I do not believe that they represent the spoken language of the time when they were inscribed, but rather that they were a secret writing based on the language of long-past centuries kept up, among the druids and brehons, combined with other cryptic methods of writing that had no reference to the antecedent state of the language.

II. Leaving then this barren field of inscriptions, we advance to the sure and fruitful sources of the MSS. in Old Irish. The earliest of these are the so-called Zeussian codices, from which was drawn the material used by our great master in the construction of his vast work, the *Grammatica Celtica*.

The progress of study on these important texts will be best seen [1853] from a chronological statement of the works published subsequently to the appearance of that work in 1853. Zeuss made use of seven MSS. of varying extent, but whose language, according to the master, was "una eademque formis suis et regulis certis circumscripta, lingua hibernica vetusta" (*Gr. Celt.*, p. xxxiv.). These were MSS. of the 8th and 9th centuries, from St. Gall, Würzburg, Milan, Carlsruhe, and Cambay, containing glosses and phrases explanatory of passages found in Latin MSS. of Priscian's grammar, or parts of the New Testament, and the Psalms.

The next step was the publication of *Goidelica*, by Whitley Stokes, [1866] in 1866, containing his transcripts of the Irish glosses found in MSS. at Turin, Milan, and Berne.

Three years after the publication of Stokes' book, Nigra gave to [1869] the world an edition of the Turin glosses, with a commentary on each word, and a considerable amount of explanatory detail.