

EUGENE O'CURRY.

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"OBSCURE Scaliger of a despised literature." So thirty years ago Matthew Arnold wrote of Eugene O'Curry, and the words are as true to-day as when written. The Titan seanchaidhe and ollave is still the obscure Scaliger. The life of a man who gave a voice to the silent forgotten tomes in Trinity College, the Royal Irish Academy, the British Museum, and the Burgundian Library, who equalled if not surpassed McFibbis and the O'Clearys in a profound and critical knowledge of the older and more obscure dialects of his country, is still little known to his countrymen.

For much of the information in the present sketch I am indebted to the late Mr. M. Lenihan, the late Rev. Mr. Kenny,(1) P.P., Castleconnell, but particularly to Professor O'Looney,(2) who so worthily wore the mantle of O'Curry in the Irish chair of the Catholic University. Professor O'Looney, with a rare and noble generosity, forwarded me seventy-five closely written pages on the labours and writings of his great predecessor.

The Currys or O'Comhraidhes trace their descent from Oilíoll Olum. Their original home was the district between Six-mile-bridge and Bunratty. Early in the eighteenth century O'Curry's grandfather settled at Lislanihan, near Kilkee, where he farmed some land for a Mr. Canney. O'Curry's father became an itinerant dealer, and in his journeyings wooed and won Catherine Madigan, of Doonaha, on the right bank of the Shannon, near Carrigaholt. Here henceforth he settled, and at Doonaha Eugene was born in the year 1796. It was a birth-place of happy influence for the future Irish scholar. Old Celtic

(1.) The late Fr. Kenny went to very great trouble to get information connected with O'Curry for me, and got much through Mr. James Clancy and others.

(2.) Professor Sullivan says that without the aid of O'Looney he could not have written introduction to "Manners and Customs of Ancient Irish."

life lingered there unchanged. The murmurs of a world elsewhere vanished, here filled the air. The fairies were an active power, the banshee crooned, the pooca rode through the darkness, roan twigs guarded the churn, May-dews made lovers faithful, the *blast* stole the rose from fair cheeks, and withered manly arms. Even Cateleen Dubh Keating, and her daughter Cateleen Oge, though upholstered with tar and feathers, could not stay its blighting influence, or restore to his friends John Fitzgerald, (3) carried away by the fairy queen Cleena.

About Doonaha, moreover the baldest spots were dignified by some tradition. Every headland and island retained echoes of saints and heroes. At the winter fireside the deeds and adventures of Cuchulainn and Curoi were related, the poems of Oisín recited, and those heart-piercing old melodies in which the tears and hopes of dead generations seem crystallized, constantly sung. Curry's father was not only a seanchaidhe, but also a very good Irish scholar, and an ardent collector of Irish manuscripts. A decaying mythology found in him a faithful guardian. He knew every niche in the fairy pantheon, and every tale that whispered from the ruins and grassy mounds of Thomond. At his death young Owen rightly believed that a large and valuable chapter of Irish history was lost. "It was not until my father's death that I fully awoke to the passion of getting those old fragments of history. I knew that he was a link between our day and a time when everything was broken, scattered and hidden ; and when I called to mind all the knowledge I knew him to possess of every ruin, every old manuscript, every old legend and tradition of Thomond, I was suddenly filled with consternation to think it was all gone for ever, and no record of it."

However, his father's vast knowledge of the history and legends of the country had one important result—it gave young Owen an undying interest in Irish lore. Even in boyhood he began to transcribe manuscripts, to visit places of interest, and to feel the "Spioraid aosmhoir tír nan gaidheal." As he grew to manhood his great delight was to visit Scattery Island. A day there he afterwards told his friends acted on his mind like a strong stimulant. Scattery has been justly called the Iona of southern Ireland. For centuries it burned a bright and blessed light on the broad bosom of the Shannon. The light was trampled out,

(3) O'Curry relates this story to Sir W. Wilde.

the holy places left desolate, but the ideal consecration remains. Hallowed memories are embedded in every mouldering stone.

A few years before his death O'Curry once again visited the island, accompanied by his relative and life-long friend, Patrick Curry,(4) of Lislanihan. He gazed for hours on the crumbling remains. What a vision must have *now* risen before his mind? The lonely places gave up their dead, the round towers revealed its mystery, the ruins renewed their youth. In the vision he saw Senan and Brendan, Kieran and Odian, mitred brow and lonely Culdee, Imar and Brian, and the great battle that stained with northmen's blood the graves of saints and made red the seething river. "Patrick," he said, "it has a grand history, and often and often as the name Inisscattery turned up in my readings I thought of old times and old dear friends."

About the age of sixteen O'Curry commenced to learn the rudiments of English, helped and encouraged by Father Meehan, of Carrigaholt. And such was his determination to succeed in acquiring a knowledge of it that he frequently walked to Kilkee to hear it spoken. Unfortunately on account of the fall in prices after Waterloo the struggle for bread and butter somewhat chilled his young enthusiasm. For a time he tilled the little farm with his brothers. He afterwards taught school for four or five years. In 1888 I visited two of his former pupils. Their recollections of him, however, were few and dim. One told me that Owen Oge was not as good a man as his father, though he could trace well, and was powerful at expounding the catechism. The other repeated a few stanzas of an Irish hymn to the Blessed Virgin taught him by Curry. I asked the latter to point out to me where Curry was born. "It stood there," he said, "pointing to a cabbage garden." "Is the school standing?" I asked. "Long ago it made way for the grass," was his answer. I asked other old men in the neighbourhood of Doonaha if they remembered O'Curry. Very few did, though all had heard of him and were very proud of him. One man told me that he often went on a currach with him and that Owen was very fond of the water.

Why the school was closed I could not learn, but in 1824 Owen followed his brothers Joe (5) and Malachy to Limerick. The new bridge

(4) I visited Patrick Curry in 1887; he gave me much information about his friend.

(5) Joe afterwards got a clerkship in the gas office, and Malachy opened a coal-yard.

across the Shannon was then building, and he and they were taken on the works as day-labourers. Subsequently during the erection of the Coonagh embankment he was for some time appointed overseer. Later on he became warder in the lunatic asylum, and there he remained for seven years. There in 1828 he married Anne Broughton, (6) of Broadford, County Clare. Four of his children were born in St. John's parish, viz. :—Margaret, John, Henry, and Eugene. Margaret was baptized on the 11th May, 1829. The father's name on the baptismal register is written "Owen Curry," while on the register of the following year it is written "Eugence Curry." What led to the change I do not know. At the asylum Curry made himself the friend and favourite of all. His untiring zeal and sympathy attracted the patients; his mechanical turn for making and repairing flutes and fiddles delighted the superintendent, Mr. Jackson; and his wonderful gift as a story-teller brightened the dull hours of his fellow warders; whilst the works of Goldsmith led himself into a new world of joy and beauty. "I am more grateful to you for the Goldsmith" were his words to Mr. Lenihan, "than if you gave me the whole County Clare." He read and re-read "The Vicar of Wakefield," "The Traveller," and "The Deserted Village." Unfortunately we can only conjecture how the natural simplicity of that gem of fiction, "The Vicar of Wakefield" touched Curry's mind. The philosophic vagabond was, indeed, a stranger to the world Curry's youth moved in, but the dupe, the swindler, and the rake, are nowhere strangers. From the two poems he often quoted lines and stanzas. The following were his favourite quotations :—

" Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay :
Princes and lords may flourish or may fade,
A breath can make them as a breath has made ;
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroy'd can never be supplied."

" And as an hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
Pants to the place from whence at first she flew,
I still had hopes, my long vexations pass'd,
Here to remain—and die at home at last."

In each quotation there is evidently a yearning for the quiet and joy of a country life.

(6) Her sister married O'Donovan.

During his brief holidays Curry used visit many parts of the County Limerick where the past still lives. He frequently visited Knockany, Ardpatrick, and Lough Gur. These places are haunted by the grey legends of a remote antiquity. The ghosts of the vanished De Danaans people the slopes of Knockany. Within the circle of the Houra or Ardpatrick hills the memory of Finn and his Feini lingers, their shadowy forms cling to hill and cliff, old people speak of them as of the friends of their youth. At Lough Gur stone-circles and cromlechs brought him face to face with the hoary remnants of forgotten mystic sites. "One day," says Mr. John Fitzgerald,(7) Curry's constant companion on these excursions, "as we stood within the Druid's circle at Lough Gur, Owen was silent for eight or ten minutes, and then he suddenly cried out—'What grand old manuscripts are here if we could only read them.' I looked at him, and in my ignorance I thought the poor fellow was getting queer. Then I said to him—'Where are the manuscripts, Owen?' 'These and these and these,' he said, pointing to the big stones." Evidently he pointed to the huge circle-stones on which time has left tracings suggestive of some dim human art. Mr. John Fitzgerald, from whom I learned this information, and whose memory was clear and active also, told me that among such scenes Curry often grew very melancholy. I asked him what was Curry's usual disposition? "He was cheerful and quiet as a child, but, if roused, dark and sullen," was the reply. He further added that Curry was a most fervent Catholic—and a brave and fearless man. During the struggle for Catholic Emancipation his excitement became intense. O'Connell's burning words thrilled him like prophecies. After the Clare election Mr. Fitzgerald noticed a marked change in him, and on their excursions he now often said—"I wish I had an opportunity of knowing more about such places." Fortunately for Irish history the opportunity came.

"Mr. George Smith," says Mrs. Atkinson, "used frequently visit the country parts of Ireland with a view of obtaining information of a kind likely to aid him in discovering and securing papers and parchment he was in search of. On one of these excursions, happening to call on the medical superintendent of the establishment in which Eugene O'Curry was employed, he said to his friend in the course of conversation, that if he could meet with an Irish scholar who would give him

(7) Fitzgerald was also a worker in the Asylum.

some information, and help him in the search he was engaged in, it would be a fortunate circumstance.' 'I have the very man you want,' replied the doctor, and Eugene Curry was introduced." Mrs. Atkinson received her information from Mrs. Anthony Curry. But Mr. Lenihan, Mr. Curry of Lislanihan, and Mr. John Fitzgerald give a different account. This account is that Mr. Petrie came to the Limerick Asylum to see a friend of his. Being shown through the asylum, he saw on a table a neatly-copied Irish manuscript. He inquired of Mr. Jackson, the superintendent, who copied it. Jackson replied that it was a very extraordinary warder named Curry.

It matters little which account is the correct one—the result was the same. The opportunity often sighed for came. In 1834 Curry was engaged on the Ordnance Survey.

(To be continued.)

