Lays Of The Red Branch

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LAY S OF THE RED BRANCH

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
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THE Literature of Ancient Ireland has for some minds—and those chiefly of high imagination—an indefinable yet powerful fascination. Nor is this surprising, for it is the product of a Race highly dowered; keenly sensitive to the mystery and magic of Nature, and responsive to the spiritual no less than the heroic in Man.

The Celts of Ireland have been from very early times a literary people. Before they were acquainted with the art of writing, the tales of love, and war, and glory, in which they delighted, were recited by their Bards, and orally preserved in verse. In historic times these were committed to writing, and still exist, in books penned more than a thousand years ago. Their Brehons, or Judges, adjudicated the laws, and recorded the pedigrees so important to a tribal people
INTRODUCTION.

We can trace the Celtic occupation of Europe from the Black Sea to the Atlantic, in pre-historic times, by the expressive names which this race gave to places. These evince their poetic feeling for the varied scenery of land and water, and are instinct with "a penetrating lofty beauty."

Their monuments still exist over most parts of the globe, so far as it was known to the Ancients. These are mainly sepulchral—vast chambers of unhewn stone, Dolmens, Cromlechs, Cairns, or Earthworks covering a central chamber. With the Hero over whose mortal remains such stupendous works have been erected, were interred his most precious possessions, weapons of flint, stone, bronze, and finely polished jade—a material only found in eastern Asia—and likewise ornaments of gold, sometimes associated with beads of amber which must have come from the shores of the Baltic; these indicate the extended range of their early trade or barter.

In the western parts of Europe the Celtic languages are still spoken. Brittany, Wales, the Isle of Man, the Highlands of Scotland, and southern and western Ireland, retain the speech of this primitive race. Nor is it surprising that in Ireland—where the Roman invader never trod—their most characteristic and numerous relics are now to be found. Here are its Pagan seats of regal authority, Tara, Emania, Aileach;
its fortress-Duns—such as Rath Keltar, near Downpatrick, or the Moat of Castletown, near Dundalk: its dry-stone fortresses of immense size and strength—such as Staigue Fort, in Kerry, Dun Ængus and Dun Conor, on the Isles of Aran, off Galway Bay. Here, too, may be inspected its sepulchres of New Grange, Dowth and Knowth near the Boyne, and Slieve-na-Caliagh near the Blackwater, with others too numerous for mention. Ireland possesses also very early Christian remains; Round Towers, sculptured Crosses, primitive Churches and Cells, Shrines, Bells, and Croziers; also Ogham-inscribed pillar stones, all deeply interesting to the Archæologist. The country is rich also in gold ornaments of exquisiteworkmanship; metal work and leather work of beautiful design; book covers, and book cases, which evince the artistic taste of the Gael—for so these early inhabitants of the island called themselves.

Above all, the Libraries of Ireland, England, and the Continent, possess innumerable Manuscripts, the work of Irish scribes, many of them exquisitely illuminated. These scribes, trained in the Monastic Schools of Ireland, went forth during the sixth and subsequent centuries as missionaries. They have left their vestiges all over Europe as scholars, civilizers and Christianizers of its then heathen population.

Notwithstanding the ravages of Time, a consider-
able number of MSS. still remain intact both abroad and at home. The late Professor O'Curry in his *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1861), has estimated that existing documents, known to him, would, if printed, fill four thousand pages as large as those in O'Donovan's edition of the *Annals of the Four Masters*; the Ossianic Tales three thousand more; and he computes that the Romances and Miscellaneous Literature would extend to upwards of five thousand pages of that large size. Yet this amount of unpublished matter is a mere fraction—a survival only of that which has been lost by the ravages of Scandinavian Vikings, Norman invaders, civil wars, and confiscations, from which the native race has repeatedly suffered during the last thousand years. A glance at the *National Manuscripts of Ireland*, published in five large volumes by the Government, with its samples of the art of the early illuminators and scribes, will convince the most sceptical that the Gael of Ireland have from primitive times been a learned and artistic race.

The sixth volume of the "New Irish Library" contains a brilliant sketch of Early Gaelic Literature up to the date of the invasions of the Northmen in the ninth century, from the pen of Dr. Douglas Hyde. His translations from the Irish afford samples of