



***MATTHEW  
ARNOLD***

***CELTIC  
LITERATURE***

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# **Celtic Literature**

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Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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# INTRODUCTION.

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THE following remarks on the study of Celtic Literature formed the substance of four lectures given by me in the chair of poetry at Oxford. They were first published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and are now reprinted from thence. Again and again, in the course of them, I have marked the very humble scope intended; which is, not to treat any special branch of scientific Celtic studies (a task for which I am quite incompetent), but to point out the many directions in which the results of those studies offer matter of general interest, and to insist on the benefit we may all derive from knowing the Celt and things Celtic more thoroughly. It was impossible, however, to avoid touching on certain points of ethnology and philology, which can be securely handled only by those who have made these sciences the object of special study. Here the mere literary critic must owe his whole safety to his tact in choosing authorities to follow, and whatever he advances must be understood as advanced with a sense of the insecurity which, after all, attaches to such a mode of proceeding, and as put forward provisionally, by way of hypothesis rather than of confident assertion.

To mark clearly to the reader both this provisional character of much which I advance, and my own sense of it, I have inserted, as a check upon some of the positions adopted in the text, notes and comments with which Lord Strangford has kindly furnished me. Lord Strangford is hardly less distinguished for knowing ethnology and

languages so scientifically than for knowing so much of them; and his interest, even from the vantage-ground of his scientific knowledge, and after making all due reserves on points of scientific detail, in my treatment,—with merely the resources and point of view of a literary critic at my command,—of such a subject as the study of Celtic Literature, is the most encouraging assurance I could have received that my attempt is not altogether a vain one.

Both Lord Strangford and others whose opinion I respect have said that I am unjust in calling Mr. Nash, the acute and learned author of *Taliesin, or the Bards and Druids of Britain*, a ‘Celt-hater.’ ‘He is a denouncer,’ says Lord Strangford in a note on this expression, ‘of Celtic extravagance, that is all; he is an anti-Philocelt, a very different thing from an anti-Celt, and quite indispensable in scientific inquiry. As Philoceltism has hitherto,—hitherto, remember,—meant nothing but uncritical acceptance and irrational admiration of the beloved object’s sayings and doings, without reference to truth one way or the other, it is surely in the interest of science to support him in the main. In tracing the workings of old Celtic leaven in poems which embody the Celtic soul of all time in a mediæval form, I do not see that you come into any necessary opposition with him, for your concern is with the spirit, his with the substance only.’ I entirely agree with almost all which Lord Strangford here urges, and indeed, so sincere is my respect for Mr. Nash’s critical discernment and learning, and so unhesitating my recognition of the usefulness, in many respects, of the work of demolition performed by him, that in originally designating him as a Celt-hater, I hastened to add, as the

reader will see by referring to the passage, [0a] words of explanation and apology for so calling him. But I thought then, and I think still, that Mr. Nash, in pursuing his work of demolition, too much puts out of sight the positive and constructive performance for which this work of demolition is to clear the ground. I thought then, and I think still, that in this Celtic controversy, as in other controversies, it is most desirable both to believe and to profess that the work of construction is the fruitful and important work, and that we are demolishing only to prepare for it. Mr. Nash's scepticism seems to me,—in the aspect in which his work, on the whole, shows it,—too absolute, too stationary, too much without a future; and this tends to make it, for the non-Celtic part of his readers, less fruitful than it otherwise would be, and for his Celtic readers, harsh and repellent. I have therefore suffered my remarks on Mr. Nash still to stand, though with a little modification; but I hope he will read them by the light of these explanations, and that he will believe my sense of esteem for his work to be a thousand times stronger than my sense of difference from it.

To lead towards solid ground, where the Celt may with legitimate satisfaction point to traces of the gifts and workings of his race, and where the Englishman may find himself induced to sympathise with that satisfaction and to feel an interest in it, is the design of all the considerations urged in the following essay. Kindly taking the will for the deed, a Welshman and an old acquaintance of mine, Mr. Hugh Owen, received my remarks with so much cordiality, that he asked me to come to the Eisteddfod last summer at Chester, and there to read a paper on some topic of Celtic

literature or antiquities. In answer to this flattering proposal of Mr. Owen's, I wrote him a letter which appeared at the time in several newspapers, and of which the following extract preserves all that is of any importance:—

'My knowledge of Welsh matters is so utterly insignificant that it would be impertinence in me, under any circumstances, to talk about those matters to an assemblage of persons, many of whom have passed their lives in studying them.

'Your gathering acquires more interest every year. Let me venture to say that you have to avoid two dangers in order to work all the good which your friends could desire. You have to avoid the danger of giving offence to practical men by retarding the spread of the English language in the principality. I believe that to preserve and honour the Welsh language and literature is quite compatible with not thwarting or delaying for a single hour the introduction, so undeniably useful, of a knowledge of English among all classes in Wales. You have to avoid, again, the danger of alienating men of science by a blind partial, and uncritical treatment of your national antiquities. Mr. Stephens's excellent book, *The Literature of the Cymry*, shows how perfectly Welshmen can avoid this danger if they will.

'When I see the enthusiasm these Eisteddfods can awaken in your whole people, and then think of the tastes, the literature, the amusements, of our own lower and middle class, I am filled with admiration for you. It is a consoling thought, and one which history allows us to entertain, that nations disinherited of political success may yet leave their mark on the world's progress, and contribute



powerfully to the civilisation of mankind. We in England have come to that point when the continued advance and greatness of our nation is threatened by one cause, and one cause above all. Far more than by the helplessness of an aristocracy whose day is fast coming to an end, far more than by the rawness of a lower class whose day is only just beginning, we are imperilled by what I call the "Philistinism" of our middle class. On the side of beauty and taste, vulgarity; on the side of morals and feeling, coarseness; on the side of mind and spirit, unintelligence,—this is Philistinism. Now, then, is the moment for the greater delicacy and spirituality of the Celtic peoples who are blended with us, if it be but wisely directed, to make itself prized and honoured. In a certain measure the children of Taliesin and Ossian have now an opportunity for renewing the famous feat of the Greeks, and conquering their conquerors. No service England can render the Celts by giving you a share in her many good qualities, can surpass that which the Celts can at this moment render England, by communicating to us some of theirs.'

Now certainly, in that letter, written to a Welshman and on the occasion of a Welsh festival, I enlarged on the merits of the Celtic spirit and of its works, rather than on their demerits. It would have been offensive and inhuman to do otherwise. When an acquaintance asks you to write his father's epitaph, you do not generally seize that opportunity for saying that his father was blind of one eye, and had an unfortunate habit of not paying his tradesmen's bills. But the weak side of Celtism and of its Celtic glorifiers, the danger against which they have to guard, is clearly

indicated in that letter; and in the remarks reprinted in this volume,—remarks which were the original cause of Mr. Owen's writing to me, and must have been fully present to his mind when he read my letter,—the shortcomings both of the Celtic race, and of the Celtic students of its literature and antiquities, are unreservedly marked, and, so far as is necessary, blamed. [Ob] It was, indeed, not my purpose to make blame the chief part of what I said; for the Celts, like other people, are to be meliorated rather by developing their gifts than by chastising their defects. The wise man, says Spinoza admirably, '*de humana impotentia non nisi parce loqui curabit, at largiter de humana virtute seupotentia.*' But so far as condemnation of Celtic failure was needful towards preparing the way for the growth of Celtic virtue, I used condemnation.

The *Times*, however, prefers a shorter and sharper method of dealing with the Celts, and in a couple of leading articles, having the Chester Eisteddfod and my letter to Mr. Hugh Owen for their text, it developed with great frankness, and in its usual forcible style, its own views for the amelioration of Wales and its people. *Cease to do evil, learn to do good*, was the upshot of its exhortations to the Welsh; by *evil*, the *Times* understanding all things Celtic, and by *good*, all things English. 'The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence, and the ignorance of English have excluded, and even now exclude the Welsh people from the civilisation of their English neighbours. An Eisteddfod is one of the most mischievous and selfish pieces of sentimentalism which could possibly be perpetrated. It is simply a foolish interference with the natural progress of

civilisation and prosperity. If it is desirable that the Welsh should talk English, it is monstrous folly to encourage them in a loving fondness for their old language. Not only the energy and power, but the intelligence and music of Europe have come mainly from Teutonic sources, and this glorification of everything Celtic, if it were not pedantry, would be sheer ignorance. The sooner all Welsh specialities disappear from the face of the earth the better.'

And I need hardly say, that I myself, as so often happens to me at the hands of my own countrymen, was cruelly judged by the *Times*, and most severely treated. What I said to Mr. Owen about the spread of the English language in Wales being quite compatible with preserving and honouring the Welsh language and literature, was tersely set down as 'arrant nonsense,' and I was characterised as 'a sentimentalist who talks nonsense about the children of Taliesin and Ossian, and whose dainty taste requires something more flimsy than the strong sense and sturdy morality of his fellow Englishmen.'

As I said before, I am unhappily inured to having these harsh interpretations put by my fellow Englishmen upon what I write, and I no longer cry out about it. And then, too, I have made a study of the Corinthian or leading article style, and know its exigencies, and that they are no more to be quarrelled with than the law of gravitation. So, for my part, when I read these asperities of the *Times*, my mind did not dwell very much on my own concern in them; but what I said to myself, as I put the newspaper down, was this: '*Behold England's difficulty in governing Ireland!*'

I pass by the dauntless assumption that the agricultural peasant whom we in England, without Eisteddfods, succeed in developing, is so much finer a product of civilisation than the Welsh peasant, retarded by these 'pieces of sentimentalism.' I will be content to suppose that our 'strong sense and sturdy morality' are as admirable and as universal as the *Times* pleases. But even supposing this, I will ask did any one ever hear of strong sense and sturdy morality being thrust down other people's throats in this fashion? Might not these divine English gifts, and the English language in which they are preached, have a better chance of making their way among the poor Celtic heathen, if the English apostle delivered his message a little more agreeably? There is nothing like love and admiration for bringing people to a likeness with what they love and admire; but the Englishman seems never to dream of employing these influences upon a race he wants to fuse with himself. He employs simply material interests for his work of fusion; and, beyond these, nothing except scorn and rebuke. Accordingly there is no vital union between him and the races he has annexed; and while France can truly boast of her 'magnificent unity,' a unity of spirit no less than of name between all the people who compose her, in England the Englishman proper is in union of spirit with no one except other Englishmen proper like himself. His Welsh and Irish fellow-citizens are hardly more amalgamated with him now than they were when Wales and Ireland were first conquered, and the true unity of even these small islands has yet to be achieved. When these papers of mine on the Celtic genius and literature first appeared in the *Cornhill*

*Magazine*, they brought me, as was natural, many communications from Welshmen and Irishmen having an interest in the subject; and one could not but be painfully struck, in reading these communications, to see how profound a feeling of aversion and severance from the English they in general manifested. Who can be surprised at it, when he observes the strain of the *Times* in the articles just quoted, and remembers that this is the characteristic strain of the Englishman in commenting on whatsoever is not himself? And then, with our boundless faith in machinery, we English expect the Welshman as a matter of course to grow attached to us, because we invite him to do business with us, and let him hold any number of public meetings and publish all the newspapers he likes! When shall we learn, that what attaches people to us is the spirit we are of, and not the machinery we employ?

Last year there was a project of holding a Breton Eisteddfod at Quimper in Brittany, and the French Home Secretary, whether wishing to protect the magnificent unity of France from inroads of Bretonism, or fearing lest the design should be used in furtherance of Legitimist intrigues, or from whatever motive, issued an order which prohibited the meeting. If Mr. Walpole had issued an order prohibiting the Chester Eisteddfod, all the Englishmen from Cornwall to John o' Groat's House would have rushed to the rescue; and our strong sense and sturdy morality would never have stopped gnashing their teeth and rending their garments till the prohibition was rescinded. What a pity our strong sense and sturdy morality fail to perceive that words like those of the *Times* create a far keener sense of estrangement and

dislike than acts like those of the French Minister! Acts like those of the French Minister are attributed to reasons of State, and the Government is held blameable for them, not the French people. Articles like those of the *Times* are attributed to the want of sympathy and of sweetness of disposition in the English nature, and the whole English people gets the blame of them. And deservedly; for from some such ground of want of sympathy and sweetness in the English nature, do articles like those of the *Times* come, and to some such ground do they make appeal. The sympathetic and social virtues of the French nature, on the other hand, actually repair the breaches made by oppressive deeds of the Government, and create, among populations joined with France as the Welsh and Irish are joined with England, a sense of liking and attachment towards the French people. The French Government may discourage the German language in Alsace and prohibit Eisteddfods in Brittany; but the *Journal des Débats* never treats German music and poetry as mischievous lumber, nor tells the Bretons that the sooner all Breton specialities disappear from the face of the earth the better. Accordingly, the Bretons and Alsations have come to feel themselves a part of France, and to feel pride in bearing the French name; while the Welsh and Irish obstinately refuse to amalgamate with us, and will not admire the Englishman as he admires himself, however much the *Times* may scold them and rate them, and assure them there is nobody on earth so admirable.

And at what a moment does it assure them of this, good heavens! At a moment when the ice is breaking up in