



THE LAYS OF AMERGIN.

"According to the historical legend, Ireland was invaded from the south, in the year of the world 3500, by Milesius and his followers. They found the isle in the possession of a fair and highly gifted race, the Dé Dananns.

It is related that when the Milesians landed, a conference took place with the kings of the island: these offered, if the Milesians withdrew for three days, they would decide upon one of three courses, namely: retire, submit, or fight. Amergin (brother to Miled, or Milesius), a bard, druid, and judge, was chosen as arbiter. He decided that the island belonged of right to the Dé Dananns, and that his kindred should withdraw over nine green waves. If then they could land again and conquer, the island should belong to them by the right of battle.

Accepting this judgment they set out from Inver-scene (Kenmare Bay), over nine green waves, to sea. The Druids and poets of Erinn by their incantations raised so violent a storm that the vessels were driven westward and separated. "This is a Druidic wind," said Donn, son of Milesius. "It is,"

replied Amergin, "if it does not blow above the masthead." Then Aranan, Donn's youngest brother and helmsman, went aloft and discovered that the upper air was calm. "It was treacherous of our soothsayers," exclaimed Donn, "not to have prevented this Druidic wind." "There was no treason," replied Amergin. Thereupon Amergin stood up and chanted his "Incantation."

This strange poem is unquestionably very ancient, and pre-Christian, but of course its exact date is uncertain. It is composed in "Conaclon," the end word of one line rimes to the first word of the line following, and indeed the rime is sometimes secured by repeating the word. Alliteration of two initials is also sought and usually obtained. These characters can be seen in the following specimen:

*Ailim iath n ereann,
Ermac muir motach,
Motach sliab sreatach
Sreatach coil ciotach.*

These characters are of exceeding interest, since they prove that the rime-sense was well developed in the very ancient Irish. Amergin's "Song of Triumph," composed when he landed, differs much in metre, being irregular, and appears to dispense with rime, so that it might pass as the first example of blank verse. Even alliteration seems rather avoided than desired in the shorter lines, though permitted in the longer. It seems to me, however, that Amergin may have intended a mode of rime altogether overlooked, which I would call "entrance-rime,"—each of the shorter lines begins with the verb "am" (I am), and the repetition of this accented word sufficed.

This triumph song has been called the "Mystery of Amergin," in the "Lyra Celtica" of Dr. and Mrs. Sharp; some, with Dr. D'Arbois Jubainville and my friend Dr. Douglas Hyde, see a pantheistic spirit in it. That is possible, of course; still I think it open to another interpretation. This archaic poem is glossed by old Irish writers in the Books of Leacan and Ballymote, and by the O'Clerys. Professor Connellan gives these glosses with his translation. They have it that Amergin declares he is the wind at sea, in subtle action; the billow, in overwhelming power; the roar of ocean, in terrific approach; a bird of prey on a rock, in cunning or keen vigilance; a sun ray, for clearness; a salmon in a river (known to it) for swiftness; and a lake on a plain for extent, or magic greatness. This view is supported by the fact that, in later but still ancient bardic verses, enigmatic metaphors were much affected, and needed explanation by the author. Amergin might have written "I am the sun after leaving the stars," and left us in doubt; but when Dalian so describes a king, the bard himself explains: "'Thou sun after leaving its stars,' that is when the sun has left its stars, this is the time its figure is best, and not better is its countenance than thine." My contention is conclusively proved by the existence of another poem, identical in form and structure, in which Cuchulainn (in the "Battle of Ros-na-ree") makes his vaunting song, like Amergin. He uses similar expressions, as "I am a fire avenging floods," "I am

a fierce flaming lion," with others which are unmistakably personal vaunts—
not pantheistic, but pan-egoistic."

THE INCANTATION.¹

AMERGIN.

FAIN we ask Erinn,
Faring o'er ocean's
Motions to mountains,
Fountains and bowers,
Showers, rills rushing,
Gushing waves welling,
Swelling streams calling,
Falling foam-thunder,
Under lakes filling:
Willing—(abiding
Riding rounds, holding
Olden fairs meetly—
Fleet to lift loyal
Royal king's towers,²
Bowers for crowning;
Frowning foes over—
Rover Mil's warlike
Starlike sons therein.
Erinn shall longer,
Stronger, show honour,
On our Milesians.—
Wishing, in trouble,
Noble isle's wooing,
Suing, we stay here;—
Pray here to sail in,
Wailing maids royal!
Loyal chief-leaders,
Pleaders, blend pray'r in.
So we seek Erinn.

1. When the Milesians, on the second occasion, had approached the shores of Erinn, they were driven back

by a strange magic wind. Amergin, their poet-druid and judge then made this incantation.

2. At Tara.

FIRST TRIUMPH-SONG.¹

AMERGIN.

I, THE Wind at Sea,
I, the rolling Billow,
I, the roar of Ocean,
I, the seven Cohorts,
I, the Ox upholding,
I, the rock-borne Osprey,
I, the flash of Sunlight,
I, the Ray in Mazes,
I, the rushing Wild Boar,
I, the river-Salmon,
I, the Lake o'er plains,
I, the Strength of Song.
I, the Spear for smiting Foemen,
I, the God for forming Fortune!
Whither wend by glen or mountain?
Whither tend beneath the Sunset?
Whither wander seeking safety?
Who can lead to falling waters?
Who can tell the white Moon's ages?
Who can draw the deep sea fishes?
Who can show the fire-top headlands?
I, the poet, prophet, pray'rful,
Weapons wield for warriors' slaying:
Tell of triumph, laud forthcoming
Future fame in soaring story!

1. When Amergin of the Fair Knee first placed his right foot on the land of Erin he composed this song in Rosg metre.

Text Source:

Sigerson, George. Bards of the Gael and Gall: Examples of the Poetic Literature of Erin. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897. 93-5; 377-380.

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