Celtic Legends

1. *The Coming of Cuculain. By Standish O'Grady. London: Methuen & Co.* 2 *More Celtic Fairy Tales. Edited by Joseph Jacobs. G. P. Putnam's Sons.*

THE CELTIC SOURCES of the literature of western Europe have been the least thoroughly explored, though they promise the most interesting results. One Celtic cycle, the Welsh-Armorican lays of Arthur and the Holy Grail, has furnished material to every important modern literature except, possibly, the Russian. But of the original tales of this cycle only a few fragments remain, and the best-known version, Malory's "Morte d'Arthur," is mainly a dry compendium of rather late French variants. The existence of a Gaelic cycle was made generally known by Macpherson's blundering attempts at reconstruction. There is no longer any question that he must have obtained much of his material from Highland traditions, but his bombastic manner is wholly his own. Many manuscript versions, mostly Irish, have since been published. Some are not any earlier than the fifteenth century, but references to the principal stories in older manuscripts prove their existence in substantially the same shape as early as the eleventh century, and internal evidence shows that, as regards the main incidents at least, they have come down from a remote pre-Christian antiquity. They have suffered very little from Christian or other "contamination," and are one of the best sources for the study of ancient Aryan civilization. Their literary merits are often very considerable. They are far more polished than the corresponding Teutonic lays and sagas, are more often dramatic, exhibit a higher range of feelings, and contain passages of poetic description hardly to be matched even in Tennyson or Keats. Most of the translations so far made follow the letter rather than the spirit, being intended for the use of students. The late Dr. Joyce put into verse the remarkable tale of "Deirdrè," and the children of Usnach, but no one has renewed Macpherson's attempt to gather the various lays into consistent epics.

"The Coming of Cuculain," by Mr. Standish O'Grady (1), may, however, be said to be an effort in this direction. It is in prose, but in a style which is seldom far removed from poetry. He has chosen what Gaelic scholars consider the oldest of the heroic cycles, that dealing with the exploits of the Red Branch Knights of Ulster, and has brought together in the present volume the tales that relate to the boyhood of the most celebrated of them all, the hero Cuculain. The Red Branch appears to have been originally an institution like King Arthur's Round Table, but it persisted through many generations. The young sons of the affiliated princes were sent at an early age to be trained in the laws and exercises of the order. But the mother of Satanta, or Cuculain, detained him at home beyond the appointed time, and he was obliged to run away on foot to the Ulster capital, Emain Macha, and to camp out the first night on the intervening mountains. That night the chief druid at Emain Macha had a vision of the disruption of the order, and announced that it would be saved from total destruction by a child who was even then approaching the city. The cause of the revolt, which soon after broke out, was the abduction of Deirdrè by the sons of Usnach. About one-third of the order revolted in support of the latter and attempted to prevent their punishment, but were driven into Connaught, where they took service with Maev, the Queen Mab of English fairy literature. In the ensuing war Cuculain rose to be considered "the battle-prop of the valor and the torch of the chivalry of the Ultonians." Mr. O'Grady, in this volume, tells of his conferences with the sun-god Lu, or Lug (the god of *Lug dunum—i e.*, London), of his adventure with the great dog of Culain, the "high-smith of all Ulster," of his taming the black and gray horses of the goddess of war, of his knighting and his first foray into the enemies' territory. It is to be hoped that this book may meet with such a reception as will induce Mr. O'Grady to complete the story. He believes his hero to be a historical character. Others believe him to be a myth. Certain elements of the story plainly belong to the supernatural, but it is probably a reliable picture of ancient Celtic manners, nevertheless. Whether a true tale has been embellished by details from some more ancient myth of springtime, or—the myth being the nucleus—it has, instead, become charged with human interest, cannot now be determined.

Mr. Jacobs, in his interesting new collection of Celtic fairy-tales (2), gives a version of "The Children of Lir," a mythic tale of some importance. Lir was the sea-god of the Gael. His children were changed into swans by their stepmother. Yet a son, Mananan, appears to have succeeded his father in the godship and to have made his home chiefly in the Isle of Man, as may be seen in Mr. Hall Caine's "Manxman."

Many of these little-known tales, in fact, seem to have made their way into England, and to have tinctured perceptibly the stream of English literature. Mr. Jacobs's book is written for children. It is made up from Welsh and Scotch as well as Irish sources, and many of his tales are of quite recent origin. "The Coming of Cuculain" will be read with equal pleasure by young and old; but its illustrations are wholly unworthy of the text, while the drawings that Mr. Batten has supplied to "More Celtic Fairy Tales" are excellent, especially the humorous ones.