

The Celt

Mary Kenealy

“MEN loving Ireland have long felt the want of a cheap, periodic home literature, a literature whose price will not embarrass its circulation and whose aim should be to have its pages suited to all classes and its contents redolent of nationality.” These were the views of the Kilkenny Patriot, Robert Cane, expressed in the Journal, “The Celt” of which the first number appeared on 1st August, 1857.

Dr. Cane who lived in No. 8 William Street was a medical practitioner with an extensive practice which suffered to a certain extent from his political activities. In 1853 he had founded the Celtic Union, an organisation devoted to promoting the unity of Ireland. The Celt was the organ of this body and Dr. Cane was both founder and editor. Published weekly it consisted of 16 pages 10” x 6” and sold for one penny. It contained articles of general interest, Irish and Continental interspersed with patriotic verse.

The journal was well received and in the first month trebled its circulation but alas the following year Dr. Cane died and the publication lapsed for a time. It was revived in 1859 by Cane’s friend and colleague, John Thomas Campion, another Kilkenny doctor with considerable literary experience having contributed poems and articles to “The Nation,” “The Irish Felon,” “Duffy’s Fireside Magazine,” etc.

His aim he declared was to make “The Celt” — “National, Catholic, Interesting and Progressive.”

The following is an extract from the first number of “The Celt”:

ANECDOTES OF JOHN BANIM

“I remember well the first public occasion I ever saw John Banim. I was sitting in the Kilkenny citizens’ club room, I was disturbed by a bustling movement, a heavy step was audible advancing up the stairs, it was John Banim’s servant man carrying him from his carriage and bearing him up to the green baize-covered sofa allotted to him in the best corner of the room. Members pulled their chairs aside, the fire was raked up into a better blaze, and men pressed officiously to bid him welcome. He was in

the servant's arms, half reclining, half sitting up, his arms round the man's neck so that his fingers were locked upon his shoulders, his legs hung down helplessly; and his emaciated frame told the sad story of paralytic wasting; his long and thin visage was made sadder still by the deep searing of small pock and by well defined traces of anxious and painful thoughts, but his eyes were most expressive, pale blue or gray, but large, prominent, broadly open, starting out of their sockets, they were full of meaning and spoke to you before his lips moved. There was an energy of manner, a fiery gesticulation about him when he warmed with his subject or became excited in narrating some anecdote or reciting some piece of his own poetry, which he did in a most impassioned manner, and so as to impress himself with great power upon his auditory. His voice was deep and solemn, and his emphasis peculiarly impressive. Upon this occasion I heard him recite with deep pathos 'Sogarth Aroon,' and in a moment after heard him thunder out these lines written in reply to Wellington's threat of re-conquering Ireland, 'The Brigand, let him come, let him come,' which he delivered with great power and with an impressive fervour that shook his attenuated frame like so many electric shocks. At its conclusion, when the plaudits of a crowded room answered him, his pale face became fiery red and his eyes actually sparkled.

"It was upon that occasion that he narrated two anecdotes of his sojourn in France, which he visited just after the Revelation of 1830, and which event appeared to have awaked all his sympathies and aroused the full enthusiasm of his exquisitely poetic nature.

"General Lafayette, then an old man, had waited upon him—the hero who had figured in three revolutions. Banim complimented him on that national guard in which he took such pride, and spoke of it as a grand new thought or suggestion to do away with standing armies and make every citizen a soldier. 'Sir,' said Lafayette, 'you as an Irishman may refer to it with pride. We had the idea from you; the first national guard the world ever saw was the Irish Volunteers.' 'Oh,' exclaimed Banim when relating the anecdote to his fellow townsmen, 'it was the highest compliment ever paid to me as an Irishman.' Then he told amongst other anecdotes of the three days' revolution, how an old Parisian friend of his had suspended in his parlour the musket he carried on that occasion, and with it a solitary cartridge remaining of the powder he had used at the barricades. 'I asked' said Banim, 'to give me of that

powder, thirty-two grains.' 'Thirty-two grains,' said the Frenchman, 'for what?' 'To sow one grain in every county in Ireland, replied Banim. 'My God! I would,' said the Frenchman, 'if I thought they would grow!'"

D.T.

A comprehensive account of the life of Dr. Robert Cane by Margaret Phelan will appear in the 1978 issue of the Old Kilkenny Review.



Book Review

Images of Stone - Helen Hickey

(Blackstaff Press £1.95)

This is an attractively produced book which will serve the dual purpose of a guide to those who wish to visit this rather remote area and a catalogue of many little known works for those who wish to study the sculptures for their own sake. Mrs. Hickey has managed well that difficult task, a good balance between scholarship and readability. The good photographs by Bill Porter add to the layman's ease in following the script and bring to life many of the quaint carvings which it would be difficult to visualise from verbal descriptions alone.

By taking an area like the Erne valley which until relatively modern times was little influenced by outside cultures Mrs. Hickey has gone a long way to answering the question: How would Irish art have developed had it avoided the English influences which followed in the wake of the Norman invasion?

Too much scholarship has been expended on the great art of the country which bears comparison with any in Europe but also lacks a national identity. By taking her survey through from the earliest Celtic carvings to the folk art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Mrs. Hickey has brought a breath of fresh air to a field which needed it.

This is a book which deserves to be read by everyone who is in anyway interested in our national heritage.

S.A.F.