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AN OLD IRISH PRAYER FOR
LONG LIFE

BY

KUNO MEYER

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL NOTE, *O. Elton*. ADDRESS FROM COLLEAGUES, FORMER STUDENTS AND FRIENDS. SIGNED ADDRESS FROM CLASSES.

ACADEMIC

JOHN MACDONALD MACKAY, BUILDER, *Sir Walter Raleigh*. ARCHITECTURE AS AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT, *C. H. Reilly*. THE IDEALS OF CIVIC DESIGN, *S. D. Adsbread*. CHEMICAL RESEARCH IN A MODERN ENGLISH UNIVERSITY, *F. G. Donnan*. FERMENTATION, *J. S. Macdonald*. MATHEMATICS AS AN ARTS SUBJECT, *W. H. Young*. IDEALS OF A SCHOOL FOR COMMERCE, *John Montgomery*. MACKAY AND THE SCHOOL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES, *Bernard Pares*. THE STUDY OF GERMAN IN AN ENGLISH UNIVERSITY, *Karl Holl*. THE EVOLUTION OF A WESTERN CANADIAN UNIVERSITY, *Ralph Flenley*. BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY AND MACKAY, *E. A. Sonnenschein*. A NOCTURNE, *Norman Wyld*.

HISTORICAL, ARCHAEOLOGICAL, LEGAL

THE PROGRESS OF HITTITE STUDIES, *John Garstang*. HERODOTUS THE TRAGEDIAN, *J. L. Myres*. HERODOTUS AND THE BATTLE OF MARATHON, *C. F. Lehmann-Haupt*. THE RUSSIANS AND MONGOLIA, *E. H. Parker*. NOTES ON DOMAINAL ADMINISTRATION, *G. W. Coopland*. ST. JOHN OF BRIDLINGTON, *J. A. Twemlow*. PEPYS' ABSTRACT OF ANTHONY'S ACCOUNT OF HENRY VIII'S NAVY, *F. P. Barnard*. LIVERPOOL AND IRISH POLITICS IN THE XVITH CENTURY, *C. F. Routledge*. UN PROCÈS DE SORCIÈRE À TEMPLEUVE EN PEVÈLE AU XVII^E SIÈCLE, *Charles Bonnier*. GERMAN PAMPHLETS IN PROSE AND VERSE ON THE TRIAL AND DEATH OF CHARLES I, *Robert Priebisch*. SOCIAL STRUCTURE, *Chancellor H. C. Dowdall*. A LAWYER AMONG THE PROPHETS, *His Honour Judge Thomas*.



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AN OLD IRISH PRAYER FOR LONG LIFE

WE know so little of the beliefs and practices of Irish paganism that the following prayer or invocation of undoubtedly pagan origin, here fully edited and translated for the first time,¹ will come as a welcome addition to our knowledge. Though published more than twenty years ago by Rudolf Thurneysen in 'Irische Texte' III, p. 53, from the only two manuscripts in which it has come down to us,² it has never received that attention to which its age and contents entitle it.

It is cited in an old-Irish metrical treatise, the oldest portion of which dates from the eighth century,³ as one of four examples of the kind of composition called *cētnad*. This is a compound of *cēt*, 'first' and *nath*, n. 'rhythm' (Germ. 'Spruch'), and may be freely rendered with Thurneysen⁴ as 'initiative' or 'inaugural song.' We first have *cētnad cuirmhige* 'inaugural song of an ale-house'; next *cētnad tige nūi* 'inaugural song of a new house'; then *cētnad n-imrime*, 'song on setting out on horseback'⁵; and lastly our *cētnad n-āisse* 'prophylactic song of age' or 'of long life.' While the other poems, so far as they can be understood,⁶ are wholly Christian,⁷ our prayer goes back to pagan times. For though it presents a curious mixture of pagan and Christian conceptions, the latter are evidently superadded. They all occur at the end of the stanzas.⁸ At the same time they form, as the metrical structure shows,

1. In an essay on 'Learning in Ireland in the Fifth Century' (Dublin, 1913) I have printed and translated the first and last stanzas.
2. These are the Bodleian MS. Laud 610 and the Book of Ballymote, p. 304a, both dating from the fifteenth century.
3. See Thurneysen, 'Zu irischen Handschriften' (Berlin, 1912), p. 86.
4. See Ir. Texte, III, p. 117.
5. For a Middle-Ir. prayer or blessing on setting out on a journey see a poem in Arch. III, p. 211, translated in *Ériu*, VI, p. 112.
6. The *cētnad tige nūi* is too short to allow any inference either way.
7. Thus the *cētnad cuirmhige* calls upon *mac Maire mac Dē*, 'the Son of Mary, the Son of God,' and contains such expressions as *atomsuide serc Dē*, 'may the love of God keep me,' or *adneot nem*, 'I look forward to Heaven'; while the *cētnad n-imrime* begins: *Donfē for Fēda*, which seems to mean 'May your Lord lead us,' unless we have here a compound *forfēda* 'overlord.' Compare the opening of Colman's hymn *Sēn Dē donfē*, *Tbes. Pal.*, II, p. 299.
8. There is nothing distinctly Christian in the first stanza. But *Rī inna n-uile*, 'King of the Universe,' at the end of the second, evidently refers to the Christian God. Cf. *ardrī āasal inna n-uile*, Anecd., I, p. 50; *co Rīg inna n-uile n-ard*, CZ., VI, 258, 1. The third stanza ends with an invocation of the Holy Spirit, to which the ninth verse of the third psalm is added with the insertion of *Christi est salus*.

an integral part of the whole composition, so that we are driven to the conclusion that an ancient pagan prayer has been remodelled by a Christian poet. Now I believe we can fix upon the very person and thereby get an approximate date for the composition.

In both MSS. the poem is introduced by the following sentence: *Nuall fer fia forsét sensum fonicairt (foni cart B) immaig næsa (amaigh neasa B)*, which I would emend and translate as follows: *Nūall Fir fio for sēt sēnsu[m] fom chūairi¹ i mmaig āesa (or i mmag n-āesa)* 'The cry² of Fer fio upon the road, may it bless me³ on my journey⁴ in (or 'into') the Plain of Age.' Here *Nūall Fir fio* is the special title of our poem.

The proper name *Fer fio*⁵ is very rare. Indeed I know of only one other instance. In the 'Annals of Ulster' it occurs as that of an abbot of Conry in Westmeath, who died A.D. 762.⁶ I do not consider it altogether incredible that an ecclesiastic should have recast an ancient and probably popular pagan prayer by adding Christian tags to it. Those familiar with early Irish Christianity know that it often exhibits a strange admixture of pagan elements, and that the early Church treated ancient popular superstitions with a very lenient hand. Nor is there anything in the language of the poem that would speak against its having been composed in the first half of the eighth century.⁷ I would therefore suggest that *Fer fio* of Conry was the author of the revised version.

The prayer is in the main a request for a long life,⁸ good fortune and lasting fame. Life is regarded as a journey in the 'Plain of Age,' a notion which is also found in the 'Colloquy of the Two Sages' (*Rev. Celt.*, XXVI, p. 24). There Ferchertne asks the youthful Nēde: '*Cid fodlaimther-su?*' 'What is it

1. *fom chūairt* is miswritten in both MSS. exactly in the same way as B miswrites the same words *fomicairt* (p. 54, l. 2). The scribes evidently thought that they had to do with a form of the verb *focaird*.
2. *nuall* denotes a wailing or imploring cry.
3. *sēnsu[m]* might mean 'it has blessed me.' But we have here more likely a formation like *snādsiuimn*, 'may he save us,' in Colman's hymn, *Thes.*, II, p. 300, 9; 302, 7; or *sōersuimn*, *ib.*, p. 303, 1.
4. Literally, 'round, circuit.'
5. Though both MSS. read *fer fia* it is not likely that we have to do with a compound *Fer-fia*. I have therefore altered into *Fir fio*.
6. *Ferfio mac Fabri sapiens*, abas Comraire Mide obiit, AU. 761.
7. The *cētnad n-imrime* is even older. As the form *fēda* preserved by one MS. for later *fīada* shows, it belongs to the seventh century.
8. In the first stanza *trī āes*, 'three life-times,' are asked for, but in the third this is increased, if I translate rightly, to 'a hundred times a hundred years.'

thou undertakest?'' and Nēde answers: ' *i mMag n-Aesa,*' ' (a journey) into the Plain of Age,' *i Slīab n-ōited, i Fidach² n-āise,* 'into the Mountain of Youth, into the Wood of Old Age.' Then the dangers and snares which beset the traveller on his journey are enumerated: *messe,*³ i.e., 'phantoms' or 'spectres,' hardly correctly explained by the gloss *i. banchola,* 'women's lusts'; dangerous or ill-omened animals, thieves, women-folk, and armed bands. The following divinities or supernatural beings are invoked, of whom unfortunately nothing further is known: the seven⁴ daughters of the sea,⁵ who in Irish myth seem to play the part of the *Moīpai*, *Parcæ* or *Norns* in spinning the thread of life for men at their birth; the deathless 'Silver-champion,' whom one is tempted to regard as the moon-god; and *Senach,*⁶ whose name is a short form of some compound beginning with *sen-* 'old,' so that we may render 'the Ancient one.' With these pagan conceptions the Christian God and the Holy Spirit are oddly coupled.

As regards the metrical structure of the prayer, it belongs to the very oldest kind of Irish poetical composition just emerging from rhythmical prose. Indeed we can hardly discern a strict metrical form, though many of the elements—such as rhythmical cadences, a definite number of syllables in the line, alliteration, rhyme—out of which the various forms of the stricter rhythmical poetry developed, are already there as it were in embryo. The principles on which each stanza is constructed do not differ from those of the rhetorical style of the later Latin prose: parallelism and antithesis, an artificial order of words, rhythmical cadences at the end of the periods, among which dactylic rhythms early became the favourite, or homoioteleuta leading to rhyme.⁷

The whole composition falls into three sections or stanzas,

1. Or, perhaps, 'Whither doest thou venture?'
2. Stokes reads *fīadach*, 'hunting'; but the best MSS. have *fīdach*. Cf. for *fīrad n-ūis*, ib., § 11.
3. Cf. *meise .i. siabra*, Corm., § 954; *meise .i. urtroighe*, ib., § 949 = *i. aurdraige*, H. 3, 18, 72^c, and Egerton 1782.
4. The number seven recurs in the 'seven waves of good fortune,' in the epithet *secht-amserach*, literally 'seven-timed,' bestowed upon *Senach*, in the 'seven candles' (of life), and in *sechtmainech*, an adjective derived from *sechtmaine*, 'week,' a loan from Latin *septimana*. L. reads *sechtmonach*; cf. *sechtmanach*, Arm., 170⁶².
5. Perhaps *triatb* is to be taken as a personification of the sea, like *Tp̄t̄rov* and Sanskrit *Tritas*, to which it corresponds etymologically.
6. The name is common in all Celtic languages. It is the Gaulish *Senācus* (see Holder for examples), Welsh *Hynog*. In Irish legend it occurs as the name of a fairy king (*Senach Siaborthe*), whom *Cuchulinn* slays at the request of another fairy, *Labraid*. See 'Serglige Conculaind,' §§ 13 and 36.
7. See on the whole subject of early Irish rhythmical prose my lecture on 'Learning in Ireland,' p. 13 ff.

each beginning with the word *admuiniur*, 'I invoke.'¹ In each stanza two longer lines² are followed by a number of shorter ones, all constructed on the principle of parallelism or antithesis,³ with homoioteleuta.⁴ Then follow two differently constructed lines, and lastly two lines containing endrhyme—*cel : sen ; uile : buiden* (a rhyme which would not have been tolerated at a later period); *lessa : form-sa*. Alliteration is scattered here and there throughout the poem,⁵ but we do not find that strict principle of word to word alliteration which characterises certain poems of the earliest period and continues into the ninth century.⁶ In printing the Irish text I have so arranged the lines as to show their parallel structure at a glance.

- I. Admuiniur⁷ secht n-ingena trethan⁸
 dolbte⁹ snáthi macc n-æsmar.
 Trī bās ūaim¹⁰ rohucaiter !
 trī æs dam dorataiter¹¹ !
 secht tonna tacid dam dorodalter¹² !
 Nīmchoillet messe¹³ fom chūairt¹⁴
 i llurig lasriēn¹⁵ cen lēniud !
 Nī nascthar¹⁶ mo chlū ar chel !
 domthī æs¹⁷ ! nīmthī bās corba¹⁸ sen.

- In Thes. II, p. 250, the editors translate *admuiniur epscop nIbar* by 'I honour bishop Ibar,' but on p. 322 *admuinemar nōebPātraicc* by 'we invoke holy Patrick,' and on p. 349 *admunemar mo Brīgi*, 'we appeal to my Brigit.' 'Invoke' is undoubtedly the correct rendering. Cf. also *cāmbreo* (sic leg.) *atmuinemar*, Arch. III, p. 219; *cdmuindfnd mac nEitbneud*, LL 122^b 49. In all these cases the sentence introduced by the verb is immediately followed by a string of optative clauses.
- In the second stanza these rhyme (*bebae : febae*). We find the same rhyme in Fiacc's hymn, Thes. II, p. 314.
- As e.g. in I, 3 and 4.
- In I, we have three lines with dactylic endings; in the second, six with monosyllabic endrhyme; in the third, again five (or six, if we include *cētblādnach*) with dactylic endings.
- The alliterations are: *ūaim : ucaiter ; tonna : tacid ; lūrig : lasriēn : lēniud ; cblū : cbel ; ba : beba ; fndruni : feba ; dorb : dūrglass ; dōel : dīcbuinn ; aurbur : amsire ; Senach : sechtamserach ; bruinnib : būais ; dūn : dītbogail ; ail : anscuicbte ; lia : lūagmar ; sēn : sechtmainech ; cētach : cētblādnach : cēt*.
- See on this kind of alliteration my 'Älteste irische Dichtung,' I, p. 5. I forgot to mention there that the technical term for it is *gobul*, 'fork.' See *Rev. Celt.*, XX, p. 146, 4.
- Here and in the second stanza L has *admuinmur*. But the singular is used throughout in *ūaim*, *dam*, *mo*, etc. Cf. *admuiniur* in the first spell in the Stowe Missal, Thes. II, 250. On the other hand Ninīne's prayer (Thes. II, 322) begins with *admuinemar*.
- trebain* codd. I have restored the old gen. of *triath*.
- dolbtai*s codd. I restore the old relative form of the present tense. *dolbtai*s probably arose from the spelling *dolbtai*, the *s* being due to the initial of *snáthi*.
- buann* L *uaim* B.
- lasren* B.
- sic B *doraitaite*r L.
- nascair* L *nascar* B.
- doroidalter* L *dorodailite*r B.
- dommaes* L.
- .i. na banchola* add. codd.
- corbam* B.
- fom cairt* B.

II. Admuiniur m'argetnia¹ nad ba nad beba :
 amser dam doridnastar² findruni feba !
 Rohorthar mo richt,
 rosōerthar mo recht,
 romōrthar³ mo nert,
 nīb⁴ ellam mo⁵ lecht,
 nīmthī bās for fecht,
 rofirthar mo thecht !
 Nímragba nathir⁶ díchonn⁷
 nā dorb dūrglass⁸ nā dōel⁹ dīchuinn¹⁰
 Nīmillethar¹¹ teol¹² nā cuire¹³ ban nā cuire¹³ buiden !
 domthī¹⁴ aurchur n-amsire¹⁵ ō Rīg¹⁶ inna¹⁷ n-uile.

III. Admuiniur Senach sechtamserach
 conaltar¹⁸ mnā sīde for bruinnib būais.¹⁹
 Nī bāiter²⁰ mo sechtchaindel !
 Am dūn dīthogail,
 am ail anscuichthe,²¹
 am lia lūagmar,
 am sēn sechtmainech.²²
 Ropo²³ chētach cētblīadnach,
 cech cēt diib²⁴ ar ūair²⁵ !
 Cotagaur²⁶ cucum²⁷ mo lessa :²⁸
 robē rath in spiurto²⁹ nōib³⁰ form-sa³¹ !
 Domini est salus, ter,³² Christi est salus, ter.³³
 Super populum tuum, Domine, benedictio tua.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>margetnia</i> codd. | 18. <i>conaltar</i> L. |
| 2. <i>dorindastar</i> L. <i>dorinnastar</i> B. | 19. <i>buaes</i> L. <i>bues</i> B. |
| 3. <i>rommortbar</i> L. | 20. <i>atar</i> L. <i>baiter</i> B. |
| 4. <i>nirb</i> B. | 21. <i>anscuigthe</i> L. <i>anscuichtbi</i> B. |
| 5. <i>do</i> B. | 22. <i>sechtmonach</i> L. |
| 6. <i>naitber</i> L. | 23. <i>robam</i> B. |
| 7. <i>dichuind</i> L. | 24. <i>dib</i> L. om. B. |
| 8. <i>nimthi duirb durgblas</i> B. <i>dichur</i> L. | 25. <i>iarnuair</i> B. |
| 9. <i>dōer</i> codd. | 26. <i>congair</i> L. |
| 10. <i>dichunn</i> B. | 27. <i>cbucum</i> L. |
| 11. <i>nimelletha</i> L. <i>nimillitbar</i> B. | 28. <i>amalesa</i> B. |
| 12. <i>theoil naitardeol</i> B. | 29. <i>inipirta</i> L. <i>inspū.</i> B. |
| 13. <i>caire</i> codd. | 30. <i>noim</i> L. <i>naem</i> B. |
| 14. <i>dommí</i> L. | 31. <i>forum</i> B. |
| 15. <i>ansere</i> L. | 32. om. L. |
| 16. <i>ri</i> B. | 33. <i>tra</i> B. |
| 17. <i>na</i> codd. | |

Translation

I. I invoke the seven daughters of the Sea
 who fashion the threads of the sons of long life :
 May three deaths be taken from me !
 May three periods of age¹ be granted to me !
 May seven waves² of good fortune be dealt to me !
 Phantoms shall not harm me on my journey
 in flashing³ corslet without hindrance⁴ !
 My fame shall not perish !⁵
 Let old age come to me ! death shall not come to me
 till I am old !

II. I invoke my Silver-champion who has not died, who
 will not die :⁶
 May a time be granted to me of the quality⁷ of white
 bronze !
 May my double be slain !⁸
 May my right be maintained !⁹
 May my strength be increased !
 My grave shall not be ready !
 Death shall not come to me on an expedition !
 May my journey be carried out !¹⁰

1. Or 'three life-times.'

2. *tonn*, 'wave,' is often used thus metaphorically: *co toirtea tuind mbróin ar Brían*, Cog., 120, 25.. *atbath ar tonn indmais* (of a king), Ir. T., III, 63.

3. *lasriēn*, if correct (B has *lasren*), seems a formation from *lassar*, 'flame,' with the suffix *-iēn*, on which see Thurneysen, Handb., § 908.

4. As to this meaning of *lēniud* cf. *lēiniud clairend .i. tairmesc fodla ocus rainde*, Corm., § 307 *is lēniud don fīrinde*, CZ, III, 451, 4. *lēnaid* (leg. *lēnid*) *lōg n-enech .i. bacaid lōgb n-enech na flaiba*, O'Dav., 1162.

5. *nī nasctbar* (if I emend correctly) *mo cblū ar chel* seems to mean literally 'my fame shall not be bound on death.' We have a similar but still more obscure phrase in 'Immacallaim in dā thūarad,' § 144: *arannaic (arranaic, arnaic) a cbēignūis cel (cū) .i. is ē cēignūis dochbūaid i mbās peccaid*.

6. The following forms of the stem *ba-* may be added to Pedersen's list in his Vgl. Gramm., § 659: *robá*, 'he died,' RC, 23, 310, § 32; *coich beba*, Trip., 88, 1; *conbebbau*, RC, 12, 113; *arbeba* (*adbeba*), Immac. in dā th., § 200; *arbebat*, ib., 175; *dobeat*, ib., 181, 191; *iarbibebat*, ib., 242.

7. i.e., as durable as bronze.

8. This is a difficult line to understand: *roborthar mo richt* would mean literally 'may my shape be slain.' But *richt* also means 'guise, likeness' and 'a double.' Cf., e.g., *co tarat fūasma tria Odrān hi richt Pātraic*, 'so that he gave a spear-thrust through Odrān mistaking him for Patrick,' Trip., p. 218, 6. So I have ventured to translate as above, and the meaning would be: 'if I am to be slain, may my double be slain instead of me.'

9. Literally, 'saved.'

10. Literally, 'come true, be realised.'

The headless¹ adder shall not seize me,
 nor the hard-grey² worm, nor the headless black
 chafer !
 Neither thief shall harm me, nor a band of women, nor
 a band of armed men.
 Let increase³ of time come to me from the King of the
 Universe !

III. .I invoke Senach of the seven periods of time,
 whom fairy women have reared⁴ on the breasts of
 plenty :

May my seven candles⁵ not be extinguished !
 I am an indestructible stronghold,
 I am an unshaken rock,
 I am a precious stone,
 I am the luck⁶ of the week.

May I live a hundred times a hundred years,
 each hundred of them apart !

I summon their boons to me.

May the grace of the Holy Spirit be upon me !

Domini est salus (three times), Christi est salus (three times).
 Super populum tuum, Domine, benedictio tua.

KUNO MEYER

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1. *dī-chonn* or the i-stem *dī-chuinn*, a compound of privative *dī-* and *conn*, 'head.'

2. Or 'hard-green.'

3. *aur-cbur* n., v.n. of *ar-cuiriuir*, 'I add to, increase.'

4. *conaltar*, 3. pl. pret. of *con-alim*, 'I rear, foster.' Cf. *mac claime nī comail mātair*, O'Dav., 1364; part. pass. *comalta*.

5. I take *sechtbaindel* to be a compound. Cf. *tar secht sechtmuire*, and the n.pr. *Secht-fli*, BB 141^b.

6. Or 'the blessing'; *sēn* = W. *swyn*, both borrowed from Lat. *signum*.

LITERARY, ARTISTIC, SCIENTIFIC, ETC.

NOTES ON THE 'AGAMEMNON' OF AESCHYLUS, *G. A. Davies*. 'BRITO MALUS' ET 'BRITO EXOSUS,' *V.-H. Friedel*. AN OLD IRISH PRAYER FOR LONG LIFE, *Kuno Meyer*. A WELSH 'SUNDAY EPISTLE,' *W. Garmon Jones*. 'THE NIGHT-WANDERER'; A POEM BY DAFYDD AB GWILYM (c. 1350), *J. Glyn Davies*. JOHN MAJOR, *H. A. Strong*. SONNETS ON A SONNET, *J. Fitzmaurice-Kelly*. COLERIDGE'S USE OF LIGHT AND COLOUR, *A. C. Bradley*. UEBER FRIEDRICH HEBBEL'S VERHÄLTNISS ZUR ALLGEMEINEN GESCHICHTE, *Robert Petsch*. CLASS DIALECT AND STANDARD ENGLISH, *H. C. Wyld*. IDEAL NUMBERS IN THE RATIONAL FIELD, *F. S. Carey*. LONG GALLERIES IN TUDOR HOUSES, *Sir Martin Conway*. HISTORY OF THE ANATOMICAL MUSEUM, *F. J. Cole*. THE FORTRESS OF THE ROCKS, *Dorothy M. Vaughan*.

VERSE

TO J. M. M.: A SUITE, *G. S. Sberrington*. TO A CHIEFTAIN, *John Sampson*. 'SCRUTATOR,' *R. H. Case*. 'ES WAR EINMAL; ODER, AULD LANG SYNE,' *Antonie Meyer*. ENVOY, *Oliver Elton*.

APPENDICES

(By permission of *J. M. Mackay*)

- I THE NEW UNIVERSITY AND PRIMARY TEACHERS.
 - II THE TEACHING OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE NEW UNIVERSITY.
 - III SENATE AND FACULTY, ETC.
 - IV THE LOCAL UNIVERSITY AND THE LOCAL AUTHORITY; A FORECAST OF LIVERPOOL.
 - V A NATIONAL COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE TRANSVAAL.
- INDEX.

ILLUSTRATIONS

J. M. MACKAY (From a Portrait by *Augustus John*).

SHIPS OF HENRY VIII

- i The Harry Grace à Dieu.
- ii The George.
- iii The Graunde Masterys.
- iv The Dragon.
- v The Phawcon; The Hare.
- iv The Double Rose; The Portquillice.
- vii The Galie Subtile.

MUSEUM OF LEVIN VINCENT AS IN 1719.

CHART.

MUSEUM OF OLE WORM, 1588—1654.

MUSEUM OF FREDERIK RUYSCHE, 1638—1731.

THE WOMEN AT THE SEPULCHRE (From a Painting by *R. Anning Bell*).

J. M. MACKAY (From a Photograph by *E. Rawlins*).



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Nuall Fir fio. English & Iri
An old Irish prayer for long
life

