

CHAPTER IV

Great Irish Literature

THE definite demonstration of the intellectual genius of the Irish people and especially of the height and depth of their poetic inspiration, came in the early centuries of the Christian era when their pre-Christian poets sketched a series of great sagas which in the course of the immediately subsequent centuries developed into great epic poems. These proved on their recovery from oblivion in the modern time the greatest possible surprise to the critics of the world, for it has come to be universally acknowledged now under the leadership of French and German scholars that the Irish of this period composed a series of epics which for depth of feeling and acumen in characterization are almost unrivalled in the history of literature. These great Irish poems exhibit a profound knowledge of human nature that has almost never been equalled and probably never surpassed except by the Greeks.

The result of several centuries of elaboration first by oral tradition and then by the written word, was an epochal achievement in literature through the creation of a series of characters that will never die so long as this stage of our civilization lasts. The Irish poets created a new literature by the description of the lives and activities of a number of men