

## Annals, Histories, Genealogies & Tales

P. W. Joyce

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### SECTION I. *How the Annals were compiled.*

AMONG the various classes of persons who devoted themselves to Literature in ancient Ireland, there were special Annalists, who made it their business to record, with the utmost accuracy, all remarkable events simply and briefly, without any ornament of language, without exaggeration, and without fictitious embellishment. The extreme care they took that their statements should be truthful is shown by the manner in which they compiled their books. As a general rule they admitted nothing into their records except either what occurred during their lifetime, and which may be said to have come under their own personal knowledge, or what they found recorded in the compilations of previous annalists, who had themselves followed the same plan. These men took nothing on hearsay : and in this manner successive Annalists carried on a continued chronicle from age to age, thus giving the whole series the force of contemporary testimony [1] We have still preserved to us many books of native Annals, the most important of which will be briefly described in this chapter.

Most of the ancient manuscripts whose entries are copied into the books of Annals we now possess have been lost ; but that the entries were so copied is rendered quite certain by various expressions found in the present existing Annals, as well as by the known history of several of the compilations. The compiler of the Annals of Ulster, for instance, Cathal Maguire, an eminent divine, philosopher, and historian, who died of smallpox, A.D. 1498, often refers to the authorities that lay before him in such terms as these :—“ So I have found it in the Book of Cuana”; “ I state this according to the Book of Mochod”; “ This is given as it is related in the Book of Dubhdaleith,” and such like ; and we know that the Four Masters compiled their Annals from the collection of old MSS. they had brought together in Donegal. But nearly all the authorities referred to, or used, in both books of Annals have disappeared.

As an example of what manner of men the Annalists were I will instance one of the earliest of those whose books are still extant :—Tigernach O’Breen, who died in 1088. He was abbot of the monasteries of Clonmacnoise and Roscommon, and was one of the greatest scholars of his age. He was acquainted with the chief historical writers of the world known in his day; and it is clear that he had—as already remarked—the use of an excellent library in Clonmacnoise. He quotes the Venerable Bede, Josephus, St. Jerome, Orosius, and many other ancient authorities, and with great judgment compares and balances their authorities one against another. Of course he made use of the works of all previous Irish historians and annalists.

#### *2. Tests of Accuracy.*

*Physical Phenomena.*—There are many tests of the accuracy of our records, of which I will here notice three classes :—Physical phenomena, such as eclipses and comets : the testimony of foreign writers : and the consistency of the records among themselves. Whenever it happens that we are enabled to apply tests belonging to any one of these three classes—and it happens very frequently—the result is almost invariably a vindication of the accuracy of the records. A few instances will be given : but the subject is too extensive, and the proofs too numerous to be fully dealt with here. The examples are not selected with a view to a foregone conclusion : that is to say, the favourable cases are not brought forward, and those that tell unfavourably held back : they are taken as they come ; and those given may be considered types of all.

Let us first instance the records of physical phenomena: and of these I will set out with one very instructive and impressive example—the solar eclipse of A.D. 664, a year rendered memorable by the ravages of the terrible yellow plague, which swept over all Europe. The Venerable Bede, writing fifty

or sixty years after this eclipse, records it as he found it mentioned—vaguely mentioned as to time—in some record, or perhaps from the reports of some old persons who had seen it. At any rate, not knowing the exact day and hour, he calculated backwards, using the only means then known for such calculations—the Dionysian Cycle—which was a little incorrect. This led him to the 3rd May, 664, as the date of the eclipse—two days wrong. The Annals of Ulster, in its brief and simple record, give the correct date, 1st May, and even the very hour : a striking proof that the event had been originally re-corded by some Irish chronicler who actually saw it, from whose record—or perhaps from a copy—or a copy of a copy—the writer of the Annals of Ulster transcribed it.

The Irish annals record about twenty-five eclipses and comets at the several years from A.D. 496 to 1066, which are collected from various books by Cathal Maguire in the Annals of Ulster, and which will be found set forth in one list by O'Donovan in his Introductory Remarks to the Annals of the

Four Masters. The dates of all these as entered in the Annals of Ulster, are found, according to modern scientific calculation and the records of other countries, to be correct. This shows conclusively that the original records were made by eye-witnesses, and not by calculation in subsequent times : for any such calculation would be sure to give an incorrect result, as in the case of Bede.

A well-known entry in the Irish account of the Battle of Clontarf, fought A.D. 1014, comes under the tests of natural phenomena. The author of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, the ‘ War of the Gaels with the Galls,’ writing early in the eleventh century, soon after the battle, states, in his detailed account, that it was fought on Good Friday, the 23rd April ; that the battle commenced in the morning at sunrise *when the tide was full in* ; and that it continued the whole day till the tide was again at flood in the evening, when the foreigners were routed :—“They [*i.e.* the two armies] continued in battle array, fighting from sunrise till evening. This is the same length of time as that which the tide takes to go and to fall and to flood again. For it was at the full tide the foreigners came out to fight the battle in the morning, and the tide had come to the same place again at the close of the day, when the foreigners were defeated.” So the Irish record.

The time of high water, it is to be observed, is noticed *incidentally* here in order to account for the great slaughter of the Danes in the evening during the rout ; for as the tide was at height at the time, they were not able to reach their ships or boats, which were anchored in the bay., and which they might wade to at low water. Their only other means of escape—the single bridge that led to their fortress in Dublin at the other side of the Liffey—was cut off, partly by the tide and partly by a detachment of Irish : so that the chronicler goes on to say :—“An awful rout was made of the foreigners, so that they fled simultaneously, and they shouted their cries for mercy ; but they could only fly to the sea, as they had no other place to retreat to, seeing they were cut off from the head of Dubgall’s Bridge.” [2]

As soon as Dr. Todd, the translator and editor of the “ War of the Gaels with the Galls,” came across this passage, in the year 1867, it struck him at once that here was an obvious means of testing—so far—the truth of the old narrative; and he asked the Rev. Dr. Haughton, a well-known eminent scientific man, a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, to calculate for him the time of high water in Dublin Bay on the 23rd April, 1014. After a laborious calculation, Dr. Haughton found that the tide was at its height that morning at half-past five o’clock, just as the sun was coming over the horizon, and that the evening tide was at fifty-five minutes past five : a striking confirmation of the truth of this part of the narrative. It shows, too, that the account was written by, or taken down from, an eye-witness of the battle. [3]

*Testimony of Foreign Writers.*—Events occurring in Ireland in the middle ages are not often mentioned by British or Continental writers : they knew little of the country, which was in those times—as regarded the Continent—a very remote place. But in the few cases where they do notice Irish affairs, they are always—or nearly always—in agreement with the native records. A few of these cor-robations, moreover, may serve as a warning to us not to be too ready to reject ancient narratives as unworthy of notice because they happen to have about them an air of romance or fiction. The great body of the early history of all countries is compiled from narratives much mixed

up with romance and fiction, from which modern historical writers have to select the truth as best they can.

Irish bardic history relates in much detail how the Picts, coming from Thrace, landed on the coast of Leinster in the reign of Eremon, the first Milesian king of Ireland, many centuries before the Christian era : that they aided the king of Leinster to defeat certain British tribes who had given great trouble ; that when, after some time, they proposed to settle in the province, Eremon refused to permit them, advising them to cross the sea once more, and make conquests for themselves in a country lying to the north-east, *i.e.* in Alban or Scotland, and promising them aid in case they needed it. To this they agreed ; and they requested Eremon to give them some marriageable women for wives, which he did, but only on this condition, that the right of succession to the kingship should be vested in the female progeny rather than in the male. And so the Picts settled in Scotland with their wives. [4] Now all this is confirmed by the Venerable Bede, but with some differences in detail. His account is that the Picts, coming from Scythia, were driven by wind on the *northern* coast of Ireland. The Irish refused them land on which to settle, but advised them to sail to a country lying eastward, which could be seen from Ireland, and offered them help to conquer it. The Picts obtained wives from the Scots (*i.e.* the Irish), on condition that when any difficulty arose they should choose a king from the female royal line rather than from the male ; “ which custom,” continues Bede, “ has been observed among them to this day.” [5]

Coming down to more historic times...the Irish accounts of the colony led by Carbery Riada to Scotland in the third century of the Christian era have been confirmed by the Venerable Bede.

All the Irish annals, as well as the “ War of the Gaels with the Galls” (pp. 5, 222), record a great defeat of the Danes near Killarney in the year 812, which so deterred them that many years elapsed before they attempted to renew their attacks. This account is fully borne out by an authority totally unconnected with Ireland, the well-known book of Annals, written by Eginhard (the tutor of Charlemagne), who was living at this very time. Under A.D. 812 he writes :— “ The fleet of the Northmen, having invaded Hibernia, the island of the Scots, after a battle had been fought with the Scots, and after no small number of the Norsemen had been slain, they basely took to flight and returned home.” [6]

Sometimes confirmation comes from the most unexpected quarters. In one of the historical Tales of the *Táin*, or Cattle-spoil of Quelna, which took place in the first century of the Christian era, we are told that King Conobar Mac Nessa conferred knighthood on the great hero Cuculainn at seven years of age, who, during the ceremony, broke many weapons by sheer strength. We find this event also mentioned in the Annals of Tigernach, in the simple record that Cuculainn “ took valour” at seven years of age. This appears to have established a precedent, so that the fashion became pretty common of knighting the sons of kings and great chiefs at the age of seven years.

Now all this looks shadowy, romantic, and mythical ; yet we find it recorded in the pages of Froissart that the custom of knighting kings’ sons at seven years of age existed in Ireland in the end of the fourteenth century, having held its place, like many ancient Irish customs, for at least fourteen hundred years. When Richard II. visited Ireland in 1494, he entertained the Irish kings and chiefs in a magnificent manner, and proposed to confer knighthood on the four provincial kings, O’Neill, O’Conor, Mac Murrough, and O’Brien. But they told him they did not need it, as they had been knighted already ; for they said it was the custom for every Irish king to knight his son at seven years of age. The account of all these proceedings was given to Froissart by a French gentleman named Castide, who had lived seven years among the Irish. The narrative goes on to describe the Irish manner of conferring knight-hood at the time :—that a shield was set up on a stake in a level field ; that a number of little spears were given to the youthful aspirant ; that he thereupon hurled them against the shield ; and that the more spears he broke the more honour he received : all corresponding with the ancient Irish romantic narrative. (Johnes’s “ Froissart,” II. 577.)

To return to the Battle of Clontarf : we must not omit a corroboration of the truthfulness of the Irish account coming from an unimpeachable source. All the Irish chronicles state that a general rout of the Danes took place in the evening : which is fully corroborated in the Norse records. There is a

brief description of “ Brian's Battle,” as the Danes called it, in the Danish saga, “ Burnt Nial,” in which this final rout is recorded by the Norse writer—the best possible authority on the point under the circumstances—in language much more simple and terse than that of the Irish chronicler : it is merely this short sentence :—“ Then flight broke out throughout all the [Danish] host.” [7]

*Consistency of the Records among themselves.*—Testimonies under this heading might be almost indefinitely-multiplied, but I will here instance only a few. The names of fifteen abbots of Bangor, who died before 691, are given in the Irish Annals, not all together, but at the respective years of their death. In the ancient Service Book, known as the “ Antiphony of Bangor”, there is a hymn in which, as Dr. Reeves says [8] “these fifteen abbots are recited [in one list] in the same order as in the Annals ; and this undesigned coincidence is the more interesting because the testimonies are perfectly in-dependent, the one being afforded by Irish records which never left the kingdom, and the other by a Latin composition which has been a thousand years absent from the country where it was written.”

References by Irishmen to Irish affairs are found in numerous volumes scattered over all Europe:—Annalistic entries, direct statements in tales and biographies, marginal notes, incidental references to persons, places, and customs, and so forth, written by various men at various times ; which, when compared one with another, hardly ever exhibit a disagreement. Perhaps the best illustration of this is Adamnan’s “ Life of Columba.” Adamnan’s main object was simply to set forth the spiritual life of St. Columba, who lived about a century before him, to describe, as he expressly tells us, the Miracles, the Prophecies, and the Angelic Visions of the saint. But in carrying out this ideal, he has everywhere in his narrative to refer to persons living in Ireland and Scotland, mostly contemporaries of Columba, as well as to the events and customs of the time—references which are mostly incidental, brought in merely to fix the surroundings of the saint and his proceedings. Beyond this Adamnan was not at all concerned with Irish history, genealogy, or social life. But when we come to test and compare these incidental references with the direct and deliberate statements in Irish annals, biographies, tales, and genealogies, which is, perhaps, the severest of all tests in the circumstances, we find an amazing consensus of agreement, and never, so far as I can call to mind, a contradiction.

The more the ancient historical records of Ireland are examined and tested, the more their truthfulness is made manifest. Their uniform agreement among themselves, and their accuracy, as tried by the ordeals of astronomical calculation and of foreign writers' testimony, have drawn forth the acknowledgments of the greatest Irish scholars and archaeologists that ever lived, from Ussher and Ware to those of our own day, and especially of Dr. Reeves, the learned editor of Adamnan’s “ Life of Columba.” These men knew what they were writing about ; and it is instructive, and indeed something of a warning to us, to mark the sober and respectful tone in which they speak of Irish records, occasionally varied by an outburst of admiration as some unexpected proof turns up of the faithfulness of the old Irish writers and the triumphant manner in which they come through all ordeals of criticism.

### 3. *Principal Books of Annals.*

The following are the principal books of Irish Annals remaining. [9] The *Synchronisms of Flann*. This Flann was a layman, *Ferleginn* or Principal of the school of Monasterboice : died in 1056. He compares the chronology of Ireland with that of other countries, and gives the names of the monarchs that reigned in Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome, from the most remote period, together with most careful lists of the Irish kings who reigned contemporaneously with them. Copies of this tract, but imperfect, are preserved in the Books of Lecan and Ballymote.

The *Annals of Tigernach* [Teerna]. Tigernach O’Breen : the compiler of these Annals. Like most of the other books of annals, his work is written in Irish, mixed with a good deal of Latin. In the beginning he treats of the general history of the world, with some brief notices of Ireland—the usual practice of Irish annalists ; but the history of Ireland is the chief subject of the body of the work. One most important pronouncement he makes, which has been the subject of much discussion, that all the Irish accounts before the time of *Cimbaeth* [Kimbay], B.C. 370, are uncertain. Several copies of his Annals are in existence in London, Oxford, and Dublin, but all imperfect. The fragments that remain

have been edited and the Irish portions translated by Dr. Whitley Stokes in the *Revue Celtique*, vols. xvi. and xvii.

The *Annals of Innisfallen* were compiled by some scholars of the monastery of Innisfallen, the ruins of which still stand on the well-known island of that name in the Lower Lake of Killarney. They are written in Irish mixed with Latin. In the beginning they give a short history of the world to the time of St. Patrick, after which they treat chiefly of Ireland. Their composition is generally ascribed to the year 1215 ; but there is good reason to believe that they were commenced two centuries earlier. They were subsequently continued to 1318.

The *Annals of Ulster*, also called the Annals of Senait Mac Manus, were written in the little island of Senait Mac Manus, now called Belle Isle, in Upper Lough Erne. They treat almost exclusively of Ireland from A.D. 444. The original compiler was Cathal [Cahal] Maguire, who died in 1498 ; and they were continued to the year 1541 by Rory O'Cassidy, and by a nameless third writer to 1604. There are several copies of these annals, one in a beautiful hand in a vellum manuscript of Trinity College, Dublin. One volume has been issued, translated and annotated by the late William M. Hennessy ; the rest by the Rev. B. McCarthy, D.D.

The *Annals of Loch Ce* [Key] were copied in 1588 for Brian Mac Dermot, who had his residence in an island in Lough Key, near Boyle in Roscommon. They are in the Irish language, and treat chiefly of Ireland from 1014 to 1636, but have many entries of English, Scottish, and Continental events. The only copy of these annals known to exist is a small-sized vellum manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin. They have been translated and edited in two volumes by Mr. William M. Hennessy.

The *Annals of Connaught* from 1224 to 1562. There is a copy in Trinity College, Dublin, and another in the Royal Irish Academy.

The *Chronicon Scotorum* (Chronicle of the Scots or Irish) down to A.D. 1135. This was compiled about 1650 by the great Irish antiquary Duaid Mac Firbis. His autograph copy is in Trinity College, and two other copies are in the Royal Irish Academy. These annals have been printed, edited with translation and notes by William M. Hennessy.

The *Annals of Boyle*, from the earliest time to 1253, are contained in a vellum manuscript in the library of the British Museum. They are written in Irish mixed with Latin ; and the entries throughout are very meagre.

The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, from the earliest period to 1408. The original Irish of these is lost ; but we have an English translation by Connell Mac Geoghegan of Lismoynty in Westmeath, which he completed in 1627. Of this translation several copies are preserved, of which one is in Trinity College and another in the British Museum. O'Donovan printed many extracts from this compilation in his Notes to the Annals of the Four Masters : and the whole collection has been lately edited by the Rev. Denis Murphy, S.J.

The *Annals of the Four Masters*, also called the *Annals of Donegal*, are the most important of all. They were compiled in the Franciscan monastery of Donegal, by three of the O'Clerys, Michael, Conary, and Cucogry, and by Fersa O'Mulconry ; who are now commonly known as the Four Masters. The O'Clerys were, for many generations, hereditary *ollaves* or professors of history to the O'Donnells, princes of Tirconnell, and held free lands, and lived in the castle of Kilbarron, on the sea-coast northwest of Ballyshannon. Here Michael O'Clery, who had the chief hand in compiling the Annals, was born in 1575. He was a lay brother of the order of St. Francis, and devoted himself during his whole life to the history of Ireland. Besides his share in the Annals of the Four Masters, he wrote a book containing (1) a Catalogue of the kings of Ireland ; (2) the Genealogies of the Irish saints ; and (3) an Account of the saints of Ireland, with their festival days, now known as the Martyrology of Donegal. This last has been printed by the Irish Archæological and Celtic Society, with translation by John O'Donovan, edited by the Rev. James Henthorn Todd, D.D., and the Rev. William Reeves, D.D. Brother Michael also wrote the Book of Invasions, of which there is a

beautiful copy in the Royal Irish Academy. It is a sort of chronological history, giving an account of the conquests of Ireland by the several colonists, down to the English Invasion, with many valuable quotations from ancient Irish poems. There is an older Book of Invasions of which the Book of Ballymote contains a copy.

Conary O'Clery, a layman, acted as scribe and general assistant to his brother Michael. His descendants were for long afterwards scholars and historians, and preserved his manuscripts. Cucogry or Peregrine O'Clery was a cousin of the two former, and was chief of the Tirconnell sept of the O'Clerys. He was a layman, and devoted himself to history and literature. He wrote in Irish a Life of Red Hugh O'Donnell, of which his autograph copy is in the Royal Irish Academy. This has been translated, annotated, and published—text and translation—by the Rev. Denis Murphy, S.J. The fourth Master, Ferfesa O'Mulconry, was a historian from Kilonan in Roscommon.

The materials for this great work were collected after many years' labour by Brother Michael O'Clery, who brought every important historical Irish manuscript he could find in Ireland to the monastery of Donegal ; for he expressed his fears that if the work were not then done the materials might never be brought together again. His fears seemed prophetic ; for the great rebellion of 1641 soon followed ; all the manuscripts he had used were scattered, and only one or two of them now survive. Even the Four Masters' great compilation was lost for many generations, and was recovered in a manner almost miraculous, and placed in the Royal Irish Academy by Dr. George Petrie. The work was undertaken under the encouragement and patronage of Fergall O'Gara, prince of Coolavin, who paid all the necessary expenses ; and the community of Donegal supplied the historians with food and lodging. They began their labours in 1632, and completed the work in 1636. [10] The Annals of the Four Masters was translated with most elaborate and learned annotations by Dr. John O'Donovan ; and it was published—Irish text, translation, and notes—in seven large volumes, by Hodges and Smith of Dublin (now Hodges, Figgis, and Company)—the greatest and most important work on Ireland ever issued by any Irish publisher.

A book of annals called the *Psalter of Cashel* was compiled by Cormac Mac Cullenan ; but this has been lost. Besides annals in the Irish language, there are also Annals of Ireland in Latin, such as those of Clyn, Dowling, Pembridge, of Multifarnham, &c, most of which have been published by the Archæological and Celtic Society.

#### 4. *Histories : Genealogies : Dinnsenchus.*

*Histories.*—None of the writers of old times conceived the plan of writing a general History of Ireland : it was only in the seventeenth century that anything like this was attempted. But the old Irish writers left many very good Histories of particular transactions, districts, persons, or periods, all in the form of Historic Tales and mixed up with fabulous relations. Of these the following may be mentioned as examples—others will be noticed in next chapter. *The History of the War of the Gaels with the Galls or Danes* ; the *History of the Borumean Tribute* ; the *Wars of Thomond*, written in 1459 by Rory McGrath, a historian of Thomond or Clare. Of these the first has been published, with translation, introduction, and annotations, by Dr. James Henthorn Todd. The “Tribute” has been translated and edited by Dr. Stokes in the *Revue Celtique* (vol. xiii.), and by Dr. Standish Hayes O'Grady in his “*Silva Gadelica.*”

The first History of the whole country was the *Forus Feasa ar Erin*, or History of Ireland—from the most ancient times to the Anglo-Norman invasion, written by Dr. Geoffrey Keating, a learned Roman Catholic priest of Tubbrid in Tipperary, who died in 1644. Keating was deeply versed in the ancient language and literature of Ireland ; and his History, though uncritical and containing much that is fabulous and legendary, is very interesting and valuable for its quaint descriptions of ancient Irish life and manners, and because it contains many quotations and condensations from authorities now lost. The work was translated in 1726 by Dermot O'Connor ; but he wilfully departed from his text, and his translation is utterly wrong and misleading : “Keating's History”—writes Dr. Todd—“is a work which has been greatly underrated in consequence of the very ignorant and absurd translation by Mr. Dermot O'Connor.” [11] A complete and faithful translation by John O'Mahony was

published, without the Irish text, in New York in 1866. Complete text and translation, with notes, are now being issued by the Irish Texts Society of London, under the editorship of Mr. David Comyn, M.R.I.A., of Dublin, of which one volume has already appeared.

*Genealogies.*—The genealogies of the principal families were most faithfully preserved in ancient Ireland. There were several reasons for their anxiety to preserve their pedigrees, one very important motive being that in the case of dispute about property or about election to a chiefship, the decision often hinged on the descent of the disputants ; and the written records, certified by a properly qualified historian, were accepted as evidence in the Brehon Law courts. Each king and chief had in his household a *Shanachie* or historian, an officer held in high esteem, whose duty it was to keep a written record of all the ancestors and of the several branches of the family. The king's *Shanachie* should be an ollave. [12] Sometimes in writing down these genealogies the direction was downward from some distinguished progenitor, of whom all the most important descendants are given, with intermarriages and other incidents of the family. Sometimes again the pedigree is given upwards, the person's father, grandfather, &c, being named, till the chief from whom the family derived their surname is arrived at, or some ancestor whose position in the genealogical tree is well known, when it becomes unnecessary to proceed farther. In the time of the Plantations and during the operation of the penal laws, the vast majority of the Irish chiefs and of the higher classes in general were driven from their lands and homes ; and they and their descendants falling into poverty, lost their pedigrees, so that now only very few families in Ireland are able to trace their descent.

Many of the ancient genealogies are preserved in the Books of Leinster, Lecan, Ballymote, &c. But the most important collection of all is the *Book of Genealogies* compiled in the years 1650 to 1666 in the College of St. Nicholas in Galway, by Duaid Mac Firbis, the last and most accomplished native master of the history, laws, and language of Ireland.

The confidence of the learned public in the ancient Irish genealogies is somewhat weakened by the fact that they—like those of the Britons and some other nations—profess to trace the descent of the several noble families from Adam—joining the Irish pedigrees on to the Scriptural genealogy of Magog the son of Japhet, from whom Irish historians claim that all the ancient colonists of Ireland were descended. But passing this by as of little consequence, and coming down to historic times, the several genealogies, as well as those scattered portions of them found incidentally in various authors, exhibit marvellous consistency and have all the marks of truthfulness. Moreover they receive striking confirmation from incidental references in English writers—as for instance the Venerable Bede. Whenever Bede mentions a Scot or Irishman and says he was the son of so-and-so, it is invariably found that he agrees with the Irish genealogies if they mention the man's name at all.

The following three tracts from the manuscript genealogical books, have been printed, with translations and most copious and valuable notes and illustrations by Dr. John O'Donovan, for the Irish Archæological and Celtic Society :—An account of “ *The Tribes and Customs of Hy Fiachrach*” in Connaught, from Duaid Mac Firbis's Book of Genealogies; a similar account of “ *The Tribes and Customs of Hy Maine*” [Mainy], from the Book of Lecan ; and from the same book the *Genealogy* of a Munster tribe named *Corcalee*. And the genealogies of numerous Irish and Scottish families have been printed in various Irish publications, all from the Irish manuscript books. A large number of them will be found in the Rev. John Shearman's “ *Loca Patriciana*.”

*Dinnsenchus.*—In this place may be mentioned the *Dinnsenchus*, a topographical tract in Middle Irish, prose and verse, giving the legendary history and the etymology of the names of remarkable hills, mounds, caves, carns, cromlechs, raths, duns, plains, lakes, rivers, fords, estuaries, islands, and so forth. It takes its name from *dind* or *dinn*, ‘ a fortified hill,’ and *senchus*, ‘ a history.’ The stories are mostly fictitious—invented to suit the several really existing names : nevertheless this tract is of the utmost value for elucidating the topography and antiquities of the country. Copies of it are found in several of the old Irish books of miscellaneous literature, of which the Book of Leinster contains the oldest version. Various portions of it have been published by Petrie in his Essay on Tara, by Crowe in the *Kilk. Arch. Journ.*, 1872-3 ; by Stokes in *Rev. Celt.*, xv. and xvi., and in *Folklore*, iii. and iv. ; and by Gwynn, in the Todd Lecture Series, Royal Irish Academy. Another very important

tract about the names of remarkable Irish persons, called *Cóir Anmann* ('Fitness of Names'), corresponding with the *Dinnsenchus* for place-names, has been published with translation by Dr. Stokes in *Irische Texte*, iii.

## Historical and Romantic Tales

### SECTION I. *Classes, Lists, and Numbers.*

EVEN from the most remote times, beyond the ken of history, the Irish people, like those of other countries, had stories, which, before the introduction of the art of writing, were transmitted orally, and modified, improved, and enlarged as time went on, by successive *seanchuide* [shanachie], or 'story-tellers.' They began to be written down when writing became general : and a careful examination [13] of their structure, and of the language in which they are written, has led to the conclusion that the main tales assumed their present forms in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries ; while the originals from which they sprang are much older. " It is probable"—writes M. Dottin [14]—"that the most ancient pieces of the epic literature of Ireland were written before the middle of the seventh century : but how long previously they had been preserved by oral tradition—this is a point that it is difficult to determine." Once they began to be written down, a great body of romantic and historical written literature rapidly accumulated, consisting chiefly of prose tales.

But of these original transcripts not a line remains : the manuscript books that contained them were all destroyed by the Danes, or in the disturbed times of the Anglo-Norman invasion. Of many of the tales, however, we have, in the Book of the Dun Cow, and the Book of Leinster, copies made in the eleventh and twelfth centuries : and there are numerous others in manuscripts copied by various scribes from that period to the present century, many of them from original volumes older than the Book of the Dun Cow, and existing when the several scribes wrote, but since lost.

Another point bearing on the antiquity of our Irish tales is this :—that many of them correspond with tales in the ancient Romantic Literature of Greece and the East. Thus, to mention one out of many : our legend of Dermot O'Dyna [15] corresponds with the Greek story of Adonis, both heroes being distinguished for beauty, and both being killed by a boar. Even their names O'Dyna (Irish *O'Duibne*) and *Adonis* seem to have come from the same original. Those of the tales that correspond in this manner must have had their origin prior to the separation of the races centuries before the Christian era. [16]

In the Book of Leinster there is a very interesting List of the classes to which the ancient historical tales belong, with a number of individual tales named under each class as examples, numbering altogether 187, which has been printed by O'Curry in his *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Irish History*, p. 584. Another similar Class-List has been published in the *Proc. R. I. Academy* (for 1870-76), p. 215, by Mr. Bryan O'Looney, from a Trinity College MS. : and a third short one appears in the first volume of the *Brehon Laws*, p. 47. [17] Many classes and tales are common to the whole of these Lists ; but each contains some not found in the others. The following Class-List is made up from a comparison and combination of all.

The stories belonging to some of the classes were called *Prime* or *Chief Stories* (*Prim-scéil*), and those of the rest *Minor Stories* (*Fo-scéil*). It is stated in all the Lists that only the four highest grades of poets (Ollave, Anruth, Cli, Cana) were permitted to tell both the prime and the minor stories : the lower grades were confined to the chief stories.

Classes of Prime Stories :— 1. Battles : 2. *Imrama*, Navigations, or Voyages [18] : 3. Tragedies : 4. Adventures : 5. Cattle-raids (or Preyings) : 6. Hostings or Military Expeditions: 7. Courtships: 8. Elopements : 9. Caves or Hidings (i.e. adventures of persons hiding for some reason in caves or other remote places) : 10. Destructions (of palaces, &c.) : 11. Sieges or Encampments: 12. Feasts: 13. Slaughters.

Classes of Minor Stories : 14. Pursuits : 15. Visions : 16. Exiles, or Banishments: 17. Lake Eruptions.

We have in our old books stories belonging to every one of these classes : but of the individual tales named in the detailed Lists, at least one-half have been lost. The original List from which all our present Lists were drawn, was, in the opinion of M. D'Arbois de Jubainville [19] written in the seventh century. In the same author's "Catalogue de la Littérature Épique del'Irlande" (mentioned farther on), he has published the titles of about 550 separate tales in prose or poetry or both, of which, according to the estimate of Professor Kuno Meyer, in the Preface to his "Liadain and Curithir," about 400 are still preserved in MSS. These might be supplemented—Mr. Meyer continues in the same Preface—by at least 100 others that have come to light since the publication of the Catalogue, and by a further number in MSS. still unexplored, thus bringing up the number still existing to between 500 and 600.[20]

As to the language of the Tales. The old scribes, when copying a tale, often modernised the phrase-ology of the antique prose to that of their own time : but the poetry, being constructed in accordance with complicated prosodial rules could not be altered without disarranging the delicate structure. [21] Accordingly the scribes generally let it alone, copying it as they found it ; and for this reason the verse passages are generally more archaic and difficult to understand than the prose. Most of the tales, as already remarked, have fallen under Christian influences, and contain allusions to Christian doctrines and practices, inserted by the Christian copyists, mostly monks : but some have escaped this and are thoroughly pagan in character, without the least trace of Christianity. For those monks were liberal and broadminded, and whenever they could—consistently with what they considered their duty— they retained the old pagan allusions untouched.

The copyists modernised in other ways. They often altered the descriptions of antique customs and equipments so as to bring them into conformity with their own times. A notable example of this is the influence of the Danish wars of the ninth and tenth centuries. It is now generally admitted that before the arrival of the Danes, the Irish did not use coats of mail or metallic helmets, despising such things as unmanly. But they were forced to adopt them—at least partially—when they found themselves pitted against the Danes ; and to some small extent they kept to the usage afterwards, so that, though they never took heartily to armour and helmets, they were quite familiar with their use. Accordingly in many or most of the copies of the Red Branch Knights Tales made in the ninth and succeeding centuries (i.e. *after* the arrival of the Danes), Cuculainn and other heroes are represented as wearing metallic helmets and mail, though in a few versions we find no mention of these defensive arms. A distinguished Continental scholar, Prof. Zimmer, [22] has made use of this as a means to distinguish between pre-Danish and post-Danish versions of the same story : assuming that those recensions that make no mention of armour are unaltered copies of versions written before the ninth century.

## 2. *Chronological Cycles of the Tales.*

Most of the Irish Tales fall under four main cycles of History and Legend, which, in all the Irish poetical and romantic literature, were kept quite distinct : —

1. The Mythological Cycle, the stories of which are concerned with the mythical colonies preceding the Milesians, especially the Dedannans. The heroes of the Tales belonging to this cycle, who are assigned to periods long before the Christian era, are gods, namely the gods that chiefly constitute the mythology of the pagan Irish. These tales are much less numerous and less consecutive than those of the next two cycles.

2. The Cycle of Concobar Mac Nessa and his Red Branch Knights, who flourished in the first century.

3. The Cycle of the Fena of Erin, belonging to a period two centuries later than those of the Red Branch. The Red Branch Knights and the Fena of Erin have been already fully described.

4. Stories founded on events that happened after the dispersal of the Fena such as the Battle of Moyrath (A.D. 637), most of the Visions, &c. There are some tales however that do not come under any of these categories.

The stories of the Red Branch Knights form the finest part of our ancient Romantic Literature. The most celebrated of all these is the *Táin-bo-Cuailnge* [Quelnè], the epic of Ireland. *Medb* [Maive] queen of Connaught, who resided in her palace of Croghan—still remaining in ruins near the village of Rathcroghan in the north of Roscommon—having cause of quarrel with an Ulster chief, set out with her army for Ulster on a plundering expedition, attended by all the great heroes of Connaught, and by an Ulster contingent who had enlisted in her service. She was accompanied by her husband King Ailill, who however plays a very subordinate part : the strong-minded queen is the leading character all through. The invading army entered that part of Ulster called *Cuailnge* or Quelnè, the principality of the hero Cuculainn, the north part of the present county Louth. At this time the Ulstermen were under a spell of feebleness, all but Cuculainn, who had to defend single-handed the several fords and passes, in a series of single combats, against Maive's best champions, in all of which he was victorious. She succeeded in this first raid, and brought away a great brown bull—which was the chief motive of the expedition—with flocks and herds beyond number. At length the Ulstermen, having been freed from the spell, attacked and routed the Connaught army. The battles, single combats, and other incidents of this war, which lasted for several years, form the subject of the *Táin*, which consists of one main epic story with about thirty shorter tales grouped round it.

Mr. Alfred Nutt (in his "Cuchulainn, the Irish Achilles," p. 2) estimates that the whole of the literature of the Red Branch Knights that we possess—never counting one piece twice—would occupy about 2000 Svo printed pages.

Of the Cycle of Finn and the Fena of Erin we have a vast collection of stories. The chief heroes under Finn, who figured in the tales, were :—Oisín or Ossian, his son, the renowned hero-poet to whom the bards attribute—but we know erroneously—many poems still extant ; Oscar the brave and gentle, the son of Ossian ; Dermot O'Dyna, unconquerably brave, of untarnished honour, generous and self-denying, the finest character in all Irish literature, perhaps the finest in any literature ; Goll Mac Morna, the mighty leader of the Connaught Fena ; Cailte Mac Ronan the swift-footed ; Conan Mail or Conan the Bald, large-bodied, foul-tongued, boastful, cowardly, and gluttonous. The characters of all these are maintained with great spirit and consistency throughout the stories.

The Tales of the Fena, though not so old as those of the Red Branch Knights, are still of great antiquity : for some of them are found in the Book of the Dun Cow and in the Book of Leinster, copied from older volumes ; and they are often mentioned in Cormac's Glossary—ninth or tenth century. The quantity of this literature contained in these old books is however small. According to Mr. Nutt, in his "Ossian and the Ossianic Literature" (p. 8), it might fill a hundred pages such as this now under the reader's eye — for the stories are scrappy and very briefly told. Mr. Nutt believes, however, that before the eleventh century there must have existed a large body of complete tales, all of which have perished. But a vast amount of Ossianic stories, both in prose and verse, is contained in later MSS., composed and transcribed from time to time down to the beginning of the last century. The brief tales contained in the older MSS. form the germs of the later and more elaborate stories.

M. H. D'Arbois de Jubainville has published, in his "Littérature Épique de l'Irlande" (the Epic Literature of Ireland), a most useful catalogue of ancient Irish romantic tales, with the several libraries and manuscripts in which they are to be found : a work which is quite indispensable to every student of Irish romantic literature. For a good and most useful survey of this ancient literature the reader is referred to Mr. Alfred Nutt's "The Voyage of Bran," vol. i., pp. 115 *et seq.*

### 3. General Character of the Tales.

"Some of the tales are historical, *i.e.* founded on historical events—history embellished with some fiction ; while others are altogether fictitious—pure creations of the imagination. But it is to be

observed that even in the fictitious tales, the main characters are nearly always historical, or such as were considered so. The old Shanachies wove their fictions round Concobar Mac Nessa and his Red Branch Knights, or Finn and his Fena, or Luga of the long arms and his Dedannans, or Conn the Hundred fighter, or Cormac Mac Art ; like the Welsh legends of Arthur and his Round Table, or the Arabian romances of Haroun al Raschid. The greater number of the tales are in prose, but some are in verse ; and in many of the prose tales the leading characters are often made to express themselves in verse, or some striking incident of the story is related in a poetical form. These verse fragments are mostly quotations from an older poetical version of the same tale.” [23]

From this great body of stories it would be easy to select a large number, powerful in conception and execution, high and dignified in tone and feeling, all inculcating truthfulness and manliness, many of them worthy to rank with the best literature of their kind in any language. The Stories of the Sons of Usna, the Children of Lir, the Fingal Ronain, the Voyage of Maeldune, Da Derga’s Hostel, the Boroma, and the Fairy Palace of the Quicken Trees, are only a few instances in point.

As to the general moral tone of the ancient Irish tales : it is to be observed that in all early literatures, Irish among the rest, sacred as well as profane, there is much plain speaking of a character that would now be considered coarse, and would not be tolerated in our present social and domestic life. But on the score of morality and purity the Irish tales can compare favourably with the corresponding literature of other countries ; and they are much freer from objectionable matter than the works of many of those early English and Continental authors which are now regarded as classics. Taken as a body they are at least as pure as Shakespeare’s Plays ; and the worst of them contain very much less grossness than some of the Canterbury Tales. Dr. Whitley Stokes, in his Preface to the “ Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” speaks with good reason of the “ pathos and beauty” of that fine story ; and his remarks on the series of short stories in the *Acallamh na Seanorach*, or “ Colloquy with the Ancient Men,” deserve to be quoted in full :—“ The tales are generally told with sobriety and directness : they evince genuine feeling for natural beauty, a passion for music, a moral purity, singular in a mediaeval collection of stories, a noble love for manliness and honour. Some of them seem to me admirable for their unstudied pathos.” [24] On the same point Professor Kuno Meyer [25] justly remarks :—The

“ literature of no nation is free from occasional grossness ; and considering the great antiquity of Irish literature, and the primitive life which it reflects, what will strike an impartial observer most is not its license or coarseness, but rather the purity, loftiness, and tenderness which pervade it.”

Irish Romantic Literature is intimately interwoven with native Topography, as much so at least as that of Greece or Rome, and much more so than the German or Norse Tales. Some particular spots, residences, or monuments are assigned as the scenes of almost all the battles, feasts, burials, or other memorable events ; and the chief places through which armies on the march passed are laid down with great precision. [26] Most of those places, as well as the residences of the kings and great heroes of the olden time, are known to this day, and not only retain their old names, but are marked by such monumental remains as might be expected : of which many examples will be found in various parts of this book.

#### 4. *Story-telling and Recitation.*

The tales were brought into direct touch with the people, not by reading—for there were few books outside libraries, and few people were able to read them—but by recitation : and the Irish of all classes, like the Homeric Greeks, were excessively fond of hearing tales and poetry recited. There were, as we have seen, professional shanachies and poets whose duty it was to know by heart a number of old tales, poems, and historical pieces, and to recite them, at festive gatherings, for the entertainment of the chiefs and their guests : and it has been already observed that every intelligent person was supposed to know a reasonable number of them, so as to be always ready to take a part in amusing and instructing his company. The tales of those times correspond with the novels and historical romances of our own day, and served a purpose somewhat similar. Indeed they served a much higher purpose than the generality of our novels ; for in conjunction with poetry they were the chief agency in education—education in the best sense of the word—a real healthful informing exercise for the intellect. As remarked elsewhere they conveyed a knowledge of history and geography, and they inculcated truthful and honourable conduct. More-over this education was

universal ; for though few could read, the knowledge and recitation of poetry and stories reached the whole body of the people. The *recaire* [rackera] or reciter generally sang the poetical parts of the tale to the music of a harp, when a harp was at hand and when he was able to play.

“ This ancient institution of story-telling held its ground both in Ireland and in Scotland down to a very recent period ; and it is questionable if it is even yet quite extinct. Within my own memory, this sort of entertainment was quite usual among the farming classes of the south of Ireland. The family and workmen, and any neighbours that chose to drop in, would sit round the kitchen fire after the day’s work—or perhaps gather in a barn on a summer or autumn evening—to listen to some local shanachie reciting one of his innumerable Gaelic tales.” [27] In old times people were often put to sleep by a shanachie reciting a tale in a drowsy monotonous sort of recitative. [28]

##### 5. *Translations and Versions in Modern Languages.*

Much of this ancient Romantic Literature has been recently translated. The Battle of Moylena and the Battle of Moyrath are the subjects of two historic tales, both of which have been published, the former edited by O’Curry and the latter by O’Donovan, both with valuable notes. What are called the “ Three Tragic Stories of Erin,” viz., the Fate of the Children of Lir, the Fate of the Sons of Usna, and the Fate of the Sons of Tuirenn, have been published in the *Atlantis*, translated and edited by O’Curry; who also translated the Sick-bed of Cuchulainn in the same periodical. Some few others have been published with translations in the *Kilkenny Archæological Journal*, and in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*.

In the *Revue Celtique*, *Irische Texte*, *Zeitschrift für Celt. Phil.*, *Folklore*, and other periodicals, both British and Continental, a great number have been translated by Dr. Whitley Stokes and by Prof. Kuno Meyer. Several have also been translated into French and German by Windisch, D’Arbois de Jubainville, Zimmer, and others. The Irish Texts Society of London have published the *Feast of Bricriu*, with English translation ; which however had been previously translated into French by M. De Jubainville in his “ *L’Épopée Celtique en Irlande*,” and into German by Dr. Windisch in *Ir. Texte*, vol. ii. In Dr. Hayes O’Grady’s “ *Silva Gadelica*” are text and translation of twenty-seven. Six volumes of tales, chiefly of the Cycle of Finn, have been published with translations by the Ossianic Society. The best of them is “ *The Pursuit of Dermot and Grania*,” which has been literally translated by Standish Hayes O’Grady. Miss Eleanor Hull has given a good abstract of the Red Branch Knights tales in her book, “ *The Cuchullinn Saga*.” I have myself published in my “ *Old Celtic Romances*” free translations—without texts—of twelve ancient tales (including Dermot and Grania above-mentioned). A translation, on similar lines, of “ *The Fate of the Sons of Usna*” is included in my “ *Reading Book in Irish History*.” Lady Gregory has told the principal stories of the Red Branch Knights in simple, quaint English—following pretty closely on the originals—in her “ *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne*.” Translations and versions still continue to appear, showing no signs of falling off, but rather a tendency to increase. [29]

Already a good beginning has been made in the creation of a modern literature founded on these ancient sagas. Five English poetical epics have been published, founded on five of them : — “ *Congal*,” on the Battle of Moyrath, and “ *Conary*,” on the Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel, both by Sir Samuel Ferguson ; “ *The Foray of Queen Meave*,” on the *Táin-bo-Quelnè*, by Mr. Aubrey de Vere ; and “ *Deirdre*,” on the Fate of the Sons of Usna, and “ *Blaid*,” on the Death of Curoi Mac Dara, both by my brother, Dr. Robert Dwyer Joyce. When Tennyson read for the first time the *Adventures of Maeldune*, in “ *Old Celtic Romances*,” he made it the subject of a beautiful poem, which he called “ *The Voyage of Maeldune*.” And there exist still, in this fine old literature, ample materials untouched. The harvest is abundant, but the labourers are wanted.

[1] Of course it is not claimed for the Irish Annals that they are absolutely free from error. In the early parts there is much legendary matter ; and some errors have crept in among the records belonging to the historical period.

[2] Dr. Todd’s translation in his edition of the *War of the Gaels with the Galls*, p. 191.

[3] Dr. Haughton’s calculation will be found in *War of GG*, *Intro.* xxvi.

- [4] See Irish version of Neunius (Irish Arch. Soc), pp. 121 *et seq.*: and O'Mahony's Keating, pp. 213 *et seq.*, and p. 382.
- [5] Bede, Eccl. Hist., I. i.
- [6] Lynch, Cambr. Ev., I. 165, 167; III. 273: Joyce, Short Hist, of Irel., 190 : Miss Stokes, Early Ir. Architecture, 149.
- [7] See for a full account of the Battle of Clontarf, Joyce, Short Hist, of Ireland, p. 210.
- [8] Eccl. Antiqq., 153.
- [9] For further information, see O'Curry, MS. Mat., and Dr. Hyde's Literary History, under the proper headings.
- [10] See Petrie's account of all this in O'Donovan's Introduction to the Four Masters, vol. i.
- [11] Todd, St. Patrick, p. 133, note.
- [12] O'Curry, MS. Mat., 204. A list of the shanachies of several noble families may be seen in the same work, p. 219.
- [13] By Zimmer and De Jubainville: see Nutt, Cuchulainn, the Irish Achilles, pp. 3, 29, 31 : De Jubainville, La Civil, des Celtes, 137. See also Voyage of Bran, I., Introd. xvi: and Rev. Celt., vm. 47.
- [14] La Litt. Gael, de l'Irlande, p. 68.
- [15] For which see Old Celtic Romances (p. 274) : The Pursuit of Dermot and Grainne.
- [16] See the paper on Remarkable Correspondence of Irish, Greek, and Oriental Legends, by the Rev . James O'Lavery, in Ulst. Journ. of Archæol., VII. 334. See also Dr. Whitley Stokes : Rev. Celt., V. 232.
- [17] Still another will be found in M. De Jubainville's Catalogue de la Litt. Épique de l'Irlande, pp. 259-264.
- [18] Of all the various classes the Imrama or Voyages were the most celebrated, and had most influence on European literature : and next to these the Visions. Latin versions of the Voyage of St. Brendan, as well as versions in several European living languages, were common in every country in Europe all through the Middle Ages : and there is scarcely a Continental library that does not now contain one or more of these versions. The reader may consult Father O'Donohue's Brendaniana for a full account of this " Voyage" and its literature. The Imrama have been examined with great learning and research by Zimmer and De Jubainville : of whose labours a good account will be found in Mr. Nutt's Voyage of Bran, I. 161, with full documentary references. See also p. 230, same vol.
- [19] Cours de Litt. Celt., VI. 35: see also Voyage of Bran, I. 130: and Hyde, Lit. Hist., chapters xxii.-xxx.
- [20] As to the total number of individual Tales, see also Miss Hull, Saga, Introd., xxxviii-ix.
- [21] On this see Zimmer in Rev. Celt., xiii. 179.
- [22] In Zeitschrift für Deutsches Alterthum, xxxii.
- [23] Joyce, Old Celtic Romances, Pref.. p. iv.
- [24] Irische Texte, iv., Pref. xii.
- [25] In the Preface to his " Liadain and Cuirithir."
- [26] On this special point, see Miss Hull's " Cuchullin Saga," Appendix II., p. 301, and the map prefixed to the work.
- [27] See Pref. to Old Celtic Romances, from which the above extract is- taken : and Preface to Carmichael's Carmina Gadelica.
- [28] See O'Grady, Silva Gad. : Pref. xxi, par. v.
- [29] Of the whole of the five or six hundred ancient Irish Tales, Prof. Kuno Meyer, in the Preface to his " Liadain and Curithir," estimates that about 150 have been, so far, published with translations.

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