

The Borderland of History

from

A Handbook of Irish Pre-Christian Traditions

by

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In the subject here under examination ; it is impossible that any writer can rely only on his own researches and resources. If he appropriates the thoughts of his predecessors and contemporaries he is accused of being a plagiarist, yet if he be a good adapter he treats each author as the bee treats the flower, steals sweets from it without injuring it, and essays to improve and transform them into more appetising food. It has been sought to make the text readable, but at the same time in no sense perfunctory, so that if another writer follows on, in the same track, he maybe able to devote himself to a complete analysis of the subject, and may find this attempt of use to him in his literary labours ; for a good antiquary should not only chronicle what other writers have often forgotten, but he should also ignore many things on which the superficial observer reposes a misplaced confidence.

According to Robert Atkinson, L.L.D., amongst the many difficulties which beset the path of the Irish historian “ not the least is that of fixing upon any point where real information begins. The narrative, such as it is, is carried on with so plausible an evenness of apparently circumstantial detail of name and place, that the reader is in danger of being hurried up the stream of time to a period long before the Homeric epoch. In these shaking bogs of bardic history, where may we set firm foot?”

Tighernach, pronounced Teernah, the most reliable of early Irish scribes, died, it is stated, about A.D. 1088, and if he be accepted as an authority, Irish History might be considered to open about two centuries before Christ ; his words, “ omnia monumenta Scotorum usque Cimbeath incerta erant,” must, as O’Donovan remarks, inspire a feeling of confidence in the writer ; but while his details of foreign history, relating to remarkable events at and preceding the Christian Era, are ample, his enumeration of Irish events down to the third and fourth century is exceedingly meagre. He only mentions a few kings whose reigns are, by later scribes, filled with fabulous performances ; he barely notices the fact of the great hero Cuchullin’s (Coolin’s) existence, and gives but a passing notice to “ the Cattle Prey of Cooley.” “ The poor honest man was evidently troubled with a conscience rather above his business,” remarks John M. Dickson, “ and he felt that he must really draw the line somewhere, . . . yet this limit did not long confine the less scrupulous annalists who followed him. They boldly undertook to carry back Irish history to the arrival of ‘ Miledh,’ said to have sailed for Spain, *via* Scythia and Egypt, some thousand years earlier still ; and to give names and dates to all the kings of Ireland during the intervening time, filling in the pictures of most of them with details of unnatural villainy, too gross for the latitude of Dahomy, and yet all the while implying that their country had enjoyed a happy, and heroic past. . . . The compilers of these various annals were, no doubt, most of them, honest and painstaking men who would not willingly have falsified facts within their own knowledge ; but they were too ambitious, they attempted the impossible, and when their own necessarily limited knowledge failed them, they fell back on a fund of credulity that was apparently inexhaustible. To realize how great was the credulity, let anyone read for himself the earlier portions of the *Annals of the Four*

Masters (the latest and most authoritative of them all), whose office it should have been to purge the works of previous writers of crudeness and inaccuracy, and yet we find them gravely repeating as facts the most childish observations” ; and all this, he it observed, so lately as the commencement of the seventeenth century.

According to Tighernach (Teernah) the starting point of Irish history was the erection of the Palace of Emania, and a wild legend states its origin to be as follows :— Three kings who had been fighting amongst themselves finally agreed to reign for seven years, each in succession. They had each enjoyed the sovereignty for one of these periods, when the first king died, and his daughter claimed the right to reign when her father’s term of sovereignty came round ; she was opposed, but vanquished all opposition. Her subjects suggested that she should put her prisoners to death. ; this she refused to do, but condemned them to slavery, and employed them in building a huge rath or fortress, and “ she marked for them the *dun* with her brooch of gold from her neck,” so that the palace was called *Eomuin*, from *eo*, a brooch, and *muin*, the neck.

The early history of Ireland, whether given by ancient or modern writers, is a strange mixture of truth, exaggeration, allegory, and downright fiction ; however, the fact of incredible exploits being ascribed to dim historic personages is not sufficient ground for denying the existence of those individuals. In the early history of almost every country, the appearance of mythical beings is reported, and formerly it was usual to deny that these persons had ever existed, but present-day historians rather incline to the opinion that they may have been real individuals, remarkable for some great quality, or for heroic deeds, around whom tradition gradually wove an accumulation of supernatural glory. The statements presented by many writers as true history are, as is remarked by O’Donovan, “ after all no more than their own inferences, drawn, in many instances, from the half historical, half fabulous works of the ancients in the Middle Ages no story was acceptable to the taste of the day without the assistance of some marvellous or miraculous incidents which, in those all-believing times, formed the life and soul of every narrative.

Early Greek writers possessed the guilt of throwing a veil of graceful fiction over stern reality ; on the other hand, the historians of Ireland presented as sober facts, the wildest and most extravagant fictions, and as nature imperceptibly, but, none the less surely, planes and rounds off the rocks, covering them with ever increasing masses of verdure, so are actual facts of the elder days of Erin, planed, rounded, and covered by the accretions of successive generations of so-called historians, until they are carpeted with a luxuriant crop of beautiful, but comparatively valueless legends. These legends, however, while without value as history, are of the very highest value as guides to popular thought at the time of their composition, and in some instances may contain a germ of fact which it requires the most delicate literary acumen of the historian to discern.

There is a strange kind of excitement in endeavouring to unravel a complicated problem ; and certainly ample room is afforded to a student desirous of analysing and investigating the so-called history and description of ancient Erin, which have been handed down to us and repeated by writer after writer. The mythical stories of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and other scribes of that school, relative to the colonization and history of England, have long been consigned to the literary waste-paper basket ; and why should the extravagant legends related of Ireland be treated with more leniency? To transmit, by oral tradition, a chain of events, extending back, in an unbroken order to the Creation, would be an impossibility ; we possess also good authority for not giving “ heed to fables and endless genealogies,” or to “ profane and old wives’ fables.” Writers of the olden school usually commenced their histories with fables, the length and extravagance of which was in proportion to their estimate of the im-

portance of the theme ; and nothing has tended so much to bring discredit on the proper study of Irish history and Irish antiquities as this exaggeration. In this characteristic Irish writers do not, by any means, occupy a unique position, for the early historians of all nations appear to have possessed an innate tendency to magnify the antiquity of the origin of the race whose deeds they recorded. The Arcadians alleged that they existed before the creation of the moon, and, according to Ovid, the inhabitants of Attica, not to be outdone, boasted that they were a nation before the sun shone : —

“ Ante Jovem genitum terras habuisse feruntur
Arcades, et luna gens prior ilia fuit.”

Nations pride themselves on their antiquity, individuals on their ancestry ; but as antiquity, or remote ancestry, is in itself nothing, that in which is their pride is in reality their humiliation ; for “ if an individual is worthy of his ancestors, why extol those with whom he is on a level? And if he is unworthy of them, to laud them is to libel himself. And nations also, when they boast of their antiquity, only tell us, in other words, that they are standing on the ruins of so many generations. But if their view of things is limited and their prospect of the sciences narrow and confined, if other nations, who stand upon no such eminence, see farther than they do, is not the very antiquity of which they boast a proof that their forefathers were not giants in knowledge ; or, if they were, that their children have degenerated?”

“ From you blue heavens above us bent.
The Gardener Adam and his wife
Smile at the claims of long descent.
Howe'er it be it seems to me,
'Tis only noble to be good.”

Beranger, towards the close of the last century, wrote on this subject of historical exaggeration ; and one would almost imagine that the cautious old artist-antiquary had been inditing a prospectus for the origination of an Archæological Society when he states, that “ no traces remain of the grandeur of the ancient Irish, which we are pressed to believe without proofs, except some manuscripts, which very few can read, and out of which the Irish historian picks what suits him, and hides what is fabulous and absurd.” Even, now-a-days, the stories translated from the Irish, for popular reading, are eclectically selected, and many portions of the text are suppressed.

No statement should be advanced on the mere authority of native Irish annals and manuscripts, unless corroborated by outside and disinterested evidence, such as is afforded by classic or foreign writers, or archæological and material evidences of sepulchral remains, dwellings, implements, ornaments, and other traces left by the primitive and early inhabitants of the land.

If material objects be accepted as proofs of the pagan ideas and customs of the aborigines, surely the evidence of still existing superstitious observances of the peasantry, which can be traced to a pre-Christian source, ought to be received with, at least, the same authority ; and we should look upon all these subjects as mere links in one great chain which binds together many separate periods of semi-culture. The past can always be found in the present ; for it is easy to bring some custom or superstition of the present into connexion with the past, and to use it to bring out distinctly what was believed in and acted upon in by-gone centuries.

It is to be hoped that research into the past, on these lines, may contribute to the reconstruction of early history, a work which can only be finally accomplished by many united ef-

forts ; for our discoveries are founded on those of our predecessors, and we merely utilize the ascending steps formed by an innumerable army of fellow-workers. We stand on a better basis than those that went before. It is certain that those who follow after will be better placed than ourselves; for even “ a dwarf on a giant’s shoulders sees further of the two.” Thus the science of archæology is gradually evolving out of apparent chaos ; it has become vertebrate, and possesses a solid framework which can be gradually clothed correctly with details. Evidence of this steady growth of healthy archæological thought is very apparent ; yet we have made but little progress in higher and scientific archæology, and the ancient antiquities of Ireland still remain in an unclassified condition. For a lengthened period archæology was not recognised as a science, although it treats of the arts, manners, customs, and entire past of primitive man, whilst, now-a-days, it must be acknowledged as an able assistant to ethnology and philology. It is evident that philology, as a guide, must give place to, or rest its evidence on, the material proofs produced by archæology or ethnology. Indeed, a student seeking to discover the origin of a people, through analysis of the spoken language, may be led to conclusions of the most erroneous description. For instance, in Ireland, a stranger ignorant of its early history, and finding the vast majority of the population speaking English, might come to the conclusion that they were of English descent. A good example occurred not long ago, when an English-speaking writer lamented that he could not give vent to his feelings in the Gaelic tongue, of which he was quite ignorant — English being, in his opinion, totally inadequate to express his indignation at being called an Anglo-Saxon. And, from his point of view, he was perfectly right ; for he was no more an Anglo-Saxon, because he spoke English only, than he would have been a horse had he been born in a stable.

Grant Allen illustrates, with the following personal anecdote, the facility with which the ethnological generaliser may be precipitated into unexpected pitfalls: — “ It happened to me once, many years since, to be taking a class in logic in a West Indian college. The author of our text-book had just learnedly explained to us that personal names had no real connotation. ‘ Nevertheless,’ he went on, ‘ they may sometimes enable us to draw certain true inferences. For example, if we meet a man of the name of John Smith, we shall at least be justified in concluding that he is a Teuton.’ Now, as it happened, that class contained a John Smith ; and as I read those words aloud, he looked up in my face with the expressive smile of no Teutonic forefathers ; for *this* John Smith was a pure-blooded negro.”

It is difficult to define limits to this species of investigation ; for ethnologists are of opinion that even the so-called Irish race is really a compound one, containing in addition to the true Celtic or Aryan element at least two others that are non-Aryan, probably a Mongolian or Finnish element and an Iberian element. “ Very little attempt,” remarks William Larminie, “ has hitherto been made to settle in what parts of the country these elements respectively preponderate ; but that there must be some preponderance of different races in different localities is shown clearly enough by the varying physical types. It is beyond question that Donegal differs from Connaught, and that both differ from Munster ; and when we find that, in spite of a co-existence of at least two thousand years in the same island, and the possession of a common language, different districts have a different folklore, is it extravagant to surmise that these different bodies are due to varying racial deposits?” The creeds of their faith, namely, the myths, legends, and superstitions of a people, are far truer guides to their origin than is their spoken dialect. The tongue of the aborigines is usually either extinguished or forced on one side by the stronger and dominant race, but the bent of mind of the subjected people becomes more or less stereotyped, and forms the distinguishing feature of their character.

The inhabitants of Cornwall, though largely of Celtic blood, speak English ; the Romans imposed their language upon the conquered races inhabiting France and Spain. The late Pro-

fessor Huxley, writing on this subject, remarked that : — “ At the present day the physical characters of the people of Belgic Gaul remain distinct from those of the people of Aquitaine, notwithstanding the immense changes which have taken place since Cæsar’s time ; but Belgæ, Celtæ, and Aquitani (all but a mere fraction of the last two, represented by the Basques and the Bretons) are fused into one nationality, ‘ le peuple Français.’ But they have adopted the language of one set of invaders and the name of another ; their original names and languages having almost disappeared. Suppose that the French language remained as the sole evidence of the existence of the population of Gaul, would the keenest philologist arrive at any other conclusion than that this population was essentially and fundamentally a ‘ Latin’ race which had some communication with Celts and Teutons ? Would he so much as suspect the former existence of the Aquitani ?”

Thus language is no absolute or even approximate test of race ; it is merely evidence of a contact having taken place between races. Language may explain much ; it cannot explain everything, and may, as we have seen, in fact, in some instances, prove actually detrimental to research. Although the English language is mainly of Saxon origin, yet it is by no means so certain that the blood of Englishmen — taken as a whole nation — is as fully Saxon as their tongue ; the Celtic strain, though to a great extent absent from our tongue, exists no doubt to a large extent in the blood. Anglo-Celtic is probably a truer description of British nationality than Anglo-Saxon; for all are not Celtic that speak with a brogue, and all are not Saxon that are guileless of the letter *h*. On the other hand there is more Saxon and Norse blood flowing in the veins of Irishmen than is generally supposed. As already noticed, Ireland at the very earliest period contained a dark and a fair race, which there is every reason to believe are identical with the dark and the fair races of Britain. When the Irish first became known to history they spoke a Gaelic dialect ; and though for many centuries Scandinavians made continual incursions upon and settlements among them, the Teutonic languages took no more root among the Irish than they did among the French. “ How much Scandinavian blood was introduced there is no evidence to show. But, after the conquest of Ireland by Henry II., the English people, consisting in part of the descendants of Cymric speakers, and in part of the descendants of Teutonic speakers, made good their footing in the eastern half of the island, as the Saxons and Danes made good theirs in England ; and they did their best to complete the parallel by attempting the extirpation of the Gaelic-speaking Irish, and they succeeded to a considerable extent. A large part of eastern Ireland is now peopled by men who are substantially English by descent, and the English language has spread over the land far beyond the limits of English blood. . . . What, then, is the value of the ethnological difference between the Englishman of the western half of England and the Irishman of the eastern half of Ireland ? For what reason does the one deserve the name of ‘ Celt’ and not the other ? And, further, if we turn to the inhabitants of the western half of Ireland, why should the term ‘ Celts’ be applied to them more than to the inhabitants of Cornwall? And if the name is applicable to the one as justly as to the other, why should not intelligence, perseverance, thrift, industry, sobriety, respect for law, be admitted to be Celtic virtues ? And why should we not seek for the cause of their absence in something else than the idle pretext of ‘ Celtic blood’ ? I have been unable to meet with any answers to these questions,” concludes the late Professor T. H. Huxley.

There is scarcely any branch of knowledge of the past with which archæology may not claim to concern itself ; and even if the term be taken in its narrower sense, as the study only of the history of the outward and material life of man in past ages, and especially of the extant works of human ingenuity, yet even the historical limits of the subject are only bounded by the first appearance of man on the earth. Until a comparatively recent period the study of Irish archæology was in a deplorable state ; travellers along the road to antiquarian knowledge were beguiled at every step from the true track by false guides who, like “ Will-o’-the-

wisp," led them aimlessly about ; yet the old school of writers, whom it is the custom to sneer at, should be judged like other men in similar circumstances, according to the light of their time. Thus while we need pay but little heed to their arguments, deductions, and assumption of learning, we must acknowledge that we are indebted to them for many most useful and explanatory facts that might otherwise have escaped being recorded. Of all the writers of the old school. General Vallancey is the one most to be admired and the least to be blamed. He wrote as he believed, and in all sincerity, as a sympathetic writer exclaims : — " Good, worthy, brave old antiquarian : peace be to his ashes. He had an Irish heart, although he chanced to be born on the wrong side of St. Georges Channel : and an Irish head, too, if the making of a blunder, now and then, be deemed a true characteristic of our country ; but antiquarians in England can make blunders, too, only their blunders are not Blunders, they are ' erroneous conclusions.'"

Almost always, at the birth of a new study, zealous votaries undertake much laborious research, which has to be gone over afresh as soon as systematized work is commenced. Not only has the student proper to undo the futile work that obstructs scientific inquiry, but he has, after pulling down the edifice, to attempt a reconstruction. The very fact of great errors having been committed should make us proceed with the more caution, especially in forming our own judgment. The unweighed theories of the old school of archæologists hardly require refutation, nevertheless the emotional basis on which they rested must be demolished with a firm but, it must be admitted, reluctant hand ; and though the path be strewn, like that of the iconoclasts of old, with shattered fragments of broken idols, the remains will be found not worth the trouble of an attempted restoration. A new structure must be erected ; for an attempt to utilise too much of the old material would but mar the archæological harmony of the rising edifice.

Dr. Petrie's essay on the origin of Irish Round Towers, a model for archæological writers, created a literary revolution, yet, as is the case with too many other Irish writers, the amount of published matter which he has left represents most inadequately his great knowledge of archæology. To the overthrow of romantic theories and fanciful speculations he marshalled solid arguments and a bristling array of facts, and conclusively proved that the Round Towers of Ireland, instead of being Pagan temples of the remotest antiquity, were erected by Christian ecclesiastics, in comparatively modern times, for various purposes, but certainly for keeps, or places of protection, against sudden attacks from predatory foes.

The present school of archæology is before all tilings practical, and is pre-eminently that of the spade. The spade is a great solver of problems and destroyer of fantastical theories ; it must ultimately unfold, in its entirety, primitive man's ideas regarding the dead, of the future state, of burial customs, ceremonies, and the institutions to which they gave rise. It is precisely at this early stage that the spade has much to tell ; for where historical and legendary traditions are absent, the ultimate appeal must be to it. The trend of all modern science is to essay to recover from caves, middens, and other such like sites, precise acquaintance with the manners and methods of life of the men of long past ages. Need it be stated that, as far as it has gone, investigation on every side has proved fruitful. We have, to some extent, solved the secret of the Eld. The knowledge that to-day we possess, and at which we have long ceased to wonder, would, a few years ago, have been deemed a mere dream ; but there are many more secrets of the past belonging to our land yet unravelled because traces of them are very faint, and it is to the examination of these that we should direct our attention.

The mass of literature which has appeared on the subject of the name and meaning of the ancient designation of Ireland would fill a goodly sized volume : in some of the earliest manuscripts the name is written Eriu. One legend, which on the face of it appears to bear the

impress of truthfulness, alleges that, at some period either prior to or after the Deluge, Ireland was discovered by fishermen who had been blown out to sea in their skiff ; this was at least a natural and not improbable manner of discovering a new island.

Whether or not Ireland was known to the Phœnicians is a subject of controversy amongst antiquarians. Even had these energetic traders been acquainted with the island, it is more than probable that they would have tried to conceal their knowledge, as they would have been unwilling to allow other maritime nations to discover the sources from which they drew their riches. We have the well-known and hackneyed story of the wily Phœnician shipmaster who, observing that, on his voyage to Britain, he was followed by a Roman galley which watched his course, deliberately ran his vessel on a shoal, on which his pursuer also struck ; the Phœnician, either a better or more fortunate seaman, floated off his craft, but the Roman galley went to pieces.

The earliest writers of Greece and Rome who are supposed to refer to Ireland, have spoken of it in a manner so vague, that very little can be learned from their words ; even if Ireland may be identified as Thule, as the “ sacred Island,” or the poetic “ Island of the Blest,” in which the golden age of innocence and purity still continued to flourish, after all the rest of the world had become corrupt : but the following lines from Claudian are conclusive as to the designation of Thule, at any rate in the poet’s time — not being applicable to Ireland : — “ The Orkneys dripped (with blood) when the Saxons were put to flight ; Thule grew warm with the gore of the Picts ; icy Ireland bewailed the heaps of (slain) Scoti.” [1]

Rufus Festus Avienus, a poetical writer of the fourth century, A.D., in his *De Oris Maritim.*, professes to have derived his information from a Carthaginian source ; and he is, it is alleged, the only ancient author as yet known, who specially applied the epithet of “ The Sacred Island “ to Ireland. His account is curious ; he states that at a distance of two days’ sail from the Æstrumnides (the Cassiterides of the Greeks, supposed to be the present Scilly Islands) lay an extensive land called “ The Sacred Island,” inhabited by the nation of the Hibernians. The text may be thus translated : —

“ This isle is sacred nam’d, by all the ancients.
From times remotest in the womb of Chronos.
This isle, which rises o’er the waves of ocean.
Is covered with a sod of rich luxuriance
And peopled, far and wide, by the Hiberni.” [2]

“ It would be a very melancholy consideration,” remarks O’Donovan, “ if this sacred island of the Hesperides, the abode of the Pious, and the Elysian Fields of the Blest, should turn out, when the reality became known, to have been the abode of incestuous cannibals.”

Although we may be inclined to smile at the small amount of geographical knowledge possessed by the ancients, yet they were, perhaps, on the whole, better informed than were the ordinary run of Irish peasantry at the close of the last, and the commencement of the present century. O’Donovan relates how his uncle was unable to make his listeners comprehend the theories respecting the laws of motion, attraction, and gravitation, or understand that it was the earth that moved, and that the sun was comparatively stationary. The generality of mankind, for a long time, supposed that the earth was a flat plain, surrounded by the sea, and that the sky was a kind of roof from which heavenly bodies were suspended as lamps. Tyler, in his *Early History of Mankind*, states that the Polynesians thought, like so many other peoples ancient and modern, that the sky descended at the horizon and enclosed the earth. They called foreigners “ heaven-bursters,” as having broken in from another and outside world. The sky is to most savages merely the earth on high. “ There are holes or windows through the roof, or

firmament, where the rain comes through, and if you climb high enough you can get through and visit the dwellers above, who look, and talk, and live very much in the same way as the people upon earth. As above the flat earth, so below it, there are regions inhabited by men, or man-like creatures, who sometimes come up to the surface and sometimes are visited by the inhabitants of the upper earth. We live as it were upon the ground floor of a great house, with upper stories rising one over another above us, and cellars down below.”

The gravest objection made by the Irish peasantry to the “ new learning” of the eighteenth century was the late date of its discovery, and the improbability that the Almighty would have permitted such great truths to remain so long unrevealed to mankind. The peasantry asserted that the new science was but the dream of visionary and irreligious madmen ; they stoutly maintained that the earth was not a globe, but was flat, and in all probability extended to a distance simply immeasurable. With regard to Commodore Anson’s discoveries, the peasantry argued that he did not sail round the earth, but only up and down the various oceans, and returned to England after having described a circle, not in girth round the earth — for that was impossible — but on its flat surface, in the same way that an animal might walk round the flat surface of a field, but cannot pass under it. This they contended was the way Commodore Anson sailed round the earth. They also firmly believed that, under ground, there were oceans of fresh water extending in various directions as the seas do on the surface, that the upper crust of the earth was of various degrees of thickness, but that it was very thin in some places, and has been frequently broken through by the action of the water, as also by the spells of sorcerers ; that there are oceans of fresh water in the sky which would assuredly inundate the earth were they not kept suspended by God, who occasionally permits them to descend in the form of rain to fertilize the earth, and that God deigns to pour it down gently or violently, or withholds it altogether for a season, according to man’s deserts.

In a romantic Greek poem on Jason’s Colchian expedition, Ouomacritus takes his heroes over almost every part of the then known world, and in the course of their adventures in the Atlantic they pass an island named Iernè, *i. e.*, Ireland. The passage, however, in Aristotle (B.C. 384-322), in which he notices Iernè, bears, it is alleged, “ the unquestionable stamp of a much more advanced stage of geographical knowledge than that of his age.” Perhaps the earliest notice on which dependence can be placed is that by Eratosthenes (B.C. 276-19C). Most of his works have been lost ; some, however, of his references to Ireland have been preserved by Strabo, who maintains that he was so well acquainted with the western parts of Europe that he had determined the distance of Ireland from Gaul. Strabo (born B.C. 70), in describing the extent of the habitable world, considered that it commenced to the north of the mouth of the Borysthenes. This parallel, at the other extremity, passed to the north of Iernè. Little was known of the inhabitants of Iernè ; they were reputed to be mere savages, addicted to cannibalism, and having no marriage ties. Solinus—who is mentioned by Servius, Macrobius, and Priscianus, as well as by Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustin, enters into more details than any previous geographer.

He wrote before the birth of our Lord : —

“ Hibernia approaches to Britain in size ; it is inhuman in the rough manners of its inhabitants ; it is so luxuriant in its grass, that unless its cattle are now and again removed from their pasturage, satiety may cause danger to them. There is there no snake, and few birds ; an inhospitable and warlike nation, the conquerors among them having first drunk the blood of their enemies, afterwards besmear their faces therewith ; they regard right and wrong alike. Whenever a woman brings forth a male child, she puts his first blood on the sword of her husband, and she lightly introduces the first *auspicium* of nourishment into his little mouth with the point of the sword ; and with gentle vows she expresses a wish that he may never

meet death otherwise than in war and amid wars. Those who attend to military costume ornament the hilts of their swords with the teeth of sea-monsters, which are as white as ivory, for the men glory in their weapons. No bee has been brought thither, and if anyone scatters dust, or pebbles brought from thence, among the hives in other countries, the swarms desert their combs. The sea that lies between this island and Britain is stormy and tempestuous during the whole year, nor is it navigable except for a few days in the summer season. They sail in wicker vessels, which they cover all round with ox-hides, and as long as the voyage continues, the navigators abstain from food. The breadth of the island is uncertain ; that it extends twenty miles is the opinion of those who have calculated nearest the truth.”

The story about the bees, and the supposed breadth of Ireland excepted, Solinus is comparatively free from errors in this brief description, for it can readily be imagined that, to the coracle-voyaging native, the Irish Channel might well be regarded as “ stormy and tempestuous during the whole year,” In the emblematic title-page of Sir James Ware’s second edition of “ *De Hibernia et Antiquitatibus ejus Disquisitiones*,” published as late as the middle of the seventeenth century (1658), Hibernia is represented as a kind of Diana surrounded with the principal products of the kingdom, and in the foreground stands a large tree, swarming with bees, to indicate that the land was celebrated for the abundance of its wild honey. In popular belief, it is still considered extremely lucky to dream of these little emblems of industry and frugality, for their appearance implies good luck, prosperity, and happiness to the dreamer :-

“ No more of fortune’s frown afraid.
For everything in love and trade,
Henceforth shall with him thrive.”

“ When a swarm of bees suddenly quits a hive, it is a sign that death is hovering over the house, but the impending evil may be averted by the exorcism of the fairy doctor. It is not generally known that not only the sweet product of the insect, but the actual body of the bee itself, was formerly employed in therapeutics. Bees drowned in honey were recommended for strengthening the eyesight, for curing deafness, and for staying vomiting. The remedy was, however, deemed so violent in its workings that the curious injunction was laid on the practitioner that he should bind the patient, as otherwise he could not endure it. The following remedy is given by Celsus : — “ The bodies of bees taken newly from the comb and powdered and drunk with diarrhetic wine powerfully cures dropsy.”

A remarkable tradition, which depicts St. Gobnate as the patron of bees, was at one time current near Macroom, county Cork. A chief, on the morning of a battle, perceiving with dismay the inferiority in number of his followers compared with those of his adversaries, prayed to St. Gobnate for assistance. The good saint granted his request by turning a swarm of bees, close at hand, into armed soldiers, who issued from the hive in military array, ranged themselves in ranks, and followed their leader to victory. After the battle the victorious chief visited the spot from whence he had received such miraculous assistance, and found the rush-formed hive metamorphosed into a brass utensil. This article was formerly in the possession of the O’Hierlyhie family, and was held in great veneration by the peasantry of the district.

Pomponius Mela, who flourished in the reign of the Emperor Claudius, A.D. 41-54, appears to have extracted some of his information with regard to Ireland from Solinus, but he corrects his errors relative to the size of the island : — “ Beyond Britain lies Juverna, an island of nearly equal size, but oblong, with a coast at each side of equal extent, having a climate unfavourable for ripening grain, but so luxuriant in grasses, not merely palatable but even sweet, that the cattle in a very short time take sufficient feeding for the day, and if allowed to

feed too long they would burst. Its inhabitants are wanting in every virtue, and totally destitute of piety.”

Pliny, who wrote about the same time as Pomponius Mela, stated that Ireland was about the same breadth as Britain, but two hundred miles shorter, and that it was distant thirty miles from the territory of the Silures.

Diodorus, who lived in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, writes that the most ferocious of the northern Gauls were stated to be “cannibals, like the Britons who inhabit Erin.”

From an allusion in Pliny, it has been surmised that the Romans possessed a map, or topography of Ireland. After their conquest of Britain, Ireland became better known to them. Intercourse of a more or less restricted character must have sprung up, for commerce, in olden as well as in modern days, was “the parent of geography.” Whether commerce followed “the eagles,” as trade now, it is alleged, follows “the flag,” is a question open to abundant discussion; but Tacitus, in his life of Agricola, specially states that Ireland possessed a commerce superior to that of Britain, and that its harbours and estuaries were more frequented and better known to traders; also that there was very little difference between the soil and climate of Ireland and that of Britain.

Claudius Ptolemy who, in the second century, compiled his work on geography, which remained a standard text-book until the fifteenth century, is the only writer who has described the ports and inland places of Ireland with any exactitude. He essayed to systematize the result of ancient research, and although, at first sight, his map may appear grotesque, yet, if the feeble appliances which he had at his disposal be considered, the ingenuity displayed in overcoming their deficiencies should excite admiration. His information consists essentially of a table of latitudes and longitudes, evidently intended to serve as a sufficient guide for the construction of a map, without referring to any then existing charts.

It is strange that the designation Ivernia, as Ptolemy styles Ireland, differs more widely than that of Iernè, by which the island was first known to the Greeks, from the native name, Erin. Ireland, in Ptolemaic geography, is placed too much to the north, while Scotland has been made to bend towards the east, instead of to the north. The map is not far wrong as regards the length and breadth of Ireland, but it depicts the island as lying north-east and south-west, instead of north and south, whilst the outlines of the coast depart, in places, so far from the reality as to render the identification of many of the headlands very problematic. Had Ireland, however, been placed in its proper position, and Scotland given the proper direction, the approximate outline of Great Britain and Ireland would have been fairly represented. This bears out the hypothesis that Ptolemy’s information was drawn from three separate maps which afforded to him no guide as to their mutual relations.

The eastern coast of Ireland must have been that best known to foreign merchants sailing for the port of Dublin, which, even at this period, appears to have been a place of importance. The first headland sighted would be Howth, of which the ancient Irish name was Ben-Edair. Opposite a town styled Eblana there is marked on Ptolemy’s map, an uninhabited island styled Edrus, and connected as Howth (Ben-Edair) is to the mainland by low-lying ground, it is easy to understand how the geographer’s informants mistook Howth for an island. Another adjoining-island, designated Limnus, is probably Lambay, Eblana is clearly Dublin (Deblana) with the *d* softened or omitted. To the south of this city of Eblana, there appears the river Aboca, which points to its being the Avonmore in Wicklow; but not content with its identification, the stream has been recently named the Avoca. Ptolemy places a town called Dunum on, or near this river. The locality has not been identified, but the name is evidently derived

from the Celtic designation of a fortress, *i.e.*, *down*. The river Buvinda, to the north of Dublin, is clearly the Boyne. The Vinderius, from its position, appears to be Strangford Lough, whilst the Logia may be identified with the river Lagan at Belfast.

The northern coast of Ireland is the one most accurately represented, and its localities are the most easily recognizable. Robogdium appears to be Fair Head ; the river Argita, the Bann ; the Vidua, the Foyle ; Vennicium, Malin Head ; and the Northern Cape may be the Bloody Foreland.

On the west coast the identification of localities is surrounded with greater difficulties. The river Ravius may be the Erne ; the Libnius the river of Sligo, and Nagnata, either Sligo or Drumcliff ; the Ausoba, the river Moy ; the Senus corresponds in name, though scarcely in position, with the Shannon; whilst the Southern Cape is doubtless one of the headlands of Kerry.

On the southern coast the localities are almost as clearly defined as on the northern. The Dabrona answers in position to the Blackwater ; the Birgus, both in position and name, to the Barrow ; the Sacred Cape appears to be Carnsore Point.

O'Donovan alludes to the ancient names of Irish rivers, and his opinion on the subject is here given, not alone as bearing upon the identification of the names, but as showing in what light this celebrated Irish scholar regarded some of the old Irish writers. Quoting a poem preserved in several MSS., he states that in it we are given the interesting information that there were ten rivers in Erin at the time of Parthalon's arrival. " Now," he continues, " though we know that this poem is undoubtedly a fabrication, still it is very ancient ; while therefore we reject that absurd part which would give us to understand that the river Liffey is more ancient than the Shannon, we retain it as the testimony of an Irish bard, that such were the names of ten considerable and well-known rivers in Ireland at the time he flourished ; and when he either fabricated the story, or drew it from other historical monuments then existing, or founded it upon foolish traditions, the like of which are to be found among every nation, and upon which the commencement of the history of most nations is founded." O'Donovan then proceeds to identify them, and states by what names they are now known.] *Laoi* is, he points out, the Lee. *Banna* and *Bearbha* are anglicised Bann and Barrow. *Saimer* is now styled the Erne. *Sligeach*, *Modhum*, *Muadh* are anglicised Sligo, Mourne, and Moy. *Fionn*, now properly written Finn, is in the County of Donegal. *Liffe* is " the Liffey." The identification of one river, the *Baus*, alone remains doubtful.

The towns situated in the interior of the country, ;is given by Ptolemy, as well as his enumeration of tribal territories, need be but briefly noticed, as they have not been identified, at least with any unanimous assent. Places situated far inland, and probably never visited by foreign traffickers, would be by them, pronounced in a more incorrect form than those at which they had landed. This would fully account for the fairly successful identification of localities along the littoral. But even with regard to this identification it must be admitted that the conclusions of recent authorities of eminence are by no means unanimous.

Three at least of the tribes who held the eastern coast, the Brigantes, the Manapii, and the Voluntii, were undoubtedly colonies from the opposite shores of Britain. There were also territories inhabited by the Coriondi, the Cauci, and the Darini.

On the northern coast dwelt the Robogdii in Antrim and Derry, and the Venniconii in the present county Donegal.

Westward were the Erdini ; next to them the Nagnntæ probably in the county Sligo ; farther south came the Autini, the Gangani and the Vellebori.

The south-western littoral, together with a great portion of the interior of the country, was inhabited by the Iverni, who gave their name to the entire island.

Now it is almost self-evident that these various tribes, governed by different chiefs and belonging to distinct races, must have differed widely in manners and comparative civilization. Thus we should not be justified in applying to them, individually, the uncomplimentary notices of these inhabitants of Ireland, in general, which are to be found in ancient Latin and Greek writers.

The information collected and tabulated by Ptolemy was probably known, before his time, to traders belonging to, or frequenting, the western coasts of Caledonia and of Britain ; yet it is strange that no mention is made of Tara, although two cities named Regia and about eight other towns are enumerated. It is alleged that all vestiges of buildings, or earthworks, now or formerly existing on the Hill of Tara, may be classed under two distinct periods, both being within the limits of the Christian era. The most important period, and that to which, it is thought, all the remains now observable belong, is in the third century. Hence it has been concluded that, before this date, Tara was not distinguished as a regal seat, or city, and therefore was omitted from the map of Ptolemy. From traces of ancient remains at Tara it would appear that the original structures were altogether composed of earth and wood, and judging from their uniform character, they were probably erected about the same time, and by the same people.

[1]. . Maduenmt Saxone fuso
Orcades, incaluit Pictorum sanguine Thule,
Scotorum cumulos flevit glacialis Ierne.”

[2] Ast hinc duobus in Sacram, sic Insulam
Dixere prisci, solibus cursus rati est.
Hæc inter undas multum cespitem jacet,
Eamque latè gens Hibernorum colit.”

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