

Brían the high-king

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Brían's work of restoration was perhaps made possible by a period of peace for some twenty years (978-999), when very few battles of North and South are recorded. From the crowning of Mael Seachlinn in 980 two powerful warriors divided Ireland—Brían Boru and Mael Seachlinn Mór, the “ Strong Striker of Uisnech,” his junior by nine years. In that year Mael Seachlinn had won the battle of Tara against the forces of Ath Cliath and the Islands, with great slaughter of the Foreigners, and the banishing of “ their power from Ireland.” Tigernach's Annals tell of a second attack, when he besieged the Gaill of Ath Cliath three days and nights, taking from them, according to the Four Masters [1], two thousand hostages of Erin, one of whom was Domnall Claen king of Leinster ; and issued “ the famous proclamation, in which he said :—‘ Every one of the Gaedhil who is in the territory of the Foreigners, in servitude and bondage, let him go to his own territory in peace and happiness.’ This captivity was the Babylonian captivity of Ireland, until they were released by Mael Seachlinn ; it was indeed next to the captivity of hell.” The king of Dublin, Amlaibh Cuaran (of the sandal), left Ireland for Iona, whether by compulsion or in penitence, the first Christian pilgrim of the Foreigners, and is said to have died there the next year.

Amid the brevities and silences of the Ulster Annals, and the uncertain tales of the “ Wars of the Gaedhil and the Gaill,” it is difficult to follow the conflicts of Brían and Mael Seachlinn with the now restless kings of Connacht. We may gather from the Annals that in times of war Connacht hostings began to press in on the Tara kings, and in the tenth century came prominently into strife. Domnall the high-king devastated Connacht in 965 and took hostages from its king O'Ruairc, whom in fact he slew.

Connacht in the absence of an ordered study of its history remains a mysterious part of Ireland. It was the least changed of the provinces in the re-distribution of the Five Fifths. The older races then, as now, maintained a prominent place. Shut in by the inundating floods of the great river, the land could not support any increasing population. The hills and forests of what is now Clare made a forbidding entry from the south, the roughest part of the journey of the Leather Cloaks. To the north there was the famous passage by the coast road from Sligo across the Drowes, and the Erne at Ballyshannon—a military road corresponding in importance to the eastern highway north by Newry and Dundalk, and jealously disputed by the northern kings ; as in 968 when the king of Cenél Conaill and the royal heir of Connacht were slain by the Cenél nEogain ; and again in 973 when the king of Ailech warred with the Connachtmen, and their new-made king Cathal with many others was slain. Ever since the great break when the Uí Neill discarded their old home for Tara and Ailech, there was natural rancour between them and the deserted lords of Crúachu—a suspicious hostility exaggerated by the lively inventions of Ulster chroniclers. The Fir Domnann who ruled in Connacht almost to S. Patrick's time were allowed no place in the “ Milesian” high-kingship by the orthodox chroniclers of the Tara line [2]. Its later kings left behind them no more traces in the Annals than a bare name, till we come to the stirring career of Muirghis (792-815). But from its history Connacht should be the part of Ireland where ancient tradition had the best chance of preservation, a region favourable for the development of schools of old Irish history.

Mael Seachlinn and Brían were of necessity involved in the ancient conflict of north and south over the middle borderlands, with the old range of battle-fields, eastward on the Liffey plain and west to the Shannon and into Connacht. Disputes began early. In 982 Mael Seachlinn in contempt of the Dál gCais is said to have uprooted the ancient tree in Mag Adhair under which their kings were inaugurated—in memory perhaps of the insult inflicted by Brían's grandfather Lorcan on the high-king Flann Sinna at his game of chess. In 984 Brian took three hundred boats up the Shannon to Loch Ree, ravaging Meath to Uisnech, and all

Bréifne. The next year Mael Seaclinn laid in ashes the plain of Mag Ai by Crúachu ; and when the Connacht-men carried a secret depredation to his own fortress Dun-na-sciath on the shore of Loch Ennel, which they burned, and killed the king of Fir Cell, he plundered Connacht, destroyed fortified lake dwellings in rivers and marshes, and slew the chiefs. Again in 990 he was fighting in Thomond, and in 992 took great spoils out of Connacht.

On the eastern coast Mael Seachlinn defied Brían's claim to interference with or control of Leinster ; and in 983, with the help of his half-brother Gluniarn son of Amlaibh, led a battle-rout of Danes and Irish against Domnall Claen king of Leinster and Ivar of Waterford, and carried off their preys. On this side, however, his war on Brían was feeble—baffled, unless he got help, by the strength of Dublin, and yet more by his troubles in Brega, which was not only ravaged by the Norsemen, but honeycombed with petty family rivalries and shifting local understandings or private compacts with the Foreigners. His difficulties may be seen by his “treacherously” killing the “royal heir of Tara” in 991 ; and killing the king of Luighne in the abbot's house of Donaghpatrick near Navan in 993 ; followed by his burning of Swords in 994, and the blinding of the son of the king of Meath in 997—outrages which possibly indicate local leagues in Brega with the Foreigners of Dublin. Some such story may be hidden in the mysterious fall of *Lia Ailbe*, the chief monument of Mag Breg, and Mael Seachlinn's cutting of the pillar stone into four mill-stones in 999. The plain of Brega had been from ancient times the best cultivated, the richest, and doubtless the most populous part of Ireland, and its continued devastation was a serious weakening of the strength of Mael Seachlinn.

While the high-king's forces were wasted in “the plain of Meath” those of Brían were divided between two independent campaigns—on one side land-hostings on Leinster, Ath Cliath, and the Meath borders, on the other a “great marine fleet” on the Shannon. An amicable agreement was finally concluded between the two kings—Brian paralysed on one side of the island and Mael Seachlinn on the other. In 997 they met on the shore of Loch Ree where Brian had brought his fleet, and there made a mutual peace [3]—that Mael Seachlinn should give up to Brian the hostages he had taken from the south. Foreigners and men of Leinster and Connacht-men ; and that he should be sole sovereign of the north without war or trespass from Brian. All this is omitted in the Ulster Annals, but their brief entry in 998 confirms it : “A hosting by Mael Seachhnn and Brian when they took the pledges of the Foreigners for their submission to the Irish.” And immediately after comes a new (apparently agreed) division of the war—“A hosting by Mael Seachhnn to Connacht which he devastated. Another hosting by Brian to Leinster which he devastated.”

For Brían the decisive conflict came in 999 A.D. with the revolt of Maelmordha king of Leinster in alliance with the Foreigners of Dublin. When they heard that Brian was on the march to lay siege to Dublin, they hastily sent their women and cattle to the “angle of the Foreigners,” an angular piece of land near Dunlavin, an ancient fort of the kings of Leinster. At Dunlavin, one of the resting-places of Muirchertach of the Leather Cloaks, the armies of Dublin and Leinster proposed to meet and overthrow Brían. By a master-stroke he intercepted them at the narrow pass of Glen-Mama (then part of Dublin territory)—a defile where there was no room for battle and retreat was cut off [4]. The terrific slaughter is remembered in local tradition, and shown in the countless bones gathered below mounds of earth and scattered under the fields. One detachment fled to the Liffey ford of the Horsepass above Poul-a-phouca, where they were utterly routed ; another to the ford at Ballymore Eustace, over the quagmire at Moinavodh, where many sank in the morass ; a third sought shelter in the recesses of Hollywood and Slievegad, pursued by Brían. It is probably here that one of the ancient yews round S. Kevin's church gave refuge to Maelmordha king of Leinster till he was dragged from his hiding-place in its branches by Brían's son Murchad. The Dál gCais and men of Munster were heavily slaughtered, but the Norse army was practically annihilated. To the bardic poets no battle in Ireland, not even that of Mag Rath, or of Clontarf, was equal in glory and fame to that of Glen Mama under Brían Boru.

The way was now clear to Dublin, and there at Christmas the victorious Brían made his headquarters for five weeks, seizing the enormous treasures that fed the traffic and added to the splendours of the merchants of Ath Cliath. In Leinster he took hostages, burned down fortresses, and cleared woods and passages for his army. The king of Dublin, Sitric son of Amlaibh Cuaran, fled on the day of battle to the north. Pursued by Brían's orders he found no shelter with the chiefs of Ulster, and three months later "came into Brían's house" in token of consent to the generous terms of peace—which may be gathered from the "Book of Rights" : "the Norsemen of Dublin and the Foreigners of Ireland are in general bound to follow him (the king of Cashel) to battle for *maintaining them in their territory*."

According to the later saga of the Dál gCais, "the Gaedhil and the Gaill," "Five and twenty battles Brian fought before the Foreigners were destroyed, enslaved, and bonded.... So that there was not a winnowing sheet, from Benn Edair to Tech Duinn in western Erin, that had not a foreigner in bondage on it, nor was there a quern without a foreign woman. So that no son of a soldier or of an officer of the Gaedhil deigned to put his hand to a flail, or any other labour on earth ; nor did a woman deign to put her hands to the grinding of a quern, or to knead a cake, or to wash her clothes, but had a foreign man or a foreign woman to work for them" [5]. This proud invention however was far from what we know of Brían's own policy ; his determination to national peace and with it friendship even with his bitterest enemies. For seventy years attempts to drive the Foreigners out of Dublin had been abandoned. True to his fixed purpose of conciliation in Ireland, Brian restored the fortress of Ath Cliath to Sitric : a long tradition handed down probably through Giraldus to the time of Keating tells that he allowed the invaders to remain in their forts on the coast "for the purpose of attracting commerce from other countries to Ireland." Maelmordha of the yew tree was only held in captivity till Brían received the hostages of all Leinster, when he was liberated, the hostages handed over to him, and the reigning king dethroned to make way for him. The contracts were affirmed by marriages. Brían gave his daughter to the young king Sitric "of the silken beard," and probably at this time diplomatically took for himself under some form the sister of Maelmordha and mother of Sitric, Gormflaith—the famous Gormflaith who had been put away by Amlaibh Cuaran and Mael Seachlinn in succession. Finally the triumphant hosting of the Dál gCais was led back to Kincora with abundant reward of gold and silver, horns and goblets, and cloths of colour. The success of Brian's policy was shown when the Norse king of Dublin, who with the king of Leinster the year before had been fighting against him, now supported him in his conflict with Mael Seachhnn [6].

We have seen that the danger from the sea-power of Limerick and the Danes in the west had forced Brían, for the defence of his people, to establish a centralized kingship in Cashel such as had never before been known there. He had been twenty-three years king of Cashel before he found himself driven, by the same peril of ever more invaders from over-sea, to challenge the actual system of high-kingship as an adequate protection against organized foreign menace. The formidable Dublin kingdom, attracting to itself Leinster by the profits of trade, held a position where it could break at will the power of either "Half" of Ireland. In a single central authority Brían saw the only hope of national existence. The Annals of Tigernach mention in 999 "the first revolt through treachery of Brian and the Connacht men against Mael Seachlinn the Great." It was perhaps the last day of that year that Brian for the first time entered the kingdom of Tara from the south, crossing the border of Leth Cuinn with men of the south of Connacht, of Ossory and Leinster, and the Foreigners of Dublin, to proceed to Tara. But the Foreigners with a battalion of cavalry went before them into Mag Breg, and Mael Seachlinn overtook and slaughtered them. Brían afterwards marched on till he was at Ferta neme in Mag Breg, "and he came back without a battle, without ravaging, without red fire," "through the power of the Lord," the Ulster Annals add—an instance of his constant avoidance of fighting when by any other means he could assert his authority. The definite conflict however was now opened. Again in 1000 A.D. Tigernach tells of "a great foray by

the country-side (?) of Munster into the south of Meath till Oengus, son of Corrach the Valiant, with a few overtook them, and seized their spoils from them, and left them with ‘a slaughter of heads.’ ”

As this new conflict opened Mael Seachlinn, doubtless recalling the ancient prerogative of the kings of Connacht to hold “ a border meeting at Ath Luain with the *tuatha* of Temair” [7], made with the king of Connacht a causeway there (1001) for the more easy union of their armies for war. Brian’s answer to the threat was to march at the head of the forces of Leth Moga, both Foreigners and Irish, to Tara, and send ambassadors to Mael Seachlinn demanding hostages of submission or battle. Mael Seachlinn asked for a month’s delay to muster the hostings of Leth Cuinn, and Brían agreed that during that time there should be no plunder or ravage or destruction or trespass or burning on his side, and for that month he remained encamped at Tara.

The “ Wars of the Gaedhil and the Gaill” gives a highly dramatized account of the hurried controversies of the Uí Neill in presence of this threat. The alternate rule of the two kingly houses of Tara and Ailech, after five hundred years, was breaking down before the test of two centuries of Foreign war. We know that after Mag Rath the north-eastern sea-coast was abandoned to a half-century of raids from the Britons. Dangers foreseen by Columcille increased when all communications between the old Dal Riata and their territory beyond the sea were broken by the pirate fleets from the Hebrides. The people of east Ulster, caught between the raiders of the Ocean and the forces of the conquering Uí Neill, fell into extreme disorder, increased by local feuds and frequent wars to assert or recover their traditional ambitions. In 913 we read of “ the crews of a new fleet of the Ulidians on the coast of Saxon land where a great many were slain.” Desperate raids of the pirates were desperately repulsed, as when seven score invaders were hanged on the coast of Dál Ríata in 986. On the other hand the conflict with Ailech was perpetually revived as the Uí Neill pressed on their conquests, hampered in the west by troubled relations with their kindred in Donegal, and barred in the east by the physical difficulties of Loch Neagh and its tributary rivers and morasses. The dangers that confronted them at the time might well baffle even the extraordinary ability of the Uí Neill. Mael Seachlinn despatched a messenger to Cathal king of Connacht ; and to Áed king of Ailech and to Eochaid king of east Ulster he sent Gilla Comgaill O’Slebhín the poet of the Ulidians and all the north, calling on the three kingdoms to join him in defence of Tara. The arguments are given in a long poem :

“ Let not the hill of Temair come into Brían’s house.

Surrender not the soft plain to any man,
Sweet are its drink and its meat.”

And with a scoff at the little fort of Kincora : —

“ Tis a shame to have old Temair dragged to the West.”

But northern kings in their hard necessity were less heedful of dangers to “ the soft plain” of Tara than near dwellers in the middle land. Áed had a scornful answer : “ When the Cenél nEógain,” he said, “ had Tara, they defended its freedom ; and whoever possesses it, let him defend its freedom ;” and he said “ that he would not risk his life in battle against the Dál gCais, in defence of sovereignty for any other man.” Upon this “ final answer” Mael Seachlinn made his crowning act of submission. He “ went himself to the house of Áed” and spoke to him—“ Defend Tara for thyself and I will give thee hostages ; for I would rather be dependent on thee than on Brían. For we have not power to prevent our falling into Brían’s hands if thou come not with me at the head of the battle, and the nobles of Leth Cuinn also.” An assembly or king’s court of the Cenél nEógain was called. The hard common sense

of the north made no allowance for sentiment. The nobles declared the offer “ nothing but evasion,” since the king of Ailech would not accept hostages from Mael Seachlinn, who was older and nobler than himself. Áed, himself willing to accept the sovereignty, advised them to retire into secret council. They asked themselves what benefit would accrue to them compared with their lives should they take the lead in battle against the Dál gCais, for never could the men of either side retreat before the other, and if they joined in battle not a man would be left alive. Their arguments ended in the offer of a shrewd bargain—that “ half the men of Meath and of the territory of Tara be ceded to them, as if it had been their inheritance, and that then they would fight the battle along with him.”

Great wrath seized Mael Seachlinn. When he carried the tidings to the Clan Cholmáin, they in their helplessness advised him to submit to Brían as his tributary. With twelve score horsemen the high-king went to Brían’s tent, legally his “ house,” on the green of Tara, without guarantee or protection except the honour of Brían himself and of the Dál gCais. As he was not able, he said, to give him battle, he came to make submission and to yield hostages. “ Since thou hast come unto us thus,” said Brían, “ without guarantee, without protection, without treaty, we give thee a truce for a year, without asking pledge or hostage from thee ; and we will go to visit those people (viz. Áed of Ailech and Eochaid of the Ulidians) . . . that we may know what answer they will give unto us . . . and if they will give us battle come not thou with them against us.” To this Mael Seachlinn agreed, “ and that advice was pleasing to all because they were at the last of their provisions.”

Twelve score steeds were then given to Mael Seachlinn by Brian as a royal gift of the supreme lord. But there was not one of the twelve score men in the train of the displaced high-king who would deign in sign of submission to lead a gift-horse with him ; so that Mael Seachlinn bestowed them all (in token of the new leadership of Ireland) upon Murchad son of Brían who had given his hand into his hand on that day. For he was “ the only royal heir of the men of Erin who was not in alliance with Mael Seachlinn before that time. They then parted in peace and with benedictions, and repaired to their respective homes.”

With this formal and courtly procedure Brían became high-king. The year of truce was strictly observed. At its close (1002) Brían sailed to Athlone while his army went by land through Connacht, so that he received the hostages of all Connacht in one week : while Mael Seachlinn conducted his hostages to Athlone on one day. With these Brían returned to his “ house.” The seizure of the causeway broke all possibility of a junction of forces by Cathal and Mael Seachlinn. Dr. MacNeill points out the importance of this capture : “ In 1129 while Toirdhbhealach O’Conor was seeking to establish himself as king of Ireland we find him building the first castle ever seen in Ireland at Athlone. After that date his power was no longer seriously questioned.”

Meanwhile Áed king of Ailech had made a sudden hosting to Tailtiu and had “ returned in peace.”

From Tigernach’s Annals it appears that, having deserted Mael Seachlinn he had probably in this unexplained journey annexed his title of high-king—“ Áed high-king of Ailech.” Brían’s answer was immediate. Together with Mael Seachlinn he marched to Dundalk with all the hostings south of Sliab Fúait to require hostages of the kings of Ailech and east Ulster. Áed standing at the head of the other northern kings “ did not let them go past, so they separated under a truce, without hostage, without pledge.” In the characteristic way of Brían “ they separated in peace.” But the intensity of the historic struggle in the distracted north broke out in the battle between the northern kings themselves at Craeb Tulcha (1004) in north Down, where the defeated Ulidian king with his brother and his sons were slain, and a havoc was made of the army besides between good and bad. Áed the “ high-king” was himself killed. We have the lament of his court-poet :

“ Tara is deprived of her benefactor,
A blight is upon his kindred” [8].

In the same year the king of Dál nAraide was slain by the Cenél nEógain.

The story of the Ulster Annals that Áed was slain by his own people, may show the resistance of the northern princes to any rumoured terms entered into with Brían. The traditional northern defiance of a king of Munster was so strong, that when Brían attempted in 1004 to make a royal circuit as high-king, he was prevented by the Cenél nEógain. The next year however, going by another road, he carried out his purpose to stand at the head of the army of Ireland—“ the men of Erin ”— in the religious capital, a site whose fame at the time is shown in a tenth-century map of the world, now in the British Museum, where it remains the only name marked in Ireland. “ He was a night in Tailtiu ; and he went from that to Ard Macha, and he laid twenty ounces of gold on the altar in Ard Macha ; and he brought with him the hostages of east Ulster, and of Dál nAraide, and of all the north like-wise, except the Cenél Conaill.” He was there shown the “ Book of Armagh,” and in his presence his official historian wrote the entry still to be seen on the page : “ Ego Calvus Perennis haec scripsi in conspectu Briani, imperatoris Scottorum.” [9] “ I Mael Suthain write this in the presence of Brían, Emperor of the Irish.”

The date of these words is significant. From the sixth century to the eleventh or twelfth, as Dr. MacNeill has put it, the dominant idea of Irishmen was, that as in Ireland there were many small states, and over them all in primacy rather than in operative authority, there was a chief king, the monarch of Ireland ; so in the world there were many kingdoms and over all these a chief king, whom Irish writers called “ the king of the world.” The theory of the supreme lord, the bond of all human societies and international law, was adopted from Latin historians, especially from S. Jerome and Orosius. In the earliest Irish histories the emperor reigning at Constantinople was the undoubted head of Christian Europe, as we may see by a metrical list of the “ kings of the world” from the Flood down to the eighth century which was written out by Flann of Monasterboice who died in 1056. But after 800 A.D. a wholly new problem had arisen. The Empire of Charles the Great was held to be a continuation of the Roman Empire to which all European countries were nominally subject. There was therefore no longer one “ king of the world,” but two. The immediate issue was obscured by the general explanation that the change was a mere translation, legally effected, of the Empire from the Eastern Rome back to the West. It is probable that this was accepted in Ireland, and it is even likely that Irish kings sent tribute to the emperor at Aachen, friend and patron of their civilization [10].

But in Brían’s time there had been a new revolution. As the Muhammedans broke the Eastern empire in the Mediterranean, so the Scandinavian fleets threatened the new empire of the West. Europe was a tumultuous scene of change from the old to the modern world, the vitality of its new races driving them to form national states. Imperial territories were disputed among warring heirs, partitioned, attacked at every point, till the enfeebled Carolingian line was extinguished in 911.

Brían was already twenty years old when the German king Otto the Great (961) “ renewed the Imperial Office,” and founded the “ Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation,” which was in name to last till 1806. It was an empire greatly changed since the day when the Ulster Annals recorded that “ Charles king of the Franks, or rather Emperor of all Europe, slept in peace” (813). France and Burgundy and Spain were not included under its power. The new German Empire was stripped of authority along the whole Atlantic sea-board from the Shetlands to the Mediterranean, and across the northern seas. As the tradition of Imperial unity perished the new nations asserted their independence, and not least the Scandinavian

kingdoms, now by peremptory order proclaimed Christian, emerging from their confused and tempestuous histories into the full energy and pride of powerful states. Already Athelstan king of England had in his vanity and affectation given himself ever varying titles, which culminated (934) in that of “ Basileus of the English, and at the same time Emperor of the kings and nations dwelling within the bounds of Britain.”

Thus the old doctrine of Imperial Rome had been once again shaken and confused. Two Emperors still ruled ; but now in the west the ancient borders of empire were themselves annihilated. The Byzantine rulers renewed their strength, till the emperor Basil II (976-1025) brought the power of the Eastern Empire to its highest point. In the West the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, crowned in a restored Aachen, recalled the fame of Charles the Great ; and Otto III (996-1002) aspired to make Rome the seat of government and residence of the Empire of the West. The death of Otto and the extinction of his dream of Rome must have carried to Brían, who was evidently in the closest contact through his learned men with European events, a sense of profound change. In 1000 A.D., as king of Cashel, he still admitted the homage due to “ the king of the world.” But in 1005 he seems to have recognized the fading away of an Imperial West, and to have accepted a more modern aim—to establish the sovereign independence of his country. As Basil was supreme temporal ruler in the East, and Henry of Bavaria the new Emperor in some remnant lands of the mutilated West, so was Brían in his own land, for which the sole leadership and responsibility now rested with him, the *Imperator Scottorum*. We may remember the importance of a claim which might stretch across the water to the Scots of the Irish Dál Riata, the barrier that now alone held firm, right across the great northern territories of the Scandinavians.

Life moved in those days with slow and arduous effort. It was after thirty or more years of war that Charles the Great was crowned Emperor when he was near sixty years old. Brían after from twenty to thirty years fighting was high-king of Ireland at sixty-one and wrote himself down Emperor at sixty-three. After his stately revolution—a singular movement unstained by blood, where there was no victim, no prisoner, no outlaw, no final severance between the two combatants who acted together for years to come—there is no hint that Brian ever transgressed in any event whatever the traditional limits of the high-king’s rights. From his first journey to Armagh, when he proclaimed the peace of Erin, both of churches and people [11], he made year after year his formal circuit of the north to receive the due legal hostages and pledges. If he was opposed in force he retired without battle, until his authority was so clear that pledges were yielded to him in peace. In 1007, apparently starting from Kincora, he went through the modern Sligo and by Assaroe into Tír Conaill, Tír Eogain, Dál Riata and Dál nAraide, and according to law took hostages of the peoples of Erin until at Lammas he halted at Belach Duin in Meath (now Castlekieran). There he granted “ the full demand of Patrick’s congregation ;” and dismissed his army to their homes in all directions, the national army as he understood it, “ the men of Erin both Irish and Foreigners.” The next year (1008) he again made his hosting to Dundroma “ by the side of Ard Macha,” and in exercise of the justice of the high-king brought away the abbot of Movice who had been taken hostage by the Cenél nEógain. Mael Seachlín, whether in his new security or perhaps in emulation, renewed the Fair of Tailtiu, and in a great assembly established an abbot of the Columban *familia*, as of right a descendant of the Cenél Conaill. There was another hosting by Brían to Sliab Fúait in 1010 to receive the hostages of Leth Cuinn. In 1011 hostings from every province of Ireland were led by his son Murchad and the king of Ailech against the Cenél Conaill, and a hosting by Brian himself brought back the king in submission to Kincora. In this manifestation Mael Seachlín and Brian were together in camp at Enach-duibh in Cavan or Leitrim.

In Irish tradition, from his first royal circuit round Leth Cuinn, Brían “ continued prosperous and venerated, giving banquets, hospitable, just-judging, ruling with devotion and law, with prowess and valour” [12]. The only death laid to his charge in the Ulster Annals was a

Connacht chieftain “ treacherously slain” by him in 1007. The chief’s land lay across the road north to Athlone, a much-debated highway, and according to Tigernach and the Four Masters he was “ slain by Murchad son of Brían,” probably in battle. The Norse saga of “ Burnt Njal” adds a noble tribute to the patient justice of the Irish high-king. “ King Brían thrice forgave all his outlaws the same fault, but if they misbehaved themselves oftener, then he let them be judged by the law ; and from this one may mark what a king he must have been” [13].

To the Norse indeed Brían remained “ the best-natured of kings.” In spite of wars, natural friendships had grown up between the settled Foreigners and the kings of the Dál gCais, whose chief poets long served as a link of intercourse between the Irish and the merchant citizens. The “ blind poet” of Mahoun had been an intimate at the court of Ivar in Limerick, and in his elegy on the murdered king he refused to “ revile the Foreigners because of my friendship with Dubhgeen,” the son of Ivar [14]. There was rivalry in Dublin between Norse and Irish poets, both welcomed with praise and gifts. [15]. A story tells that the men of Dublin, having ordered a great Irish poem, refused to pay the price asked. The poet retorted with a quatrain :

“ To refuse me,
If anyone so wishes let him do it !
And after that I will carry off
The honour of the man that has done so.”

Upon this his own award was given him, and this is the award he made : a penny from every bad Viking, and two pence from every good Viking, so that there was not found among them a Viking who did not give them two pence, for none of them thought it right that he should be called a bad Viking. Then the Vikings told him to praise the sea, that they might know whether he possessed original poetry. Thereupon he praised the sea, he being drunk, and he said : “ A great tempest on the plain of Ler”—a poem which has come down to us in a single copy [16]. For the greater honour of Dublin, the fable was invented that the poet was no less than the celebrated Ruman mac Colmáin—called in the “ Book of Leinster” the Homer and Virgil of Ireland—who had died in 784. His oratory had been Cell Belaig on lands belonging to Mochuta : “ and Ruman gave one third of his wealth to it, and one third to the school, and one third he took with him to Rathen (Rahen near Tullamore), where he died and was buried in one grave with Hua Suanraig, on account of his great honour with God and men.”

The Irish poets seem to have acted as ambassadors charged with communications between the states, whether trading or political—such as Mael Seachlín’s poet and historian Mac Coisse, or Mac Liag the chief poet of Brían, who stayed at the court of Sitric king of Dublin for a year in much content [17]. From first to last the literary culture and enthusiasm of Irish scholars served as a powerful influence in winning strangers into the commonwealth of the peoples of Ireland.

Brían’s poets and historians were as deeply charged as any modern publicists with the business of inducing the public to accept changing doctrines of a world in movement. There was doubtless a scattered propaganda by professors outside the official groups, if we judge by a stray fragment in which an old pretendant to high-kingship from the south is applauded : “ The powerful shining blessing of Patrick which he had given to the noble Oengus had descended to the renowned Cathal—a strong and mighty king who overthrew peoples” [18]. But the great source of authority was now, as in Cormac’s time, the “ Book of Rights”—a Book amended to suit the conditions of a new age. Its old form was preserved, but new prose comments were added for instruction, new poems embodied the latest decrees, and a new order was declared under the high sanction of S. Patrick. Cúan O’Lothcain, known in the Annals of Clonmacnois as “ the prince poet of Ireland, a great chronicler, and one to whom for his sufficiency the causes of Ireland were committed to be examined and ordered” [19]—chief poet

of Mael Seachlinn till 1002, and after that again from Brian's death till 1022—opened the work with a tract on the “ prohibitions,” or unlucky acts according to old pagan traditions of the kings of each division of Ireland. The record of Munster was practically re-written [20]. It declared the king of Cashel head over all by the blessing of the altar of Patrick. It asserted that the sovereignty of Tara had passed away at the fasting of the saints against its kings, when they foretold that the race of Niall should have no “ house” there, and that the new house should be raised by the race of Ailill Olom. Against Tara the blessing of Patrick had come to the king of “ round Cashel.” A right was claimed for the king to be escorted by his sub-kings in a circuit of the whole island, though in fact it had never been customary for any but the high-king of Tara to make an official circuit and take pledges of the provincial kings. In the new theory of history, when the king of Cashel was not king of Éire, the government of Half of Éire was due to him from the “ House of Donn” (the islands in the bay of Kenmare where Donn son of Milesius was drowned) to Ath Cliath of Leinster. Ossory, Leinster, and the Foreigners were all alike under his command, bound to tribute and to follow him in every battle. He could claim border tribute from Connacht for maintaining them in their “ great Half.” In short the *comarb* or heir of Cashel was general head of all, inasmuch as the *comarb* of Patrick, the king of Cashel, was head over all by the blessing of God and of the altar of Patrick—Lord of the whole territory of Ireland :

“ Cashel overheadeth every head
Except Patrick and the King of the Stars,
The high-king of the world and the Son of God,
To these alone is due its homage.”

The nationalization of Dublin, as we may justly say, was one of the unremitting cares of Brían. The “ Book of Rights” has its legend for the Foreigners of a smooth and pleasant history—how Patrick himself had come even from Tara to visit a fabled king in Dublin, and having subdued his pagan heart by raising his son to life, had won from him a willing tribute for Armagh equal to what the Gaedhil had once demanded from the Gaill, even to the tax of an ounce for every nose—a tribute in the court of the Gaill, a gift of good kings, of soldiers, of veneration in its churches, of habitation and commerce. “ This is the history of Ath Cliath ; in books to the day of judgment it shall be.”

But the most remarkable fact in Brían's kingship, and the hardest to be understood by rulers and historians acquainted only with the royal law of conquering kings in other countries, was his reverence for the ancient customs by which his nation had lived—a reverence no less profound than that of the people themselves. His understanding of the problem is shown by his remaining all through the height of his power at his own old hereditary fort. He inflamed no smouldering passions and strifes with late enemies by planting himself in Cashel as king of Munster. Yet more remarkable, as high-king he never made any attempt, amid all his hostings over the country, to set up his seat of power at “ Cormac's Hill.” In his revised “ Book of Rights,” claiming that the blessing of Patrick with all its authority had passed from Tara to Cashel, a prophecy was added that the sovereignty of Erin, “ though great the reproach to Inis Fail,” should not be restored to Tara until the high-king's house was erected there by the race of Ailill Olom. But the court-poet and historian admitted that the men of Leinster did not teach this “ good history,” nor did Leth Cuinn preserve it [21]. With Brían's ceaseless care not to provoke conflict, or weaken Irish faith in national tradition, he never sought to fulfil the prophecy. From his Kincora home he raised no challenge to Mael Seachlinn's poet-ambassador's cry that “ old Temair” should not “ be dragged to the West.”

In his policy we see that deeper realism which soberly measured the respective values to a nation of old tradition and gradual consent, as against the parade of outward symbols of authority over an angered people. What he actually did was without any controversy to leave Meath and Tara to Mael Seachlinn, and there was no flouting of popular feeling. We have

seen the national danger from Leinster, hostile alike to Cashel and to Tara, and by long habit and interest immersed in the most perilous foreign intrigue. To meet this he had used every form of conciliation, and if he had asked, had never imposed a tribute. Foreign founders of Dublin bent on military dominion had rightly seen in the plain of Breg the vulnerable point of the island, easy of access for invaders, and opening a ready way to every part of the island, even into Ulster by the main eastern road flanking the sea. Brian's object was to win them into the Irish common-wealth, by whose forces they should be maintained in their territory, and whose interests should be theirs. The slow task he had in view was that of ending divisions and uniting the whole peoples of Ireland in a common peace.

[1] Four Masters, II, p. 713.

[2] MacNeill : " Celtic Ireland," p. 24.

[3] " War of the Gaedhil and the Gaill," p. 109, pp. cxli-cxliii.

[4] *Ib.*, p. cxliv. *n.*

[5] *Ib.*, p. 117.

[6] MacNeill : " Celtic Ireland," p. 76.

[7] " Book of Rights," p. 5.

[8] Kuno Meyer : " Ancient Irish Poetry," p. 75. A poet of about 1000 A.D. rehearses the praises of Aed king of the Cenel nEógain—how his race had founded Tara—how they protected the poets when it was proposed to turn them out of Ireland—how from Scotland to Bere island there was not a poet who did not come to Áed's royal hill, unless some ignorant bungler—how he had smitten the Ui Echaid and given their bodies to the ravens.

[9] Calvus is the literal translation of ' Mael,' bald. *Perennis* is in Irish ' Suthain,' lasting. The Ulster Annals tell that in 1010 ' Mael Suthain chief sage of Ireland and king of the Eóganachta of lough Lein fell asleep in Christ.' "(E. MacNeill.)

[10] See Robin Flower in *Athenaeum*, Sept. 5th, 1919.

[11] " War of the Gaedhil and the Gaill," p. 137.

[12] *Ib.*, p. 141.

[13] " Njal Saga," II, p. 324.

[14] " War of the Gaedhil and the Gaill," p. 99.

[15] A. Walsh : " Scandinavian Relations with Ireland, p. 71.

[16] See Kuno Meyer : " Ancient Irish Poetry," 51, 112 ; and " Otia Merseiana," II, 77, 80.

[17] Walsh : " Scandinavian Relations with Ireland," p. 70. See O'Curry, II, 128.

[18] Kuno Meyer : " Bruchstücke," 7.

[19] Annals of Clonmacnois, p. 174.

[20] MacNeill : " Celtic Ireland," pp. 73 *seq.* ; " Book of Rights," pp. 55, 57, 51.

[21] " Book of Rights," p. 57.

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