

Clontarf : April 23rd 1014

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There was little time for Brían, whether by his zeal for learning or his efforts for conciliation, to ensure peace. Trouble was always threatening on the border. In 1009 Mael Seachlinn made “ a great retaliatory depredation on the men of Leinster.” Outer discontents penetrated into Brían’s house at Kincora. Maelmordha, the refugee in the yew tree at Glen Mama, who had been given by Brian the kingship of Leinster, arrived at Kincora conveying three “ sail-trees of pine” from Fídh Gaibhle (the wood now called Figile in the upper watershed of the Barrow near Portarlinton), probably tribute due from one of the disputed border frontiers. He came in due state wearing the silken tunic bordered with gold and adorned with silver buttons given him by Brían as his token of lordship. Crossing a mountain he put his hand to steady a mast, and one of his buttons broke. The tunic was carried at Kincora to his sister Gormflaith to have a new button. Gormflaith, already repudiated by Amlaibh Cuaran and by Mael Seachlinn, and doubtless now foreseeing or preparing for a new adventure or “ leap,” cast the tunic in the fire and bitterly reproached her brother, a king of Leinster, for yielding service to the king of Munster. There was another quarrel the next morning over a game of chess, when Maelmordha was “ teaching” the adversary of Murchad son of Brian. He advised a move by which the game went against Murchad. In his anger Murchad broke into a bitter taunt about Glen Mama. “ It was thou that gavest advice to the Foreigners when they were defeated.”

“ I will give them advice again, and they shall not be defeated,” retorted Maelmordha. “ Have the yew-tree made ready for yourself by then,” said Murchad. Maelmordha in fury left the house without taking leave. Word was carried to Brían who hastily sent a messenger to “ detain him until Brían should converse with him, and until he should carry away with him cattle and pay.” The messenger overtook Maelmordha as he was mounting his horse at the east end of the plank-bridge of Killaloe, who turned on the officer and gave him a stroke of a yew horse-switch on his head and broke all the bones of the head. Some were anxious to pursue the king of Leinster and not let him escape without submission. But Brían in his chivalrous fashion answered that “ it should be at the threshold of his own house he would demand justice of him, and that he would not prove treacherous to him in his own house” [1].

On his journey home Maelmordha called an assembly of all the nobles of Leinster at the house of Dunlaing king of Iarthar Liffey, west of the river, “ and he told them that he had received dishonour, and that reproachful words were applied to himself and to all the province.” Leinster had been denationalized by its disastrous history—its age-long fight for independence against Cashel on one side and Tara on the other, its critical position between the foreign armies of Dublin and of Waterford. It had never yielded more than a forced and unwilling submission to Brían. The Leinster men, allied with Dublin merchants through common trading interests, and with bitter memories of centuries-old border feuds, seized on the chance of revolt, and by their insurrection led directly to the battle of Clontarf. Their decision was “ to turn against Brian.” Maelmordha no doubt reckoned on vengeance also over his second foe Mael Seachlinn, heir of the ancient claims of the Uí Neill to tribute from his territory. By alliance with the Foreigners, he would thus be delivered from all threats of North or South. In his mad and narrow policy he sent messengers to Flaithbertach king of Ailech, son of the great Muirchertach Uí Neill, exhorting him to make war on the Ulaid of east Ulster and on Mael Seachlinn.

The victory at Craeb Tulcha had given the Cenel nEógain nominal rule over all Ulster : Flaithbertach king of Ailech—head of the northern line which until Brían’s high-kingship had held the alternate succession with the southern Uí Neill—watched his opportunity to recover the leading position abandoned by Áed in 1004. Other messengers were hurried to the kings of Bréifne on the Connacht border, and of Cairbre in north Kildare, inciting them to raise trouble against Brían and Mael Seachlinn in their several districts. There was a flare of de-

sultory disorders and discontents in 1012 and 1013. Flaithbertach king of Ailech was still fighting to subdue, now the Cenél Conaill, now the Ulidians. Mael Seachlinn invaded Tir Eógain, burned Tullyhog and “took a spoil.” Flaithbertach plundered the Ards in Down and brought off the greatest spoils a king had ever borne : and presently made a hosting to Kells, where “Mael Seachlinn abandoned the hill to him.” There was a wild raid in Meath by the king of Cairbre, “but a few good men of Mael Seachlinn’s household, who were after drinking then and were intoxicated, met them and gave them battle through pride”—a fact so remarkable as to deserve chronicling. Mael Seachlinn overtook them and “they left their preys with them,” and the dead body of the invading king. The king of south Breg, who made a barbarous outrage on the Foreigners, yoking two to the plough, and dragging two others as a harrow, seems to have been carried as a prisoner to Mael Seachlinn, and “died in his sleep after drinking” [2].

In this lawless strife Brían took no military part. He made in 1012 what was apparently a peaceful hosting to Muirthemne (Louth) on the Ulster border, possibly to enlist the mediation of Armagh, “and he gave full freedom to Patrick’s churches on that occasion” [3].

The next year (1013) his ally Mael Seachlinn led a predatory expedition over the same district, by advice of the abbot of Armagh and Brían, to punish the profanation of S. Patrick’s “silver-sounding” bell. Brían evidently depended on the traditional law to abate these disorders, and left Mael Seachlinn full freedom to maintain his hereditary government against lawless violence from kings of Cairbre or of Leinster. The real danger which Brían feared was not from within but from without—the menace of Foreign invasion in the bay of Dublin, and the effect of such an incursion on the men of Leinster.

A vivid warning was given to Ireland when in July 1013 a mighty fleet of the Dubh-Gaill with king Swein of Denmark at their head landed in the Humber to complete the subjection of England. With terror men saw the size and number of his ships, the splendour of their equipment, the towers on their forecastles, the lions, eagles, and dragons of gold and silver glittering on their top-masts, their brazen beaks, and keels decked with colours. In a few months, before Swein’s death in the spring of 1014, England was in fact conquered, and Cnut chosen king by the Danish host, and before long his place secured as English monarch : “of all kings that have spoken the Danish tongue,” said the saga, “he was mightiest, and the one that reigned over the greatest kingdoms.”

Brían did not witness the end of this drama. But he well knew the threatening peril of the Lochlannaig, with their headquarters on the Orkneys, and their ready mercenaries in the wandering fleets of traders, buccaneers, rovers for adventure. He saw Ireland ringed round by Scandinavians at the height of their power, whose command of the sea left her without hope of aid outside her own shores. Sweden and Denmark had established their borders and dominion. Norway, threatened by both and by Norse rebels, had still to secure her independent position, and to her the importance of the Irish harbours steadily increased. However pacific Brían was in home affairs, and with foreign merchants settled in Ireland as part of the civil community, he never lost sight of danger from abroad. In the summer of 1013 he gathered his whole forces for the impending struggle. His son Murchad with half the army was sent through Leinster, devastating the territory from Glendalough till “he came to Kilmainham, to the green of Ath Cliath.” There Brían joined him, having marched through Ossory. Maelmordha had fled with his three battalions into the fortress : and Brían with his son made an encampment for the siege. They were at a disadvantage, for the Norse troops were powerfully reinforced by all the battalions of Leinster, and Dublin fed from the sea could not be starved out. The land army blockaded the town from harvest to Christmas ;” and neither the Foreigners nor the Leinstermen yielded him during that time one hostage, nor one battle, nor one subsidy. So when their provisions were exhausted Brían retired to his home” [4].

Behind this account we may perhaps see how Brían's policy was carried out in this long passive and bloodless conflict. The Leinster rising was checked. No war was made on Dublin merchants. In the extreme peril of his people, not a man was wasted, nor a channel of conciliation blocked. Lack of provisions was certainly not the reason, if it was the excuse, for his retreat. According to the Annals, it was in this year that he made numerous fortifications about the Shannon, at Kincora and round Limerick, apparently against attacks from the sea. He had evidently exact information, while the Irish army was blockading Dublin, of every device the Foreigners were using on their free road of the ocean to organize the full naval force required for conquest of Ireland to the Norse dominions by a final victory in the spring. Gormflaith, said the Norse saga, was ever urging on her son Sitric to kill Brían, and now (apparently convinced that there was no hope in intrigues at home) sent him across sea to seek Foreign help.

The first aim was to win Sigurd, powerful earl of the Orkneys, whose mother was Irish, daughter of Cearbhall prince of Ossory and later king of Dublin. Sitric "of the silken beard," called by the Norse "king of Ireland," went visiting earl Sigurd before Yule, and there too went earl Gilli of the Hebrides. On Yule day he sat with Sigurd in the hall of his homestead in the Orkneys, and "stirred in his business with earl Sigurd, and bade him to go to the war with him against king Brían." The earl "was long steadfast, but the end of it was that he let the king have his way, but said he must have his mother's hand for his help, and be king in Ireland if they slew Brían. . . . Earl Sigurd gave his word to go ; but king Sitric promised him his mother and the kingdom. It was so settled that earl Sigurd was to come with all his host to Dublin by Palm Sunday" [5]. Gormflaith showed herself well pleased with the bargain for her vengeance on Brian. "So grim was she after their parting," according to the saga, "that she would gladly have had him dead." She demanded the gathering of yet greater forces, and told of two vikings with thirty ships lying off the isle of Man—"men of such hardihood that nothing can withstand them. The one's name is Ospak, and the other's Brodir. Thou shalt fare to find them, and spare nothing to get them into thy quarrel, whatever price they ask." Ospak, leader of ten ships, "was a heathen, and the wisest of all men." Brodir (whose name has been lost so that he is only known as "brother" of Ospak) had been a Christian and mass-deacon, but had become "God's dastard," now worshipped heathen fiends, and was mightily skilled in sorcery. Tall and strong he was, with black hair so long that he tucked it under his belt ; and he was lord of twenty ships. Sitric himself went to negotiate with the vikings. Brodir refused to help in the war without a promise that the kingdom of Ireland should be his, and Gormflaith his queen, to which Sitric consented, and reported to his mother how things stood. It was agreed to keep the secret so that Sigurd should know nothing about it. Thus Brodir too was to come to Dublin on Palm Sunday. Ospak refused his consent. He would "not fight against so good a king" [6]. Avoiding a treacherous attempt of his "brother" to entrap him and his ships, he escaped to Brían, told him all that he had learned, and vowed to take the true faith and follow him till his death-day. Envoys were sent also to hire chiefs of ships and outlaws and pirates—two thousand of them—selling themselves for gold and silver and other treasure as well. Adventurers in plenty were to be found, men from York, Wales, and Galloway, Danes, Britons, Flemings, Normans, merchants from France and from the Saxons, "two sons of the king of France" [7]. With the highly disciplined and splendidly armoured Norse of the islands under Sigurd as a nucleus they made a formidable host. The importance of the preparations, as well as all Norse and Irish traditions, show that "Brían's Battle" was on both sides known to be a contest for the sovereignty of Ireland—whether a Norse king or an Irish king should reign there.

Brían, with his widespread sources of information of the enemies' preparations, had gathered his own troops to begin their march to Ath Cliath on S. Patrick's Day. The Dál gCais, all the hostings of Munster to its western-most limits, and "the ten great stewards of Brían with foreign auxiliaries" were commanded by his son Murchad, "the yew of Ross"

(one of the famous old trees), “ for the historians ... do not relate that there was any man of the sons of Adam in his time who could hold a shield” against him ; and his son Tordelbach, the best crown prince of his time. The hostings of Munster came from its extremest borders—the chief leader among them Brían’s faithful friend Cian son of Mael-muadh, and under him Cathal son of Donnabhan. Some chiefs of Connacht were with Brían—the Uí Maine, the Aidne, and warriors of the Delbna-mór, old allies that had fought for him at Sulcoit in 967, and sent men to give their lives for him at Clontarf. From the north the kings of Bréifne, and of Conmaicni (the regions of Leitrim and Longford) joined him, bring-ing news that the king of Cairbre south of Loch Erne refused to come. The *Leabhar Oiris*, traditionally ascribed to Brían’s chronicler Mac Liag, notes the saying of O’Carroll of Oriel and Maguire of Fermanagh, “ As we are from the farthest north part of Ireland, let us join the battalion of Cian MacMaelmuadh as he is from the extreme south of Ireland.” The Mor-maor of Mar, chieftain of the Eóganachta in Scotland and high steward of Mar, in re-membrance of his descent from the house of Corc and Cian, came to help Brían to defend Erin against the mail-clad Foreigners. The power of Armagh was on his side. Mael Seachlinn joined him with his army of the middle kingdom. Only the Uí Neill of the north held aloof— in their own distractions fighting neither for nor against the Foreigners. In this gathering of so great a part of Ireland after ten years of government, without any form of conquest, or a dominant army, not even a capital held in subjection, we may judge of the force of Brían’s character, and purpose to unite Irishmen in the national cause.

In the week before Palm Sunday the hostile fleet was assembled in Dublin bay. The Irish army in great array under seventy banners met between Grangegorman and Glasnevin, north of the Liffey. Still the fight was delayed from day to day. Norse sagas show how grave the issue was for Sigurd. The sky was full of portents. Showers of blood, axes and spears battling in the air, flights of savage ravens, and every night one dead in every ship. There were rumours that some of the ships proposed to withdraw and sail back. Brodir himself felt the terror and had recourse to his sorceries. Through them he learned that if the battle were on Good Friday Brian would fall but win the victory, but if they fought before that day his enemies would perish. He ordered that there should be no fight before Friday. On Thursday there was a new portent when a man on an apple-grey horse, and in his hand he held a halberd—Odin it was rumoured—rode up to Gormflaith and her company and talked long with them. Others report him an Irish traitor. There were legendary portents also for Irish warriors. A youth from the land of faery appeared to Murchad, to tell him that he would receive certain death if he fought, and of what the faëry world could give “ if thou didst but know it,” “ life without death, without cold, without thirst, without hunger, without decay, beyond any delight of the delights of the earth to me.” “ This is not good encouragement to fight,” said Murchad “... but, however, often was I offered in hills and in faëry mansions this world and these gifts ; but I never abandoned for one night my country nor my inheritance for them” [8].

On the morning of Good Friday, April 23rd, 1014, the day fixed by Brodir’s sorceries, the host of Ath Cliath “ fared out of the Burg” and put themselves in battle array. The accounts that have come down to us in old sagas are confused and conflicting. All alike are mixed with legendary details. Neither Norsemen nor Munstermen knew the topography of the Dublin region so as to give an exact description. Still more perplexing was the bitter partizanship of writers who for their propaganda boldly chose what they would report, what they would omit, and what they would alter to suit their own purposes. The latest and most valuable effort of reconstruction is that of Mr. Lloyd in the *New Ireland Review*, Vol. XXVIII., where he gives in detail his reasons for placing for the first time the fighting columns in their due positions, with the resulting course of the battle.

The site of the conflict was a very limited space between the Liffey and the Tolka ; bounded on the north by Tomar’s Wood, remnant of an ancient forest with thick undergrowth

and majestic oaks, and on the south by the strand, whatever may have been its limits in those days at high tide. The only entry from the south to the “Green of Dublin” and the wide open country which then stretched from what is now the Phoenix Park to the Weir of Clontarf was across the Liffey by Dubhgall’s Bridge, just above the modern Four Courts.

The battalions of the Norse and the Leinstermen seem to have been stationed in a line that bent round slightly from Dubhgall’s Bridge to the Weir. The Dublin Norse had their post next to the Bridge. The men of Leinster were ranged in three strong companies—the hostings of Maelmordha, of the Uí Cennselach, and the muster of the lesser kingdoms—probably on Crinan’s Hill, the rising ground between the modern Rutland Square and Mountjoy Square. The Foreign vikings under Sigurd held the ground thence to the Weir. The Irish army, leaving a broad space between, planted their three hosts in like manner from river to river : the Connacht and western men facing the Dublin Norse, the men of Munster opposite the Leinster hosting, and the men of Dál gCais over against the most formidable foes, Sigurd and his troops, a thousand of his choice warriors in mailed armour, corslets of double refined iron or of brass. Mael Seachlinn’s army seems to have lain between Grangegorm and Magh Duma, now Phibsborough, to be thrown in when it was needed to strengthen the troops of the south or west. It is reported that Mael Seachlinn “placed a ditch between himself and the Foreigners”—in other words he probably fortified his position with earthworks, which Mr. Lloyd thinks may still have existed in 1324 in “le Rughdich” that extended from Grangegorm as far as the king’s highway leading from Finglas to the city. The Norse fleet was far off at Clontarf—the Bull—for fear of being stranded by the falling tide.

The Norse for their own reasons forced the battle on Good Friday. Brían refused to fight on that holy day, and gave the command of his troops to Murchad, with his son of fifteen Tordelbach. In a space behind the fighting line of the Dál gCais a skin was laid on the ground, where the high-king knelt and clasped his hands to pray.

A single lad attendant—Laitéan—was with him, and a few warriors holding their shields linked made round him a “shield-burg.” Behind him was “Tomar’s Wood,” the sacred wood of the Dublin Foreigners where they worshipped their god Thor, Through it the stream of the Tolka flowed from Glasnevin where Columcille had studied under the Leper three hundred and fifty years before. “Watch thou the battle,” said Brian to the lad, “while I sing the psalms.”

The combat was opened by the chief champion of the Foreigners, Plait, “a strong knight of Lochlann,” “brave champion of the Foreigners,” coming forth from Sigurd’s host with a threefold cry, “Faras Domnall !” Domnall, the high steward of Mar from Alba, “answered and said, Here, thou reptile !” The two warriors fell dead together, “the sword of each through the heart of the other, and the hair of each in the clenched hand of the other.”

With equal desperation the forces fought on that narrow, perilous, and ill-chosen ground, marked out by the foreign host. The Norse trusted to their mighty ships for refuge or for provisions. They had their heavy armour, well-fastened coats of mail of double refined iron or of brass, their “foreign helmets” with clasps and buckles, powerful swords, broad green spears, and arrows—all their weapons, in common belief, poisoned in the blood of dragons and toads and water-snakes of hell and scorpions and such like. On the other side were “the wolf-dogs of victorious Banba,” with spears well-riveted in handles of white hazel, hard straight swords, poisoned darts with silken strings and thick-set with nails, in the hands of their chiefs and heroes Lochlann axes for cutting the enemies’ coats of mail, shields with bosses of brass and chains of bronze, “golden helmets” set with gems or ornament ; and to guard their bodies graceful shirts and many-coloured enfolding tunics over comfortable long vests.

The details of the battle do not concern us here. They can be studied in Mr. Lloyd’s careful reconstruction of the scene. He has ably refuted the calumny which has so long prevailed that

“ the men of Meath and Mael Seachlinn were not of the same mind as the rest,” that Mael Seachlinn was in “ evil understanding” with the enemy to betray Brían, and that the earthworks he had thrown up for protection were made on advice of the Foreigners, and part of a compact that neither side should attack the other. For this fable there is no ground in any action of Mael Seachlinn during the whole of his long and loyal association with Brían, or in the events of the battle. His entrenched position was the act of an experienced warrior ; and it appears in fact that when the Munster troops were hard pressed by Maelmordha, Mael Seachlinn hastened to their aid and routed the Leinster battalions. In that centre of the battle-field, about the slope of Crinan’s Hill, the fight was fierce. According to Mael Seachlinn’s reported story of that day : “I never saw a battle like it, nor have I heard of its equal. . . .There was a field and a ditch between us and them, and the sharp wind of the spring coming over them towards us,” so that in a brief time no son or brother could recognize the man next him, “ we were so covered, as well our heads as our faces, and our clothes, with the drops of gory blood, carried by the force of the sharp cold wind which passed over them to us.” ...“ Our spears over our heads had become clogged and bound with long locks of hair, which the wind forced upon us.”

The conflict with the Norse troops, who fell on the Dalcassians with “ crushing and repulse,” had its peculiar terrors unknown to Irish war. We should probably see something more than a merely bombastic description of the first conflict with a mailed host in that narrow field, which opened to the Irish a new vision of war—comparable to the shock of the first use of gunpowder against them in the sixteenth century (when, curiously enough, the terrifying effect of mere sound is given), or to our own modern experience of military methods outside of all former record [9]. It was a new scene the writers described, “ like the terrific judgment day to crush and shiver the compact world”— the clashing steel hacking and cutting helmets and corslets of iron and brass, the “ showers of sparks,” “ flaming stars from the firmament,” “ flashes of fire in the expanse of the air.” “ And it appeared to the people of Ath Cliath, who were watching them from their battlements, that not more numerous would be the sheaves waving over a great company reaping a field of oats, even though two or three battalions were working at it, than the hair flying with the wind from them, cut away by heavy gleaming axes, and by bright flaming swords.” Before the first onrush of the mailed Norsemen the Dál gCais were forced back, till Murchad, son of Brían, at the head of the seven score sons of kings that were in his household, swinging a sword in either hand, “ made a hero’s breach and a soldier’s field” through the battalions of the enemy. From his watchtower on the battlements of Ath Cliath king Sitric and his wife, daughter of Brían, watched through the day. “ Well do the Foreigners reap the field,” said he ; “ many is the sheaf they let go from them.” “ It will be at the end of the day that will be seen,” said Brían’s daughter.

Meanwhile the high spring tide which had carried the ships up the Liffey at 6 a.m. and fallen back, was now again rushing inward and cutting off from the Norse access to the ships, their only refuge. The last tragedy was added to the appalling strife of armies imprisoned within a restricted and ever-narrowing space, as all way of flight by the strand was closed. The panic-stricken Foreigners and the Leinstermen, seeing no escape by Dubhgall’s Bridge, and cut off on the north by Tomar’s Wood, were driven backwards to the Tolka Weir and the incoming sea, where there was no place of landing for the ships. In the wild pursuit the boy Tordelbach “ went after the foreigners into the sea, when the rushing tide-wave struck him a blow against the weir of Clontarf and so was he drowned,” entangled in a group of his enemies. It was said that of the men of Connacht and the west, hemmed in against the Liffey under the Castle battlements, only a hundred escaped. The fate of the Dublin Norsemen opposite to the Connacht troops was worse, for only twenty fled from the battle, and the last of these was slain at Dubhgall’s Bridge.

Some Foreigners were still left, “ who retained their senses and their memories, and who preferred enduring any amount of suffering rather than be drowned.” Among them was

Sigurd in the madness of the Berserker rage, whom no edged weapon could harm, nor strength overcome. He seems to have turned westward towards the open land of Magh Duma and of what is now Phoenix Park. Murchad in pursuit reached his adversary. One account tells that with a violent rush he cut the fastenings of Sigurd's helmet and felled him to the earth. Turning on the son of the king of Lochlann, head of the Foreigners, Murchad fought till the two fell there together. On the field of battle lay the dead of Brían's house—on the west his son Murchad, victor of the day over Sigurd and his host—on the east his grandson Tordelbach, in the last pursuit of the Foreigners into the ocean—and Conaing his nephew, said by one to have been the slayer of Maelmordha in the middle field, by another to have been killed at the close of the fight by the side of Brian.

The two royal watchers of the morning were still at gaze under the sinking sun. King Sitric and his wife, Brían's daughter, had not left their watch-tower of Ath Cliath. "It appears to me," said she, "that the Foreigners have gained their inheritance." "'What meanest thou, O woman?'" said Amlaibh's son. "'The Foreigners are going into the sea, their natural inheritance,'" said she; "'I wonder is it heat that is upon them; but they tarry not to be milked, if it is.'" The son of Amlaibh became angered, and he gave her a blow," which is said to have knocked out a tooth.

King Brían, on the other hand, kneeling in his post by Tomar's Wood still prayed [10]. "He sang fifty psalms, and fifty prayers, and fifty paternosters, and he asked the attendant after that what the condition of the battalions was. The attendant answered and said, 'Mixed and closely confounded are the battalions, and each of them has come within the grasp of the other; and not louder in my ears would be the echoes of blows from Tomar's Wood, if seven battalions were cutting it down, than are the resounding blows upon heads, and bones, and skulls, on both sides.' He asked of Murchad's standard; and the attendant said—'It is standing, and many of the banners of the Dál gCais are around it; and many heads are falling around it, and a multitude of trophies, and spoils, with heads of the Foreigners are along with it.' 'That is good news, indeed,' said Brían." Again he prayed, and asked of the battle. "There is not living on earth," said the lad, "one who could distinguish one of them from the other. For the greater part of the hosts at either side are fallen, and those who are alive are so covered with splatterings of the crimson blood—head, body, and vesture—that a father could not know his son from any other of them, so confounded are they." Murchad's standard was now far off, it had passed through the battalions, and was still aloft in the west. Brían said, "The men of Erin shall be well while that standard remains standing, because their courage and valour shall remain in them all, as long as they can see that standard." Once more the skin rug was readjusted and he prayed as before, and again asked of the battle. It was, said the lad, "the same as if Tomar's Wood was on fire, and the seven battalions had been cutting away its underwood . . . leaving its stately trees and its immense oaks standing . . . and Murchad's standard has fallen." "That is sad news," said Brían; "on my word," said he, "the honour and valour of Erin fell when that standard fell; and Erin has fallen now, indeed. . . . And what avails it me to survive this, or that I should obtain the sovereignty of the world, after the fall of Murchad, and Conaing, and the other nobles of the Dál gCais, in like manner?" He was urged to escape to the camp. "Oh God! thou boy," said Brían, "retreat becomes us not, and I myself know that I shall not leave this place alive; and what would it profit me if I did? For Aibhinn of Craig Liath came to me last night," said he, "and she told me that I should be killed this day." He is supposed then to have given his last directions ("I have not wealth of gold or silver," said he). As they talked earl Brodir came from Tomar's Wood in which he had taken his place, and approached with two warriors. "Woe is me, what manner of people are they?" said Brían. "A blue stark-naked people," said the attendant. "Alas!" said Brian, "they are the Foreigners of the armour, and it is not to do good to thee they come." Brodir passed him by and noticed him not. One of the three, supposed to be a traitor who had once been in Brian's service, called to him—"Cing, Cing," said he, "this is

the Cing.” “ No, no, but prest, prest,” said Brodir ; “ it is not he,” says he, “ but a noble prest.” “ By no means,” said the soldier ; “ that is the great king Brian.” “ Now,” tells the Njal saga, “ Brodir saw that king Brían’s men were chasing the fleers, and that there were few men by the shield-burg. Then he rushed out of the wood, and broke through the shield-burg and hewed at the king.” He “ cleft his head utterly,” says the Irish saga. And Brodir called out with a loud voice—“ Now let man tell man that Brodir felled Brían.”

Thus it was that as he arose from prayer the last vision on earth of the great king of Ireland was the axe swung over his head by the pagan foreigner ; and the field of slaughter, where his standard had fallen among the bravest of his house. So died, says the Irish saga, “ one of the three best that ever were born in Erinn ; and one of the three men who most caused Erinn to prosper, namely Lugh Lamha-fada, and Finn Mac Cumhaill, and Brían son of Cennétig.” *Dialana anam.*

The whole peoples of Ireland, Irish of north and south and Norse citizens, united to glorify the memory of so great a king. The dead body of the peace-maker must have been borne in honour over the terrible bridge of slaughter below the fort of Dubhlinn, and through the streets of the foreign settlement to Kilmainham. From their city the body was reverently carried in state through the purely Norse territory of Fingall, and into the heart of the most disturbed and troubled region of Ireland, among princes the most recalcitrant, leaders of revolt, long the most jealous of Brían’s policy of final unity. “ The community of Swords came on the morrow and brought the bodies of Brían and Murchad to Swords and thence to Duleek (Diamhliag Cianain). And the community of Duleek escorted them to Louth. And Maelmhuire son of Eochaid, *coarb* of Patrick, came with the community of Armagh to Louth to meet those bodies. And they buried Brían king of Ireland, Octavian Augustus of the Gael, Emperor of Ireland and Scotland and of Britons and Saxons and of part of France, after being one score and seventeen years king of Munster and twelve years king of Ireland, in the north-western side of the temple of Armagh in a coffin apart, and Murchad and the heads of Conaing and Mothla in another coffin apart. Twelve nights was the congregation of Patrick watching those bodies with hymns and psalms and canticles” [11]. No such tribute had ever been paid, or was ever again given to any king in Ireland. Nor is it easy now to measure the full significance of the great pacification that solemnized the last passage of Brían Borama in peace from the foreign city of Dublin to Swords of Columcille, and Armagh of Patrick. The *comarb* of the great saint, bearing his relics, the rulers of ancient communities, with the powerful stewards who guided the affairs of wide territories, and the leading scholars and teachers of their time, reverently conducted the bier on its long journey. The princes of Ulster made no opposition to the king whose fame was his indomitable will for peace, and the piety of his single-hearted patriotism. Thus the congregation of S. Patrick and the people of the north “ waked” the high-king from the south for twelve nights ; and then laid him in a new tomb [12].

Honour was given to Brian from every side. The Annals of Ulster woke from long contempt to proclaim him “ the high-king of the Gaels of Ireland and of the Foreigners and Britons, the Augustus of all the north-west of Europe.” “ Erinn fell by the death of Brían,” lamented the Irish saga of the south. “ Illustrious in the eastern world was the conduct of Brían among the Franks.” “ Brian fell but saved his kingdom,” said the Norse poet. But no tribute was so astonishing as that of the Irish nation at his burial.

Epilogue

“ Brían’s battle” was not a war on the settled Norse inhabitants of Ath Cliath. From the attitude of the Dublin citizens and merchants it is manifest how the high-king’s policy, in spite of the restless violence of Sitric, had gradually drawn the Foreigners into the commun-

ity of the Irish people. The merchants of the city showed no signs of supporting Sitric, and the crafty young king, if by private ambition and treachery he intrigued to call in an enemy from oversea, was evidently not acting on behalf of the Dublin men. A great change had come since the time of the old Norse warrior kings. Sitric, looking from the battlements, “went not into the battle on that day.”

After the battle there was no quarrel on either side between the Dublin men and the Irish. It would even seem that there was a good understanding between Brían’s army and the citizens. The account of the *Leabhar Oiris* tells that “it was the advice of Cian son of Maelmuadh and Tadhg son of Brían to bring all the wounded into Kilmainham and encamp there for that night.” The Irish troops lay undisturbed for two days on the Green of Ath Cliath while Donnchad, Brían’s son, went foraging for food ; and when he returned on the night of Easter Sunday with eight and twenty oxen driven in from the Norse territories, Sitric’s personal rage and attempted interference were defied, and the cattle slaughtered on the field for the famishing army [13]. Mael Seachlinn had probably already gone into Meath to take up again the high-kingship. On Monday the Munstermen buried their dead and made sledges and biers to carry the wounded. No attack was made on them when the next day the remnant of the host gathered to begin their painful march home.

There was now no king of Munster, and therefore no commander-in-chief of the hostings from the various under-kingdoms—an army at once victorious and broken by its desperate battle. The long peace established by Brían and Cian was closed. The controversy which inevitably followed has been confused by genealogists with their learned inventions of “alternate sovereignties.” We have seen that succession to the high-kingship at Tara was historically reserved to two dynasties, who followed each other in regular alternation. Though there is no record of any express constitutional pact, the alternation was a well-recognized fact. And on this fact mediæval genealogists in their reconstruction of prehistoric Irish history rested part of their work, throwing back the history of the monarchy to the first arrival of the Gaels in Ireland, and selecting names in turn out of the pedigrees of the principal dynasties [14]. No such pedigrees were made out for any kings save those of Tara. The kingship of Munster had no such record ; and we may set aside legends of an “alternate” pact in which the Eóganachta and the Dalcassians were the supposed partners [15]. From the history of Munster it is plain that succession to kingship was not hereditary but elective. The claimant of the Eóganachta who secured common consent was the rightful king.

Since the tragic death of Cormac the kings of Cashel had practically ceased to exist as a governing force. The line of the Dál gCais had now been almost stricken to death. Brían had fixed all his experienced hopes on the standard of Murchad ; and when the son whom he had trained fell—“Erin has fallen now indeed,” said he. Donnchad was a youth of whom nothing was yet known except a couple of foraging raids round Dublin at a time when all the men there had been withdrawn from the lands for the fight in the city. Brían was reported to hold him in no favour ; and his later career was that of a hard raider, and after a time a dethroned king. The one outstanding chief and famous warrior who had survived was Cian, who had held high command at Clontarf. Son of Maelmuadh (Molloy) who had once been king of Munster [16], of the royal race of Corc and the old Eóganachta, he was lord of the most wealthy and important territory in Munster, rivalling the Danish states in commerce and sea-power. A natural leader, renowned as a warrior, he was famous for his personal beauty and nobility. Moreover as son-in-law of Brían he had been his faithful ally and companion in journeyings and hostings for the last thirty-five years.

On the first night of their homeward march the men of the Dál gCais and of Desmond had their customary separate camps under their own leaders. The same system was followed when the next night they came to the Rath of Mullaghmast, a royal fort of the Leinster kings six

miles from the Barrow boundary : the two remaining sons of Brían, Donnchad and Tadhg, made their camp on the Rath for the Dál gCais, and Cian another camp for his own people. “ Donnchad had but one thousand men, and Cian had three thousand.”

The critical strife arose, as by necessity, at the crossing of the border-land. Cian, lord of Desmond, claimed his right to election against the young princes of the Dál gCais, as being of the elder line of Eogan Mor, “ for Eógan Mór was senior to Cormac Cas,” and entitled to subjection and fidelity [17]. The conflict brought into debate a third claimant, one of the last phantasmal “ kings of Cashel,” Domhnall (son of the Dubhdabhairenn slain by his own people fifty-five years earlier in 959), who allied himself to the strongest side. Never, said Donnchad of the Dál gCais, would he give to Cian pledge or hostage, and when he could gather more troops he would remember his insolence. At news of this debate the wounded and sick of the Dál gCais arose, taking their swords, and stuffed their wounds with moss—the healing bog-moss well known to their old doctors, and at last in our own time re-discovered by a modern surgeon for service in the European war of 1914. Under such terrible conditions Cian refused to fight. There was an interlude with Domhnall of Cashel. “ What profit have we of this battle ?” he asked of Cian. “ What profit dost thou seek ?” said Cian. An equal division of all the land Cian should conquer was what the Cashel king wanted, “ because I am not better pleased to be under thee than under the son of Brían Boru, unless for the profit of land and territory for myself.” Cian had no truck with the new volunteer : the armies of Desmond and Cashel marched to their separate homes, and the “ kings of Cashel” practically passed out of history.

Another peril awaited the Dál gCais when they reached the river. At Athy they drank of the water of the ford, and their wounds were cleansed. Before they actually crossed the frontier Mac Gillpatrick of Ossory and the men of Leinster, having sent out scouts to watch their path, lay in wait for them as “ natural enemies to each other,” since by Brían his father had been kept prisoner for a year and forced to give hostages (977). They demanded pledges or battle. Once more, according to the tale, the wounded prepared to fight, and sent to the nearest wood for stakes against which they could put their backs to support them standing in the battle ; on which the men of Ossory fell back. Some of the Dál gCais were there buried at the river-side, others brought back to lie in the shelter of their own hereditary churches. “ And thus they arrived at Kincora.”

The hundred and fifty years that followed the battle of Clontarf remain practically a blank in Irish history. No effort has been made by any modern historian to trace the actual developments for good or ill in Ireland itself—for example in the practice of law or in schools of learning, in the course of administration and government, in foreign intercourse, in the arts, in the monastic system and its sheltered industries, in agriculture, in trade, or in any evidences of common national tradition.

Materials certainly exist for such a study, whether we seek for them in famous manuscripts or in local records and traditions, whose study is of the utmost importance. There remain testimonies in our Museums, possibly in forgotten and neglected ruins, in scattered literary fragments such as have been revealed to us by the collections of Kuno Meyer. But none of the elements of an important and very critical period have yet been sorted out or co-ordinated.

We have lived, so far as great parts of Irish history are concerned, on a cheap form of guess-work. We have also been entangled in an accepted philosophy, easily adapted to an obscure time of which little or nothing was known, and readily developed on behalf of the next conquering invaders. It is a general view that foreign conquest is in fact justified by the right of a superior civilization, in its beneficence, to impose itself on barbarism. This was fortified by the assumption that in Ireland “ tribal” communities roamed over “ common

lands,” owning no property and practising no agriculture to speak of; that the acceptance of blood-money for killing marked a people indifferent to violence and murder ; a people who had no sense of “ law” as understood by civilized men, and who demonstrated this by leaving their whole island without any system or means for enforcing penalties, beyond private re-venge, on even the worst criminals.

The absurdities of the customary theories advanced, with no research behind them, prove the futility of accepting or inventing generalizations for the critical period from the death of Brían Boru. If we yield to the belief that Ireland had a law and culture made by her own people, and duly worked out by them, it is plain that the whole of mediæval Irish history must be re-written—not as a conflict between civilization and savagery, but as a very real and tragic part of the story of how man from his first origin has had laid on him the necessity of creating the law by which he can best live ; and of how the people of Ireland met and sustained that obligation. For the present there is, however, one decisive comment on the battle of Clontarf—the word of the Norse themselves : “ Brian fell, but saved his kingdom.” That day finally ended the possibility of a foreign Scandinavian conquest and sovereignty in Ireland. It made no severance between the whole community of the dwellers in Ireland.

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- [14] MacNeill : “ Phases of Irish History,” p. 239.
- [15] O’Mahony : “ History of the O’Mahony Septs,” p. 30.
- [16] *Ib.*, pp. 36-40.
- [17] For the late origin of the Munster kings see “ Phases of Irish History,” p. 127-8. The arguments attributed to Cian were thought suitable by the literary compilers.

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