History of Ireland

The Heroic Period

by

STANDISH O'GRADY.

" Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions,
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies."
KEATS.

Introduction

I HAD intended at first to let my book explain itself, but as I reflect on the unusualness of its form and character, I feel the advantages which would be derived from some introductory matter. If I appear sometimes to travel over ground covered by the text itself, this must be my excuse.

It is a common-place that the true function of the historian is to give a clear and vivid picture of the past ; but, although the principle is recognised in theory, it is practically set aside, and pure historical composition relegated to the novelist and romancer, whose audience, as they desire merely amusement, make no very stern demands on the veracity and historical faithfulness of the writer. In fact, the province of archaeology has so extended its frontiers, as to have swallowed up the dominion of pure history altogether. Nearly every work which one takes up affecting to treat of the past in a rigid and conscientious spirit, is merely archaeological. It is an accumulation of names, dates, events, disquisitions, the balancing of probabilities, the testing of statements and traditions, categorical assertions concerning laws and customs. All works of this character are of the nature of archaeology ; they are the material of history, not history itself.

Upon the foundations laid, with the materials provided, by the archaeologian the historian builds. When he has acquainted himself with all that the patient toil of archaeological investigation has amassed, he is equipped for his work, and not till then. But surely, no mere accumulation of facts only, no matter how profound or exhaustive may have been the search whose results he has laid up in his mind, is by itself to be dignified by the name of history. Out of the sad leavings of the past, how can even the most cunning mechanical arrangement evolve a living, adequate, affecting representation of the life of our ancestors.

In history, there must be sympathy, imagination, creation. The sorry remnants discussed by the antiquarian, do not of themselves supply a picture. All these the historian will study attentively, after which, in proportion to his strength and truth of imagination, a more or less faithful and vivid picture of that life of which they are the relics, will impress itself on his mind.

History is the flower of archaeology ; it justifies, rewards, and crowns the obscure toil of those patient and single-minded excavators into the buried past.

In the department of Pre-Norman Irish Archaeology, a generation of workers has passed away. The time has come for an embodiment in a fitting form of the results of their labours. The facts which they have accumulated, the obscurities which they dispelled, the amount of antique Irish literature which they have translated, the pregnant passages which they have

collected out of the bardic writings, the number of forgotten heroes, events, characteristics legal, social, and political which they have brought to light, furnish such a mass of antiquarian knowledge as can supply the historian with ample materials for the reconstruction by imaginative processes of the life led by our ancestors in this country. Until this mass of information is popularised, and by being popularised, secured and appropriated, it is unlikely that any new surge of antiquarian enthusiasm will again ruffle the tranquil mind of the intellectual classes in Ireland. Until this mound of ore is smelted and converted into current coin of the realm, who will spend a lifetime in adding to those heaps which, as they stand to-day in their gaunt uselessness, almost justify the apathy with which they are regarded.

But how can the historian escape the introduction of elements into the period of which he treats, which it did not really contain, but which are only factors in his own mental and moral temperament, and of the age of which he himself is a part ? Will not his own complexion colour all he writes ? This is certainly the case. The most strenuous efforts will not keep his own age and his own character altogether out of his work. Even amongst the historical writers around me, who affect to aim only at archaeological results, and the lucid arrangement of what has been discovered, I perceive their work dyed deep with the hues of their own individuality. There is this danger, indeed, this certainty of misrepresentation; but alas, there has yet been discovered no photographic agency by which may be depicted the actual life of our ancestors other than that fallible and feeble instrument, the human imagination. Yet this objection will lose some of its force by a consideration of the nature of that period, which will be represented in the present and succeeding volumes.

The forefront of Irish History we find filled with great heroic personages of a dignity and power more than human. The age in which these heroes lived was that which almost alone absorbed the attention of the Irish bards. Century after century the mind of the country was inflamed by the contemplation of those mighty beings whom, too, men believed to be their own ancestors. All the imaginative literature of the country revolved round this period, was devoted to the glorification of the gigantic figures with whom it was filled.

Naturally then, this heroic age was as it were a huge bright mirror, in which were reflected the magnified images of the bards themselves, and of the contemporary kings and heroes for whom they sang. The value of any, even the slightest characteristic of the heroic age, is, therefore, of the highest historic importance. The vastness and populousness of this age, which have been employed for the purpose of pointing derision at this country are really the best proof of the value of Irish antiquarian research ; they indicate the enormous fecundity and force of the imagination of a people whose Pantheon was so great.

Now, it is not to be supposed that the heroes and events of this wonderful period are to be lightly passed over — a period which, like the visible firmament, was bowed with all its glory above the spirit of a whole nation. Those heroes and heroines were the ideals of our ancestors, their conduct and character were to them a religion, the bardic literature was their Bible. It was a poor substitute, one may say, for that which found its way into the island in the fifth century. That is so, yet such as it was under its nurture, the imagination and spiritual susceptibilities of our ancestors were made capable of that tremendous outburst of religious fervour and exaltation which characterised the centuries that succeeded the fifth, and whose effect was felt throughout a great portion of Europe. It was the Irish bards and that heroic age of theirs which nourished the imagination, intellect, and idealism of the country to such an issue. Patrick did not create these qualities. They may not be created. He found them, and directed them into a new channel.

The heroic period demands treatment, the very best and fullest that can be accorded to it. There is one mode in which it has been treated, and that I think the worst. All the names, dates, battles, events, births, deaths, genealogies, &c., have been set down in due order. In

this treatment there is absolutely no advantage. One name is as good as another. Abracadabra is as good as Owen Mór, if we are told naught concerning him than that he had a certain father and mother, fought certain battles, and died. Moreover, the archaeological and scientific objections would apply to such a treatment with full force, namely, the unprovability of the statements so made.

The manner of Keating is different from this, and better, but not to my mind the best. Keating, following the old rationalistic compilers of the Irish chronicles, sets down in regular order the kings and heroes of ancient Eire, and related concerning many of them, one or two of what seemed to him the most important anecdotes. Now, Keating believed that all this ancient bardic lore represented pure historic fact, which caused him to commit many grave errors, artistic and archaeological, by which the value of his beautiful treatise is much impaired. Even his anecdotes lose their importance by being deprived of their substance, colour, and life, so that each under his handling has become the mere residuum and anatomy of the old bardic tale, whose essential elements he desired to represent.

Treating these tales as history, he attached no importance to those qualities which have alone value to me, viz., the epic and dramatic.

But even pursued in this direction, a fuller and more artistic treatment would not be satisfactory. No single tale, however well adapted to the modern literary taste, would form a complete and perfect representation of any of the more important heroic personages or events. Round each of the heroes revolves a whole cycle of literature in prose and verse, and no treatment would be adequate which did not take in this cycle in its completeness.

I now come to that treatment which has been suggested by O'Curry, but the effect of which he did not fully realise, viz., the narration of all the bardic tales and fragments in connection with each hero and heroine. Such a work is physically impossible, or if it were effected, the result would not be satisfactory. The bardic literature of ancient Erin would fill, perhaps, a hundred volumes such as the present. When completed, the piled up mass would be without harmony, meaning, or order. The valuable and the valueless would be mingled together. It would be utterly incondite, inorganic, and, I think, unreadable, except to archaeologians and the philosophical. A passage illustrating the character of a hero might be imbedded in a tale concerning another, or in a note to a Christian hymn, or in the life of a saint, or in some ancient chronicle, dictionary, or legal treatise. Moreover, the genesis of these tales must he ascribed to peoples separated from one another by wide tracts of country and distances of time, so that contradiction and confusion are inevitable. The result would be a huge literary chaos, not a work of art, and this would be true even if the tales were reduced each to its pure epic elements. For instance, Tierna, the Abbot of Clonmacnoise, and a man thoroughly conversant, I think, with the heroic history, tells us that the greatest of the Irish heroes died young, yet there is extant a celebrated tale in which he is represented as contending in single combat with his own son.

The treatment which I have myself adopted consists in the reduction to its artistic elements of the whole of that heroic history taken together, viewing it always in the light shed by the discoveries of modern archaeologians, frequently using the actual language of the bards, and as much as possible their style and general character of expression. The death of Conairey Mór is almost a literal transcript from the tale. Through the loose chaotic mass of bardic story and monkish chronicle, I have endeavoured to trace the mental and physical personality of the heroes and heroines in their essential elements, and to discover that order of events which best harmonises with the records and traditions of the poets, and the characters of the heroic personages. Hence it follows, that in order to be faithful to the generic conception, one must disregard often the literal statement of the bard. That the whole should be fairly represented, one must do violence to the parts upon which, indeed, no more violence can be wrought than

they inflict upon one another, perpetually diverging in detail, though in unison generally as to the main idea of characters and events.

But there is another element than the merely epic one in this volume, and which represents a great portion of our literary remains with an almost verbal exactitude and precision.

The bardic mind affected a certain fastidiousness in its mode of treating the heroic period. A conventional set of ideas were deemed poetic, and all outside that was unpoetic. We can see how some such traditions clung around the mind of Homer. For instance, he obstinately refuses to allude to writing of any sort, or to horsemen other than drivers of chariots. The same limitations, to a great extent, pervade the heroic literature of Ireland. There are many allusions to Oghams, and inscribed tablets of wood, but the bards would have us imagine that they never heard of a book or a parchment. In the more ancient literature also they do not allude to the riding of horses, nor to horses at all in connection with Mac Cool and his Fenians. From the bardic literature too, we would imagine that there was not a wolf to be seen in ancient Ireland.

Now, in relating the heroic history, I have departed wholly from the limited range of ideas permitted to themselves by the bards, and have introduced boldly the ancient civilisation of the country. In this part of my work I have preserved the closest adherence to the authorities. In all that relates to the material, social, political condition of the country, I believe that in this and the succeeding volumes will be found an accurate and faithful representation of the civilisation of ancient Ireland. In these volumes the heroic period reflects the actualities of the early historic times. I remember some remark of Horace to this effect, " Hence it happens that we see, as in a picture, all the life of the old man." This has been my object to represent, as in a picture, the state of society which obtained in this country in ancient times, which, though distant in one sense, are near in many others. It is the same sky that bent over them, which shines or darkens over us. The same human heart beat in their breasts as beats amongst us to-day. All the great permanent relations of life are the same. Therefore, I think I am also justified in treating that old heroic history in connection with the enduring facts of nature and of humanity. I do not like to contemplate that heroic age as vague, shadowy, and remote, and have not so contemplated it. Upon the realisation of the bards I have superadded a realisation more intense, working closer to those noble forms, whose outlines are more or less wavering and uncertain in the literature of the bards.

Nevertheless, the outlines are there, and in many an instance a flash of genius disperses altogether the mist for a moment, and lets us see the real hero. From these outlines I do not depart, where they appear with any consistency and definiteness. Yet when a whole nation is busy realising its heroes, it must follow that many an ignoble thought and tale will find its way into the preserved literature. The tales that are canonical and that are not must be determined. For instance, the tales told on pages 256 and 257 concerning both Cuculain and Emer strike down deep into the bardic conception of the characters of both. Nothing that interferes with these can be tolerated by the historian of the heroic period. We feel instinctively that they are essential, while we feel that others are not essential or wholly to be rejected. The nobler conception of any character, is, of course, to be preferred to the ignoble.

One of the most interesting features of early Irish civilisation, the religious feature, is also unfortunately the most obscure. In the absence of clear philosophical statements by the monks, we are obliged to fall back upon the tales and poems. The only monkish allusion to the Irish gods with which I have met, excepting another by St. Fiech, is one in Cormac's Glossary, where Ana is called the mother of the Irish gods, *mater deorum Hibernensium*. Now, if we had a sufficient quantity of pre-Christian Irish literature, there would be no loss sustained by the unfortunate reticence of the ecclesiastics ; but this is not so. The bards were but the abstracts and brief chronicles of their own time, and in their hands the ancient tales

and traditions varied from century to century, acquiring more and more a new complexion as the ages ran on. The consequence has been that, although all the Irish bardic tales revolve round the Pagan and heroic period, yet under the stress of the new faith the old distinction between gods and heroes was lost, and it is only here and there that we can see the differences that formerly obtained. For instance, in the battle of Moy Tura, Mac Ere, King of the Firbolgs, figures only as a mighty warrior, yet in the following ancient rann, discovered by Professor Sullivan, in what a different character does he appear :

> " Twice during the Treena of Tailteen,
> Each day at sunrise I invoked Mac Ere
> To remove from me the pestilence."

The chronicles follow the later tales, and the Firbolgs, as well as the Tuatha De Danan, are set down with circumstantial births and deaths ; yet this single verse shows clearly the true character of Mac Ere as a great and powerful deity.

That the Tuatha De Danan were deities, is perfectly apparent to one who reads carefully the old tales and poems. In the tale called the Sick Bed of Cuculain, the Tuatha De Danan are also termed the Shee ; and in St. Fiech's hymn, in honour of St. Patrick, St. Fiech distinctly states, that in the old times the people used to worship the Shee. The term Firbolg has, however, acquired a very definite meaning, which we cannot forego, in the received accounts of early Irish history. It is applied generally to nations not of Milesian descent. The word itself means no more than giant.

When a complete collection and translation of all the bardic literature has been effected, I should not be surprised if we should be in a position to give a clear and intelligible description of all the occupants of the Irish Olympus.

The old heroic history is overlain and concealed, but much of it is still there. In the bardic account of the Milesian invasion, we find a multitude of ancient tales reduced to their essence, or rather their anatomies, and then poured pell-mell together. By looking closely into these relics, we see that the real history was some-thing very different from that which the last redactor desired to represent. The materials which he employs tell a different tale.

There seems to have been a bardic golden age, as well as one of brass, or even earth. The advent of Christianity ruined the bards. The missionaries felt instinctively that the bards were their enemies. The praise of gods and demi-gods, and of heroes who were favoured and helped by these, was the theme of the bards. The degradation of the bardic class was therefore essential to the success of the missionaries. Both could not live in the same country. On the two occasions on which St. Columba refers to the bards, he speaks of them as *homunculi*, and on one of these he alludes disrespectfully to their art. On a third occasion, he is represented as snubbing the chief poet of Ulster, when he addressed to him a laudatory poem. In fact, St. Columba silenced him after the first line.

The consequence was that as the missionaries grew powerful, the bards declined, descending in every generation lower and lower in the social scale. The relations at first subsisting between them are reversed. St. Patrick, and his compeers and fellow-missionaries, seem to have been rude, uneducated men. Their Latin is rude, clumsy, and ungrammatical. His own compositions are so bad, that they have been considered forgeries ; but his pupil, St. Sechnall, was quite as illiterate. In the same age, Duvac Mac Ua Luhair, the chief poet of the King of Leinster, composed two magnificent Irish poems—bold, glowing, energetic, and even sublime. On the other hand, in the time of Adamnan, three centuries later, the monks had perfected a splendid Latin style, enriched with contributions from the Greek and Hebrew, and giving the reader the impression that they were the intellectual lords of the land. In the bardic

literature of this period, we look in vain for anything which might be considered in profane literature the equivalent of "The Life of St. Columba."

In fact, the positions of the contending parties had been reversed. The bards now amused only farmers and tradesmen, while the monks crowned kings, and trained the minds of princes. The consequence was, that secular literature did not flourish, or flourished only in the monasteries, where it was not the chief thing, but an ornament of the monastic mind. The generous tribute paid to the chief hero of the Red Branch by the Abbot of Clonmacnoise, proves not only the growth of a scientific and secular spirit in the monasteries, but also, I think, the complete collapse and prostration of the bardic class. Otherwise, it is I. unlikely that the monks would have affected to perceive the grandeur of the heroic period. We perceive, also, traces of an union between the two modes of thought in the statement of St. Fiech, that the Tuatha of Erin, i.e., the gods, used to prophesy the reign of a new faith, and certain stories of favourite personages of the heroic period announcing the approach of Christianity, or in other ways brought into connection with the Christian idea. Cuculain, borne in his fairy chariot over the City of Emain Macha, with his steeds trampling the winds, announces from on high to the weeping people the coming of the Talkend. Concobar Mac Nessa is informed of the death of Christ by one Altus, a Roman centurion, and loses his life in the fit of wrath which the account produces.

As we examine closely the bardic tales, we will see traces of the same transformation. There are clearly marked vestiges of a golden age of bardic composition in the existing tales. In the midst of flat wordy prose, vulgar in tone, and barbarous in construction, are em- bedded perfect gems of bardic verse, clear, noble, and pathetic. To work back into the elder vein of thought and feeling as much as possible, has been my object in the composition of the history. I have in the present volume no more than adumbrated the hierarchy of the Irish gods. In a future volume I shall pursue this subject more in detail.

If it be asked whether the principal characters of the heroic age really existed, I would myself answer that they certainly did. I have the strongest belief in the incapacity of the uncivilised mind to create imaginary characters, or to discover a personality in the various beautiful or sublime aspects of nature. The Wordsworthian notion of the genesis of the gods and fairies, I think quite incorrect. I believe that all the characters in the present volume really existed, and had more or less the general attributes with which they are invested. Hardly was the mighty barrow piled above the charred relics of the hero, than he started forth to run a new career of glory in the imagination of his people ; a career whose goal was a serene god-hood ; but the first impressions left upon their minds by his actual life, though heightened, were not destroyed. I cannot help thinking that whether the local hero became a national hero, or advanced to the dignity of a god, depended very much on the size of the barrow that concealed his bones. But, indeed, such a notion one ought to be ashamed of entertaining ; yet, too, the mound of Achilles is the highest of those that cluster upon that ancient cemetery called Ilium.

I desire to qualify considerably those passages in which I speak of the old bardic tales as romances. They are by no means correctly so designated. Romance is a product of civilisation, and belongs to a luxurious and leisured age. The bardic tales were to our ancestors genuine history, and implicitly believed in. In their genesis there was never anything like conscious creation.

As I have excluded from my book all traces of investigation and inquiry, I must leave to others the task of justifying me, or undertake it myself in a separate volume. I had some thought of doing this in foot-notes, but to do so adequately, would need considerable space, and a greater amount of printed matter than is comprised in the text itself.

A considerable number of strange words will be found whose meaning, I think, will he generally discovered by the context.

I have taken the great liberty of spelling proper names in the way in which an ordinary reader would best arrive at the correct pronunciation.

STANDISH O'GRADY.

THE PRIME.

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever,
From creation to decay,
Like the foam-flakes on the river,
Bubbling, bursting, borne away."

SHELLEY.

OF planetary epochs, the Eocene and Meiocene have slowly receded into the past, their huge cycles having been accomplished, and the Pleistocene, with new tribes of animals, and amongst them one destined to the mastery of the rest, is advancing over North-Western Europe. The uncouth monsters to whom Cuvier and others have affixed names as uncouth as themselves, have disappeared. The hipparion, a delicate equine creature, will not dart through the woods any more. The mastodon, both that which made its den in the woods, and that which housed itself in caves, will not shake the earth again. The stag of Polignac, the early field-bear, the megatherium, the trogotherium, are all gone. The pleisiosauros, king of the lizard tribe, will not enjoy the heat of the sun any more. His horrid length he has committed to the safe- keeping of the mud, that will one day be marble. In due time he will be disinterred, and assigned an honourable place in the museum. The two first cycles of the modern geological era have passed away. Time, the old scene-shifter, alters the world's stage, a new act begins, and new actors appear.

Pleistocene Europe was not what it is at the present day. There was then no Mediterranean inlet from the Atlantic. There were then no British isles. Between Africa and Europe there was communication at two points : Algiers met Spain at Gibraltar, and where there is now a strait, there was then an isthmus ; from the toe of Italy to Sicily, and from that to Morocco, ran a broad belt of land, dividing the Mediterranean into two great lakes. In the Pleistocene epoch, the Thames, the Rhine, and the Elbe were but tributaries of a mighty river that flowed northward, draining the great plain between England and Scandinavia, over which roll now the waves of the German Ocean. This mighty stream, receiving the Humber and the Forth in its course, emptied itself into the Arctic Ocean hundreds of miles to the north of Scotland. Then the Suir, the Nore, and the Barrow, uniting their waters with the Bandon and the Lee, flowed southwards till they met the Seine, by whom they were borne on to the Atlantic, into which they poured their giant waters many miles to the south-west of what we now term Cape Clear. Then the Liffey, running eastward, met the Mersey from England and the Clyde from Scotland, and uniting, ran northward, till their combined current met the Arctic waters many miles beyond the remotest of the Isles of Ore.

Such was North-Western Europe when it was first occupied by man, such the region out of which Ireland was carved.

As the mastadon and his brood of earth-shaking and reptile brethren disappeared, new tribes of living creatures began to swarm up from the south and down from the north. With the varying temperature altered too the kinds of animals that took possession of these countries.

Sometimes the thick-skinned rhinoceros would wander up this way from his African haunts ; at others his woolly cousin would wander down from Siberia or Scandinavia, and with him the musk-sheep and the deer of the northern latitudes. In the hyena caves lie mingled pell-mell the bones of animals native to the torrid and to the frozen zones.

And now, too, came the Irish elk, whose raised antlers stood, twenty feet from the ground — came the mammoth, with long curving tusks and flowing mane that swept the ground came — the cave-bear, the fox, and the wolf —the bison still wild in America, the urus still preserved
in Germany—came the primitive horse with his enormous head, the lion, and tiger, and hyenas in their troops hunting down both lion and tiger, when no grass-eating animals were to be had new varieties of deer and of elephants, the wild boar, and a strange brute half lion half tiger, with broad flat tusks notched like a saw along the edges, his name machoerodus or sabre-tooth. And now, too, came another animal not yet extinct nor like to be until the planet itself becomes uninhabitable. Sabre-tooth did not slay him ; he escaped the banded hyenas ; and to-day he examines the serrated edges of sabre-tooth's great tusks, and carries the hyena from village to village as a curiosity.

GLACIALIS IEENE.

“ The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals, the bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.”

SHELLEY.

DURING the Pleistocene epoch, and prior to the arrival of man in this portion of the world, owing, as is supposed, to a violent eccentricity of the earth's orbit, the ice and snow of the Arctic regions invaded Europe. The cold was still further intensified by the contemporaneous divergence of the course of the Gulf Stream. The severe heat of ensuing summers, which was one of the consequences of that eccentricity, was powerless to melt to any great extent the ice and snow which had so far transcended their normal bounds. The raised mists stood thick and dense above the ice, down to which the struggling sunbeams could not penetrate. Year by year the ice frontier crept steadily downward. Rain-clouds from the south wafted northwards, deposited their humid burthens, in the form of snow and hail, in those cold latitudes, upon the gradually extending Arctic domains.

The warm atmosphere which had produced the rich vegetation of the earlier Pleistocene epoch was now growing every year more cold. The tropical animals disappeared altogether from North-Western Europe, and creatures of Arctic origin began to occupy these regions as their natural habitation. The mammoth, the woolly rhinoceros, and the reindeer became more and more frequent, and each winter stayed a longer season, as the highlands became more and more capped with perpetual snow. It was now, too, that man made his appearance in this portion of the world. The rough stone arrow-heads and knives which are discovered in the deeper strata of the caves were dropped there by a people which came into Europe with the great and permanent invasion of the Arctic animals, who stayed here as long as they, and who retreated at the same time. This people descended into Europe because the growing cold had driven them southwards, and because the animals upon whom they lived were moving southwards too, and they retreated from Europe, either because the growing heat drove them northwards, together with the animals which formed their subsistence, or because they were expelled by the advent of new races of man, who, as the frost powers retreated to the north, took gradual possession of the whole of Europe.

As the climate of these countries grew colder, the forms of vegetation native to warm and temperate climates died away, and their places were taken by the hardy lichens of the north.

Year by year the winter snow upon the hill-tops lasted longer into the spring, until at last upon our highlands there was no thaw, and the mountains were capped with perpetual snow.

And now, as century succeeded century, and the ice increased in mass and stretched down into the plains, great glaciers, huge rivers of slow-moving ice, began to push down into the valleys, making for the low-lands and the sea. Glaciers, moving slowly over the whole face of the country for many thousands of years, have left behind universal and indelible traces. Plains were scooped and hollowed out, and the substance borne onward by the ice was deposited far away at the point at which the thaw had dissolved the ice and strewn the boulder clay and stones over the ground. The tops of the mountains were worn away and polished as with fine sand-paper, their bases grooved and chiselled by the abrading power of the ice. What happens to-day in Switzerland happened then over Ireland and all North-Western Europe in summer mighty torrents, the solution of snow and ice, and in winter long, crawling glaciers, planing down the country, polishing the mountains. At last the ice became too vast and the climate too cold to admit any thaw, the hardiest of the Arctic animals and plants were obliged to disappear; the seal-hunters passed southwards into France and Spain, and the whole of this country, which we now call Ireland, was buried under a dense and impenetrable incubus of ice. The ignorant epithet of the Roman writer was then indeed deserved, when even the Eskimo and the reinder had to flee from her icy coasts. She was then indeed Glacialis Ierne.

IERNE REDIVIVA.

" So sinks the day-star in the ocean-bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky. "

MILTON.

IRELAND lies now buried beneath a load of impenetrable ice. Man, animals, and plants have been gradually driven southwards into France and Spain before the steady and insupportable advance of the frost-powers. But now another huge alteration began to take place. North-Western Europe descended gradually into the sea. As with a vast millennial suspiration, the earth's bosom fell. Steadily as the land sank the sea rose. Thus, as Great Britain and Ireland are but the highlands of a great plateau, a time arrived at which the rest of the plateau being submerged, the British Isles appeared on the breast of the Atlantic in the same form that they present to-day. But the huge suspiration had not yet ceased. Still deeper the earth sank, still higher the waters rose, till at last only the tops of the mountains showed here and there, and all Ireland was rolled over by the waves of the Atlantic.

But the end was not yet. Ireland, tenanted only by shell-fish and sea-weeds, above which the whale wallowed and the frequent iceberg sailed, was destined to ascend from her watery grave into the light of the sun, to be a a joyful home of men and animals, and to play her part in the great drama of the world. That vast planetary suspiration ceased, an inspiration as vast commenced, and North-Western Europe rose again slowly, millennium after millennium, inch by inch, through the centuries, rose even to the height of the early Pleistocene epoch, and then subsided once more to the point at which the historic period found her.

All this time the frost-powers still reigned. Ireland but emerged from the water to be buried under a still more barren incubus of ice. But at last their cruel grasp began to grow faint ; genial influences from the south penetrated northwards ; the solid and irrefragable ice yielded to glaciers and summer torrents ; vegetation re-appeared and animals ; the reindeer returned and the Eskimo ; milder and milder still grew the climate, till the glaciers and Arctic animals in their turn became things of the past, till the plains were clothed with grass, and great forests roughened the face of the country. Glacialis Ierne had passed away, and Inis na Veeva appeared upon the liquid surface of the sea, bearing a soil fit for the dent of spade and

ploughshare. A new and nobler race of men were now advancing from the south and east. It was not Nemeth and his tribe, or the lady Kasar, or Partholanus, the ill-starred. Civilization and the means of recording their history they did not bring with them. The annals of the cave do not tally with those of the Four Masters. The Book of Invasions is contradicted by silent witnesses out of the earth. The Lowr Gawla must be re- written, and the time-honoured traditions of the bards interpreted after a new method.

DAWN,
" Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream."
WORDSWORTH.

THERE is not, perhaps, in existence a product of the human mind so extraordinary as the Irish annals. From a time dating more than two thousand years before the birth of Christ, the stream of Milesian history flows down uninterrupted, copious and abounding, between accurately defined banks, with here and there picturesque meanderings, here and there flowers lolling upon those delusive waters, but never concealed in mists, or lost in a marsh. As the centuries wend their way, king succeeds king with a regularity most gratifying, and fights no battle, marries no wife, begets no children, does no doughty deed of which a contemporaneous note was not taken, and which has not been incorporated in the annals of his country. To think that this mighty fabric of recorded events, so stupendous in its dimensions, so clean and accurate in its details, so symmetrical and elegant, should be after all a mirage and delusion, a gorgeous bubble, whose glowing rotundity, whose rich hues, azure, purple, amethyst and gold, vanish at a touch and are gone, leaving a sorry remnant over which the patriot disillusionized may grieve.

Early Irish history is the creation mainly of the bards. Romances and poems supplied the great blocks with which the fabric was reared. These the chroniclers fitted into their places, into the interstices pouring shot, rubbish, and grouting. The bardic intellect, revolving round certain ideas for centuries, and round certain material facts, namely, the mighty barrows of their ancestors, produced gradually a vast body of definite historic lore, life-like kings and heroes, real-seeming queens. The mechanical intellect followed with perspicuous arrangement, with a thirst for accuracy, minuteness, and verisimilitude. With such quarrymen and such builders the work went on apace, and anon a fabric huge rose like an exhalation, and like an exhalation its towers and pinnacles of empurpled mist are blown asunder and dislimn.

Doubtless the legendary blends at some point with the historic narrative. The cloud and mist somewhere condense into the clear stream of indubitable fact. But how to discern under the rich and teeming my thus of the bards, the course of that slender and doubtful rivulet, or beneath the piled rubbish and dust of the chroniclers, discover the tiny track which elsewhere broadens into the highway of a nation's history. In this minute, circumstantial, and most imposing body of history, where the certain legend exhibits the form of plain and probable narrative, and the certain fact displays itself with a mythical flourish, how there to fix upon any one point and say here is the first truth. It is a task perilous and perplexing.

Des Cartes commenced his investigations into the nature of the soul by assuming the certainty of his own existence. Standing upon this adamantine foot-hold, he sought around him for ground equally firm, which should support his first step in the quagmire of metaphysics. But in the early Irish history, what one solid and irrefutable fact appears upon which we can put foot or hand and say, “ This, at all events, is certain ; this that I hold is not mist ; this that I stand on is neither water nor mire ” ? Running down the long list of Milesian kings, chiefs, brehons, and bards, where first shall we pause, arrested by some substantial form in this procession of empty ghosts—how distinguish the man from the shadow, where over all is

diffused the same concealing mist, and the eyes of the living and the dead look with the same pale glare ? Yeoha of the heavy sighs, how shall we certify or how deny the existence of that melancholy man, or of Tiernmas, who introduced the worship of fire ? Lara of the ships, did he really cross the sea to Gaul, and return thence to give her name to Leinster, and beget Leinster kings ? Ugainey More, did he rule to the Torrian sea, holding sea-coast towns in fee, or was he a pre-historic shadow thrown into the past from the stalwart figure of Nial of the Hostages ? Was Morann a real brehon, or fabulous as the collar that threatened to strangle him in the utterance of unjust judgments ? Was Ferkeirtney a poet, having flesh and bones and blood, and did Bricrind, the satirist, really compose those bitter ranns for the Ultonians ? or were both as ghostly as the prime druid, Amergin, who came into the island with the sons of Milesius, and in a manner beyond all praise, collected the histories of the conquered peoples ? Or do we wrong that venerable man whose high-sounding name clung for ages around the estuary of the Oboka.

One thing at all events we cannot deny that the national record is at least lively. Clear, noble shapes of kings and queens, chieftains, brehons, and bards gleam in the large rich light shed abroad over the triumphant progress of the legendary tale. We see Duns snow-white with roofs striped crimson and blue, chariots, cushioned with noble skins, with bright bronze wheels and silver poles and yokes. The lively-hearted, resolute steeds gallop past, bearing the warrior and his charioteer with the loud clangour of rattling spears and darts. As in some bright young dawn, over the dewy grass, and in the light of the rising sun, superhuman in size and beauty, their long, yellow hair curling on their shoulders, bound around the temples with torcs of gold, clad in white linen tunics, and loose brattas of crimson silk fastened on the breast with huge wheel-brooches of gold, their long spears musical with running rings ; with naked knees and bare crown, they cluster round their kings, the chieftains and knights of the heroic age of Ireland.

The dawn of history is like the dawn of the day. The night of the pre-historic epoch grows rare, its dense weight is relaxed ; flakes of fleeting and uncertain light wander and vanish ; vague shapes of floating mist reveal themselves, gradually assuming form and colour ; faint hues of crimson, silver, and gold strike here and there, and the legendary dawn grows on. But the glory of morn, though splendid, is unsubstantial ; the glory of changing and empurpled mist vapours that conceal the solid face of nature, the hills, trees, streams, and the horizon, holding between us and the landscape a concealing veil, through whose close woof the eye cannot penetrate, and over all a weird strange light.

In the dawn of the history of all nations we see this deceptive light, these glorious and unearthly shapes; before Grecian history, the gods and demigods who fought around Ilium ; before Roman, the strong legends of Virginius and Brutus : in the dawn of Irish history the Knights of the Red Branch, and all the glory that surrounded the Court of Concobar Mac Nessa, High King of the Ultonians.

But of what use these concealing glories, these cloudy warriors, and air-built palaces ? Why not pass on at once to credible history ?

A nation's history is made for it by circumstances, and the irresistible progress of events ; but their legends, they make for themselves. In that dim twilight region, where day meets night, the intellect of man, tired by contact with the vulgarity of actual things, goes back for rest and recuperation, and there sleeping, projects its dreams against the waning light and before the rising of the sun.

The legends represent the imagination of the country ; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray the ambition and ideals of the people, and, in this respect, have a value far beyond the tale of actual events and duly recorded deeds, which are

no more history than a skeleton is a man. Nay, too, they have their own reality. They fill the mind with an adequate and satisfying pleasure. They present a rhymthic completeness and a beauty not to be found in the fragmentary and ragged succession of events in time. Achilles and Troy appear somehow more real than Histioeus and Miletus ; Cuculain and Emain Macha than Brian Boromh and Kincoráh.

SUPREMACY.

" Me quoque vicinis pereuntem gentibus, Inquit,
Munivit Stilichon totam cum Scotus Iernen
Movit et infesto spumavit remige Tethys. "

CLAUDIAN,

THE mechanical intellect does not appear to depend upon circumstances for its vigour and effectiveness, but the imagination is never strong unless under conditions most favourable, for hope and joy are essential to its free and daring exercise. The inspired history of the Pentateuch will be found to be the creation of the Hebrew mind, wrought upon by the conquests of David, the glory of Solomon, and the consolidation of the scattered tribes. The Iliad was the creation of the Greek mind during or after a great military career. The Hellenes had conquered Greece and the AEgean Islands, and filled their home with Asiatic plunder. Then came Homer and the Cyclic poets, and Achilles was revealed. In Ireland, too, the Heroic age was the creation of the Irish mind, at a time when Scotic influence was felt over North-Western Europe, when an Irish king holding the Picts in fee devastated England, and filled his country with the plunder of the Continent. The warlike spirit of the people was high, the imagination aflame, the national idea had laid hold upon the Irish mind. It was a single nation that inhabited all Ireland and the west of Scotland, and tributary to a single chief. This was the age in which were created the national heroes of ancient Eire the Knights of the Red Branch, the Monarchs of Tara, and behind them, looming over all, the Fianna Eireen, the Tuatha De Danan, and the Titanic Firbolgs.

The pictures drawn, the ideals conceived, the history elaborated in a great age, are not lightly departed from in one which is not great. The period at which ancient Eire reached her height of national prosperity and national elation was that which intervened between the fourth and the eighth centuries. The ideal worlds and their inhabitants, which were then created, constituted a *κτήμά ές αει* ages. But before Eiré became the *Insula Sanctorum* and School of the West, she had for centuries maintained her freedom, and that of her ally, the Picts, in the face of Rome. She had conquered Alba and West Britain, had occupied London, and twice, if not oftener, invaded and plundered Gaul. The spiritual pre-eminence of the island had been preceded by success in arms ; an exodus of Irish conquerors, an influx of captives and booty, had preceded the exodus of missionaries and the influx of students and artists.

It was in this second and scholastic period that the genealogies and annals of the bards, their poems and romances, were elaborated into that luxurious and abounding history which we find in the pages of Keating and the Lowr Gawla. Succeeding centuries were satisfied to accept the history which the sixth and seventh delighted to construct.

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