

Historic Tales

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LECTURE XI.

[Delivered June 19, 1856.]

Of the existing pieces of detailed History in the Gaedhlic Language. The History of the Origin of the Boromean Tribute. The History of the Wars of the Danes and the Gaedhils. The History of the Wars of Thomond. The "Book of Munster". Of the Historic Tales appointed to be recited by the Poets and Ollamhs. Of the legal education of the *Ollamh*. The Historic Tales, with Examples. 1. Of the *Catha*, or Battles. The "Battle of *Mágh Túireadh*". The "Battle of *Magh Túireadh* of the Fomorians".

In the previous part of this course, we have already disposed of the series of the Annals, the foundation of our yet unwritten history. You have also heard something of the general contents of the great books of Gaedhlic manuscripts still preserved, and I have endeavoured to give you some idea of the extent of these great remains of our ancient literature. Before I proceed to give an account of the compositions I have termed Historic Tales, in which so vast a body of information is to be found as to the details of isolated occurrences, and the life and exploits of particular historic personages, I have still to introduce to your notice a few works of a yet more important character. When I explained to you the nature of the meagre entries of which the earlier Annals for the most part consist, I told you that the intention of their compilers was confined to a record of mere dates of the more remarkable historical events, and of the succession and deaths of the Chiefs, Kings, Bishops, and Saints. They omitted the details of the events thus recorded, and of the lives of the sages and rulers of Erinn in these general annals, because such details formed the subject of compositions of another kind. There were many extensive local histories regularly kept, and many enlarged accounts of important historical events, which filled up what was wanted in the general annals. Of those systematic historical compositions, embracing accounts of events extending over a considerable number of years or generations, many are known to have existed, but a few only have come down to us. These few are, however, tracts so much larger in extent, and so much more ambitious in their aim, than the pieces I have classed under the name of Historic Tales, that they demand our notice in somewhat greater detail. And as they rank in importance next to the Annals and the great Books of Genealogy themselves, it is to these pieces that I have now to direct your attention. These larger tracts, then, of which I am about to speak, are those which may be distinguished from Smaller pieces, recording only isolated events, exploits, and battles, in so far as they form connected narratives of the history of the whole country, or of some large portion of it, throughout a series of years. They may, therefore, be considered as complete pieces of history so far as they go, and were, no doubt, intended to form a portion of the full and complete history of the country, of which the Annals embrace but the meagre outline.

The first of this class of pieces to which I shall call your attention, is one covering a considerable space of time, and chiefly, if not entirely, within the acknowledged historic period. It is the remarkable history which gives an account of the Origin of the BOROMEAN TRIBUTE, so long the source of such fierce internal warfare among the princes of Erinn; and which details the chief contests, battles, and social broils to which that tribute gave rise, from the period of its imposition in the first century, to its final remission in the seventh.

About the middle of the first century, the mere rent-payers and unprivileged classes of Erinn, the *Aitheach Tuatha* (a word incorrectly Anglicised "Attacots"), rose up against their lords, and by a sudden rebellion succeeded in overthrowing their power, and even in destroying the chief part of the nobility, together with the monarch *Fiacha*, in whose stead they placed their own leader, *Cairbré Cinn-Cait* [Carbry Cat-head], on the throne. *Cairbré* reigned five years, and was succeeded by *Elim Mac Conrach*, one of the Rudrician race. This Elim reigned over Erinn for twenty years, after which he was at last slain at the battle of *Acaill* (a place now known as the hill of Skreen, near Tara) by *Tuathal Teachtmair*, son of the former or legitimate monarch *Fiacha*. *Tuathal* assumed the sovereignty with the hearty good will of the majority of the people, who were tired out by the inability of the usurping ruler to govern the nation in peace and order. He immediately set about consolidating his power, by reducing to obedience all such chiefs as remained still favourable to the revolutionary

cause; and, having fully succeeded in accomplishing this work, he formally received at last the solemn allegiance of his subjects, and sat down in full power and honour in the palace of the kings at Tara.

Tuathal had, at this time, two beautiful marriageable daughters, named *Fithir* and *Dairiné*. *Eochaidh Aincheann*, the king of Leinster, sought and obtained the hand of the younger daughter *Dairiné*, and, after their nuptials, carried her home to his palace at Naas, in Leinster. Some time afterwards persuaded him that he had made a bad selection, and that the elder was the better of the two sisters, upon which *Eochaidh* resolved by a stratagem to obtain the other daughter too. For this purpose, he shut up his young queen in a secret chamber of his palace, at the same time giving out that she was dead ; after which he repaired to Tara, told the monarch *Tuathal* that *Dairiné* was dead, and expressed his great anxiety to continue the alliance by espousing the other daughter. To this *Tuathal* gave his consent, and *Eochaidh* returned again to his own court with a new bride.

After some time the injured lady, *Dairiné*, contrived to make her escape from her confinement, and quite unexpectedly made her appearance in the presence of her faithless husband and his new wife. The deceived sister, on seeing her alive and well, for the first time knew how falsely both had been dealt with, and, struck with horror, disgust, and shame, fell dead on the spot. *Dairiné* was no less affected by the treachery of her husband and the death of her sister ; she returned to her solitary chamber, and in a short time died of a broken heart.

The monarch *Tuathal* having heard of the insult put upon his two daughters, and their untimely death, forthwith raised a powerful force, marched into Leinster, burned and ravaged the whole province to its uttermost boundaries, and then compelled the king and his people to bind themselves and their descendants for ever to the payment of a triennial tribute to the monarch of Erin. This tribute he fixed to consist of five thousand ounces of silver, five thousand cloaks, five thousand fat cows, five thousand fat hogs, five thousand fat wethers, and five thousand large vessels of brass or bronze.

This was what was called the “ Boromean Tribute ”; as it was named from the great number of cows paid in it,—*bo* being the Gaedhlic for a cow.

The levying of this degrading and oppressive tribute by the successive monarchs of Erin, was the cause of periodical sanguinary conflicts, from *Tuathal*’s time down to the reign of *Finnachta* the Festive, who, about the year 680, abolished it, at the persuasion of St. Moling of *Tigh Moling* (now St. Mullen’s, in the county of Carlow), though against the will of St. Adamnan, who was then the friend and confessor of the monarch. The tribute was, however, revived and again levied by Brian, the son of *Chineidigh*, at the beginning of the eleventh century, as a punishment for the adherence of Leinster to the Danish cause : and it was from this circumstance that he obtained the surname of *Boroimhé*.

Of the tract devoted to the history of this tribute we have a most valuable copy in the Book of *Lecain*, in the library of the Royal Irish Academy ; but we have a still more valuable copy, because much older, in the Book of Leinster, a manuscript of the middle of the twelfth century, preserved in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

The most important of the events recorded in the History of the Boromean Tribute, because by far the most detailed, is the battle of *Dun Bolg*, near *Bealach Conglais* [now Baltinglass], in the county of Wicklow. This battle was fought in the year 594, between the monarch of Erin, *Aedh* [Hugh], the son of *Ainmiré*, and the celebrated *Bran Dubh*, King of Leinster, in which the monarch was slain, and his forces routed and slaughtered.

The next great epoch of our history has been described in another similar piece. I allude to that long period, extending over more than two hundred years, during which the Danish and other Scandinavian hordes continued to pour an almost incessant stream of death and destruction on the country. Of the history of this dreadful warfare we have a very ample account, preserved in various contemporary poems and minor pieces of prose ; but the most valuable, because the most complete and detailed, account of it remaining, is that contained in the tract specially compiled under the name of *Cogadh Gall re Gaedhil*, or the *Wars of the Danes with the Gaedhils*.

Of this tract I had the good fortune some sixteen years ago to discover an ancient, but much soiled and imperfect copy, in the library of Trinity College ; and this manuscript, with the permission of the College Board, I cleaned and copied. On the discovery of the Brussels Collection of Irish MSS. in 1846, it was found to contain a perfect copy of this tract, in the handwriting of the friar Michael O'Clery. This book was borrowed by Dr. Todd in 1852, and I made a fair transcript of it for the College library, thus securing to an Irish institution, where it might be easily consulted, a full and perfect copy. The ancient fragment must be nearly as old as the chief events towards the conclusion of the war, or the time of the decisive battle of Clontarf ; and, as the O'Clery manuscript was not made out from this, we have the advantage of two independent copies of authority so far ; and this, I need not tell you, is no small advantage in the case of documents which must have passed through so many successive transcriptions in successive ages, as most of our celebrated pieces have done.

Of the antiquity of the original composition of the tract, and of its authenticity, we have most important evidence in the fact, that a fragment (unfortunately the first folio only) remains in the Book of Leinster. The existence of this fragment is of of the double importance. Firstly, because the Book of Leinster, having been compiled between the years 1120 and 1150, at a time that men were living whose grandfathers remembered the battle of Clontarf, this tract must have been at that period recognized as an authentic and veritable narrative, and extensively known, else it could scarcely find a place in such a compilation. And secondly, the fact of this tract containing a great amount of detail, of what must have been at this period very distasteful to the Leinster men, it is but reasonable to believe that neither exaggeration nor falsehood would have been allowed to form part of so great a provincial compilation.

This, to be sure, is arguing in the absence of the now lost copy ; but any one acquainted with our ancient books, will be struck with the remarkable agreement which characterizes the record of the same events in books of different and often hostile provinces, even when the writer is recording the defeat, and perhaps disgrace, of the people of his own territory or province.

This book is now in course of publication, as one of the series of Chronicles on the History of Great Britain and Ireland, under the superintendance of the Master of the Rolls, in England. It is to be edited, with a Translation, Notes, and Introduction, by the Rev. Dr. Todd, S.F.T.C.D.

The next great piece of history that I have to call your attention to, in continuation of the historical chain, is one which, though but of local name and importance, still must have had (as indeed it is well known to have had) a considerable influence in stimulating the fierce opposition which the Anglo-Norman invaders met with, in the south and west of Ireland, for near two hundred years after their first disastrous descent upon this country.

The tract I allude to is commonly called the *Wars of Thomond* ; and up to the present time it is, I am sorry to say, better known by name than by examination. It was compiled in the year 1459, by John, the son of Rory *Mac Craith*, a member of a learned family of that name, which gave many poets and historians to the Dalcassian families of Clare, and many learned ecclesiastics to the Catholic Church,—down to the time of the wretched *Maelmuiré* [or Miler] Mac Grath, who, from being a pious friar of the Franciscan order, became (after some smaller preferments) the first Protestant Archbishop of Cashel, at the close of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It professes to have been compiled from various documents belonging to the families of men who took an active and prominent part in the stirring scenes of which it is the record, of the following is the explanatory title-page, prefixed to a paper copy of this valuable tract, now preserved in the library of the Dublin University : —

“ Here is a copy of that prime historical book, which the learned call *Cathreim Thoirdhealbhagh* [the Wars of Turlogh], in which is set forth every renowned deed that happened in Thomond, or North Munster, for more than two hundred years, or nearly from the Anglo-Norman invasion of Erin to the death of De Clare ; first written by John, the son of Rory Mac Grath, the chief historian to the noble descendants of *Cas* [the Dalcassians], in the year 1459, as appears at the nineteenth folio of the same very old book, which may be seen at this day ; and now newly written by Andrew Mac Curtin for the use of *Tadhg*, son of John, son of Mahon, son of Donnoch, son of Tadhg Og, son

of Tadhg, son of Donnoch, son of Rory, son of Mahon, son of John, son of *Domhnall Ballach*, son of Mahon the Blind, son of Maccon, son of *Cumeadha*, son of Maccon, son of Lochlainn, son of *Cumeadha* Mór Mac Namara of Ranna. A.D. 1721”.

The transcriber of this copy, Andrew Mac Curtin, of Ennistimon, in the county of Clare, was one of the best, if not the very best, Irish scholar of his day ; and a transcript from his accurate hand may be received with confidence, and looked upon, for all historical purposes, as of equal value with the original. The Mac Namara, for whom the transcript was made, represented, in the direct line, the ancient chiefs of the *Clann Cuilein*, in Clare ; and well might he be anxious to preserve in his family a correct copy of this historical piece, because the Mac Namaras, his ancestors, were the most numerous, the most important, and, if possible, the most valiant of the proud and powerful Dalcassian Clanns who took part in the fearful internal warfare recorded in it.

The tract opens with the death of the brave *Domhnall Mór* O’Brien, the last king of Munster, in the year 1194, and the elevation of his son, Donoch, (or *Donmchadh*) *Cairbrech* O’Brien to his place,—but as chief of the *Dalcais* only (not as King of Munster), with the title of The O’Brien. The incidents of this prince’s reign are passed over lightly, to his death, in the year 1242. Donnoch was succeeded by his son Conor, who erected the monastery of Corcomroe, in which his tomb and effigy may be seen at this day. This Conor had two sons, *Tadhg* and *Brian Ruadh* O’Brien, of whom I shall presently speak.

The Anglo-Norman power which came into the country in the year 1172, had constantly gained ground, generation after generation, as you are of course aware, in consequence chiefly of the mutual jealousies and isolated opposition of the individual of the chiefs and clanns among the Gaedhils. At last the two great sections of the country, the races of the north and the south, resolved to take counsel, and select some brave man of either of the ancient royal houses to be elevated to the chief command of the whole nation, in order that its power and efficiency might be the more effectually concentrated and brought into action against the common enemy. To this end, then, a convention was arranged to take place between Brian O’Neill, the greatest leader of the north at this time, and *Tadhg*, the son of Conor O’Brien,—at *Caeluisgé* [Narrow Water] , on Loch Erne (near the present Castle Calwell). O’Neill came attended by all the chiefs of the north and a numerous force of armed men. O’Brien, though in his father’s lifetime, went thither, at the head of the Munster and Connacht chiefs, and a large body of men in arms. The great chiefs came face to face at either Bank of the Narrow Water, but their old destiny accompanied them, and each came to the convention fully determined that himself alone should be the chosen leader and king of Erinn. The convention was, as might be expected, a failure ; and the respective parties returned home more divided, more jealous, and less powerful than ever to advance the general interests of their country, and to crush, as united they might easily have done, that crafty, unscrupulous, and treacherous foe, which contrived then and for centuries after to rule over the clanns of Erinn, by taking advantage of those dissensions among them which the stranger always found means but too readily to foment and to perpetuate.

This convention or meeting of O’Brien and O’Neill took place in the year 1258, according to the Annals of the Four Masters; and in the year after, that is in 1259, *Tadhg* O’Brien died. In the year after that again, that is, in 1260, Brian O’Neill himself was killed in the battle of Down Patrick, by John de Courcy and his followers.

The premature death of *Tadhg* O’Brien so preyed on his father, that for a considerable time he forgot altogether the duties of his position and the general interests of his people. This state of supineness encouraged some of his subordinate chiefs to withhold from him his lawful tributes.

Among these insubordinates was the *O’Lochlainn* of Burren, whose contumacy at length roused the old chief to action ; and in the year 1267 he marched into *O’Lochlainns* country, as far as the wood of *Siubhdaineach*, in the north-west part of Burren. Here the chief was met by the *O’Lochlainns* and their adherents, and a battle ensued, in which O’Brien was killed and his army routed : and hence he has been ever since known in history as *Conchubhar na Siubhdainé*, or *Conor of Siubhdaineach*.

Tadhg O’Brien, the elder son of Conor, left two sons, Turloch and Donoch ; and according to the law of succession among the clanns, Turloch, though still in his minority, should succeed to the chief-

taincy and to the title of O'Brien. In this, however, he was wrongfully anticipated by his father's brother Brian *Ruadh*, who had himself proclaimed chief, and without any opposition. This Brian *Ruadh* continued to rule for nine years, until the young Torloch came to full age ; when, backed by his relatives the MacNamaras, and his fosterers the O'Deas, he marched with a great force against his uncle, who, sooner than risk a battle, fled with his immediate family and adherents, taking with him all his property, eastwards into North Tipperary, and left young Torloch in full possession of his ancestral rule and dignity.

Brian *Ruadh*, however, could not quietly submit to his loss and disgrace, and, taking counsel with his adherents, they decided on his seeking the aid of the national enemy, to reinstate him in his lost chieftainship. For this purpose Brian *Ruadh* and his son Donoch proceeded to Cork, to Thomas de Clare, son of the Earl of Gloucester, then at the head of all the Anglo-Norman forces of Munster, and sought his assistance, offering him an ample remuneration for his services. They offered him all the land lying between the city of Limerick and the town of Ardsallas, in Clare. De Clare gladly accepted those terms, and both parties met by agreement at Limerick, from which they marched into Clare ; where, before any successful opposition could be offered them, the castle of Bunratty was built and fortified by the Norman leader.

A short time afterwards, however (in the year 1277), De Clare put the unfortunate Brian *Ruadh* to death ; having had him drawn between horses and torn limb from limb, notwithstanding that the fidelity of their mutual alliance had been ratified by the most solemn oaths on all the ancient relics of Munster. And it was then indeed that the great wars of Thomond commenced in earnest; for, notwithstanding the treacherous death of their father, the infatuated sons of Brian *Ruadh* still adhered to De Clare, and the warfare was kept up with varying success till the year 1318, when Robert de Clare and his son were at last killed, in the battle of Disert O'Dea. After this the party of Brian *Ruadh* were compelled to fly once more over the Shannon into Ara, in Tipperary, where their descendants have ever since remained under the clann designation of the O'Briens of Ara.

The brave Dalcassians having thus rid themselves both of domestic and foreign usurpation, preserved their country, their independence, and their native laws and institutions, down to of the the year 1542, when Murroch, the son of Turloch, made submission to Henry the Eighth, abandoned the ancient and glorious title of the O'Brien, and disgraced his lineage by accepting a patent of his territory from an English king, with the English title of Earl of Thomond.

As illustrative of local topographical and family history, this tract stands unrivalled. There is not an ancient chieftaincy in Clare that cannot be defined, and that has not been defined by its aid ; nor a family of any note in that part of Ireland, whose position and power at the time is not recorded in it. Among these families may be found—the O'Briens, the Mac-Namaras, the MacMahons, the O'Quinns, the O'Deas, the O'Griffys (or Griffins), the O'Hehirs, the O'Gradys, the Mac Gormans, the O'Conors of Corcomroe, the O'Lochlainns of Burren, the O'Seasnans (or Sextons), the *O'Comhraidhés* (or Currys), the O'Kennedys, the O'Hogans, etc., etc.

The style of the composition of this tract is extremely redundant, abounding in adjectives of indefinable difference; nevertheless, it possesses a power and vigour of description and narration which, independently of the exciting incidents, will amply compensate the reader's study.

There are several copies of this tract extant in paper, the best of which known to me is Mac Curtin's, in Trinity College library ; but there is a large fragment of it in vellum in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, written in a most beautiful, but unknown hand, in the year 1509.

The text of this tract would make about 300 pages of the text of O'Donovan's Annals of the Four Masters.

The last piece of this class of historical composition which I shall bring under your notice, before proceeding to give some account of the Historic Tales, is the " Book of Munster",—an important collection of provincial history, and to a considerable extent of the history of the whole nation.

The *Book of Munster* is an independent compilation, but of uncertain date, as we happen to have no ancient copy of it ; but as its leading points are to be found in the Books of Leinster, Ballymote, and Lecain, we may believe that they must have taken their abstracts from this ancient book in its original form. There are two copies of it on paper in the Royal Irish Academy, both made at the beginning of the last century, but neither of them giving us any account of the originals from which they were transcribed.

The book (as is usual in all the very ancient independent compilations of this kind) begins with a record of the creation (taken, of course, from the Book of Genesis), and this merely for the purpose of carrying down the pedigrees of the sons of Noah, and particularly of Japhet, from whom the Milesians of Erin descend.

The History of the Eberians, or southern branch of the Milesian line, is then carried down from *Eber* to *Brian Boroimhé* and the time of the battle of Clontarf.

The line of succession of the kings and great chiefs of Munster may be easily collected from the great books which I have before mentioned; but in this particular “Book of Munster” there is a mass of details relative to the various disputes and contentions for this succession (between rival local aspirants, as well as between north and south Munster, or the Dalcassian and Eugenic lines), not to be found in any other work that I am acquainted with.

Space will not, however, here allow me to enter into a minute analysis of this important tract ; but I may particularly call your attention to the detailed account it contains of the contests and circumstances attending the succession to the throne of Munster of *Cathal Mac Finguiné*, about the year 720 ; of *Feilim Mac Crimthainn*, about 824 ; of *Cormac Mac Cullinan*, about 885 ; of *Ceallachain* of Cashel, about 934 ; and of *Brian Boroimhé*, about 976 ; all of which are full of historic interest, and the more so, as they are founded upon indisputable facts not elsewhere minutely or satisfactorily recorded.

The Book of Munster, including the pedigrees of the leading Munster families, consists of 260 pages folio, on paper, equal to 400 pages of the Four Masters. I believe there is a vellum copy of it in the College of St. Isidore at Rome.

In the very short account I have thus given you of the larger historical tracts, which supply, for those portions of our history which they describe, the chief details passed over in the mere Annals, I have only endeavoured to make you aware of the scope of this class of works, without enlarging on their special importance to the future historian of the country, who will find in them so much of continuous narrative nearly made to his hand. A little consideration will indeed suggest to you how much I could have offered on this subject. I pass, therefore, without more delay to the consideration of a department of our literature, which is, perhaps, the largest in extent, and hardly the least in importance, among the materials for the elucidation of our ancient history, but which I find I must, for the proper understanding of it, introduce to your notice here by some observations of an introductory character. I allude to those shorter pieces, which we may call the *Historic Tales*, and historic which consist of detailed accounts of isolated exploits and incidents, strictly historical in the main, but recited often with no inconsiderable amount of poetical or imaginative accompaniment of style.

Of these compositions, a very large number have come down to us, and when, by careful collation, and by the judicious application to them of an enlightened criticism, the true facts of history with which they abound shall be collected, the future historian will find himself at no loss for materials of the most valuable kind.

I do not purpose in this place to enter into any detailed examination of the authority of these tracts. Many of them consist entirely of pure history ; many others contain recitals of indubitable historic facts in great detail, but mixed with minor incidents of an imaginative character. That they are all true in the main, I have myself no doubt whatever ; but the investigation of their claims to respect in this regard would lead me at present too far from the prescribed track of an introductory course. I shall, therefore, only open to you shortly the circumstances under which tales of this kind were composed,

and the general character and profession of their authors ; and I shall refer you to a few examples of the recognition of their authority by some of our earliest, most careful, and authentic writers. I shall then at once proceed to describe to you the contents and plan of a few of these compositions, which may be taken as specimens of the remainder of them in each department.

I have already shown you in a former Lecture, that under the ancient laws of Erinn an obligation was imposed upon certain high officers to make and preserve regular records of the history of the country.

The duty of the *Ollamhs* was, however, a good deal more extensive than this, for they were bound by the same laws to make themselves perfect masters of that history in all its details, and to teach it to the people by public recitals ; as well as to be the legal referees upon all subjects in dispute concerning history and the genealogies (and you will bear in mind that the preservation of the rights of property of individuals intimately depended on the accuracy of that history and of those genealogies). The laws provided strictly for the education of the *Ollamh* (and no one could act as a Brehon or Judge that had not attained the degree of an *Ollamh*), and they conferred upon valuable endowments and most important privileges, all which he forfeited for life, as I had occasion before to observe to you, if he became guilty of falsifying the history of any fact or the genealogy of any family.

The education of the *Ollamh* was long and minute. It extended over a space of twelve years “ of hard work”, as the early books say, and in the course of these twelve years certain regular courses were completed, each of which gave the student an additional degree, as a *Filé*, or Poet, with corresponding title, rank, and privileges.

In the Book of *Lecain* (fol. 168) there is an ancient tract, describing the laws upon this subject, and referring, with quotations, to the body of the *Brethibh Nimhedh*, or “ Brehon Laws”. According to this authority, the perfect Poet or *Ollamh* should know and practise the *Teinim Laegha*, the *Imas Forsnadh*, and the *Dichedal do chetinaibh*. The first appears to have been a peculiar druidical verse, or incantation, believed to confer upon the druid or poet the power of understanding everything that it was proper for him to say or speak of. The second is explained or translated, “ the illumination of much knowledge, as from the teacher to the pupil”, that is, that he should be able to explain and teach the four divisions of poetry or philosophy, “ and each division of them”, continues the authority quoted, “ is the chief teaching of three years of hard work”. The third qualification, or *Dichedal*, is explained, “ that he begins at once the head of his poem”, in short, to improvise extempore in correct verse. “ To the *Ollamh*”, says the ancient authority quoted in this passage in the Book of *Lecain*, “ belong synchronisms, together with the *laegha laidhibh*, or illuminating poems [incantations] , and to him belong the pedigrees and the etymologies of names, that is, he has the pedigrees of the men of Erinn with certainty, and the branching off of their various relationships”. Lastly, “ Here are the four divisions of the knowledge of poetry (or philosophy)”, says the tract I have referred to ; “genealogies, synchronisms, and the reciting of (historic) tales form the first division ; knowledge of the seven kinds of verse, and how to measure them by letters and syllables, form another of them ; judgment of the seven kinds of poetry, another of them ; lastly, *Dichedal* [or improvisation], that is, to contemplate and recite the verses without ever thinking of them before”.

It thus appears that the *Ollamh* was bound (and even from the very first course of his professional studies), among other duties, to have the Historic Stories ; and these are classed with the genealogies and synchronisms of history, in which he was to preserve the truth of history pure and unbroken to succeeding generations. According to several of the most ancient authorities, the *Ollamh*, or perfect Doctor, was bound to have (for recital at the public feasts and assemblies) at least Seven Fifties of these Historic narratives ; and there appear to have been various degrees in the ranks of the poets, as they progressed in education towards the final degree, each of which was bound to be supplied with at least a certain number. Thus the *Anroth*, next in rank to an *Ollamh*, should have half the number of an *Ollamh* ; the *Cli*, one-third the number, according to some authorities, and eighty according to others ; and so on down to the *Fochlog*, who should have thirty, and the *Driseq* (the lowest of all), who should have twenty of these tales.

To each of these classes, as I have observed, proportionate emoluments and privileges were secured by law.

It is thus perfectly clear that the compositions I have already called the Historic Tales, were composed for a much graver purpose than that of mere amusement; and when the nature of the profession of the *Ollamh*, the Poet, the Historical Teacher, is considered, as well as the laws by which it was regulated, it will not seem surprising that the poems and tales in which these officers preserved the special facts and details of history, should have been regarded at all times as of the greatest authority. Accordingly, we find them quoted and followed by the most distinguished of the early critics and teachers of our history, such as the celebrated Flann of Monasterboice, and others.

As instances of such references, I shall take a few examples at random from the Book of Lecain ; but they occur in innumerable places in that and other ancient MSS.

The Book of *Lecain*, at folio 15, b. a., after a poem on the death of *Aengus Ollmucadh*, quotes as authority for it a poem by *Eochaidh O'Flinn*; and at 16, b. b., it quotes from another poem by the same writer.

At folio 25, b.b., a poem by Finntan (sixth centmy) is quoted as an authority on the subject of the colonies of *Parthalon*, and *Nemhed*, and of the Firbolgs.

At foHo 277, b., a poem by Mac Liag, on the Firbolg colonies, is quoted as having been taken from their own accounts of themselves ; and at 278, a., another on the same subject.

At foHo 280, is quoted a poem by *Eochaidh O'Flinn*, on the Tuatha Dé Danann and the first battle of *Magh Tuireadh*—a poem, in which the account of that battle corresponds with that of the ancient prose tale I have presently to describe to you. And so on.

One reason, perhaps, why even the poems of the learned men of ancient times have thus been regarded as of such importance, is that the *Ollamhs* were in the habit of teaching the facts of history to their pupils in verse, probably that they might thus be the more easily remembered. Thus we find in the Book of *Lecain* (fol. 27, a. b.) a poem by *Colum Cille*, in praise of *Eochaidh Mac Eirc*, addressed to a pupil who questioned him ; and this poem contains a minute account of the battle of *Magh Tuireadh*, and also of the Milesian expedition to Erinn.

And Flann of Monasterboice (perhaps the greatest of our early critics), the celebrated compiler of the synchronisms which pass under his name, frequently quotes from and refers to poems earlier than his time as authorities for historic facts, and he also often communicates in verse to his pupils his own profound historic learning. Of Flann's critical and historical poems there are several in the Book of Lecain : as at folio 24, b. b., one on the kings, from *Eochaidh Feidhleach* to *Laeghairé*, in which he gives an account of the *Cathréim Dathi*, and the *Bruighean Da Derga*, exactly corresponding with the recitals of those events in the Historic Tales so named. So also, *Lecain.*, folio 25, a.; 28, a. a.; 280, etc., etc., etc.,

It seems strange enough that the authors of the Historic Tales should have been permitted at all to introduce fairy agency in describing the exploits of real heroes, and to describe purely imaginative characters occasionally among the subordinate personages in these stories. This seems strange, because they could not alter the historic occurrences themselves, nor tamper with the truth of the genealogies and successions of the kings and chieftains,—which it was their professional duty to teach in purity to the people,—without hazarding the loss of all their dignities and privileges. It is, however, certain that the rules of these compositions permitted the introduction of a certain amount of poetical machinery. These rules, and the circumstances under which, and the extent to which, the *Ollamhs* used such licence, must remain matter for critical investigation. It only belongs to my present design to assure you of the historical authority of all the substantial statements respecting the battles, the expeditions, and the alliances of our early kings, contained in these *Scela*, or Tales : and of this authority there cannot be any doubt, if we are to believe the testimony of the most accurate of our early critics and the most venerable MSS. which have been handed down to us.

One other observation remains to be made. That the Historic Tales which I am about to describe to you are indeed those which the *Ollamhs* were bound, under the laws I have quoted, to have for recital to the people, we are fortunately in a condition to prove out of one of the earliest, and on the whole,

I believe I may say, the most valuable, of all the early historic books now in existence. I mean no other than the Book of Leinster itself (T.C.D. ; H. 2. 18).

At folio 151, a., of this venerable MS., we find recorded the rule I have already referred to as to the number of Historic Tales which each class of poet, or teacher, was bound to have. — to us.

“ Of the qualifications of a poet in stories and in deeds to be related to kings and chiefs, as follows, viz. : Seven times fifty stories, i.e., five times fifty prime stories, and twice fifty secondary stories ; and these secondary stories are not permitted [that is, can only be permitted] but to four grades only, viz. : an *Ollamh*, an *Amrath*, a *Cli.*, and a *Cano*. And these ‘ Prime Stories ’ are : Destructions and Preyings, Courtships, Battles, Caves, Navigations, Tragedies (or Deaths), Expeditions, Elopements, and Conflagrations”. And afterwards, “ These following reckon also as prime stories : stories of Irruptions, of Visions, of Loves, of Hostings, and of Migrations”.

A vast number of examples of these different prime stories follow, by which we are supplied with the names of so many as 187 in all, classified under their different heads; and this invaluable list has been the means of identifying very many of these ancient tales among the MSS. which have been preserved to our times.

The number of the ancient Historic Tales yet in existence is considerable, and several of them have been identified. Many of these, of course, are not known to us in so pure a state as we could wish, but each year’s investigation throws some additional light on even the least of them, and brings out their historic value. I need only add, that the strictly Historic Tales known to me may be calculated as embracing matter extensive enough to occupy about 4000 pages of O’Donovan’s Annals.

Of the Historic Tales a few have been printed within the last few years, which may be taken, to some extent at least, as specimens of the remainder. The *Cath Muighé Rath* (Battle of Magh Rath., or Moyra), published by the Archæological Society in 1842, is one of the tales in the list in the Book of Leinster. The Celtic Society also printed two of the Historic Tales in 1855, the *Cath Muighæ Leana*, and the *Tochmarc Moméra*, both of which are of remarkable interest and great historic value.

Of those which I have selected shortly to introduce to your notice here, the first is also one of the *Catha*, or *Battles*. It is that of *Magh Tuireadh*, one of the earliest battles recorded in our history, and almost the earliest event upon the record of which we may place sure reliance. It was in this battle that the Firbolgs were defeated by the *Tuatha Dé Danann* race, who subsequently ruled in Erin till the coming of the Milesians from Spain ; so that it forms a great epoch and starting point in our history. The tract which goes by the name is somewhat long, opening indeed with the same account of the first colonies or expeditions that landed in Erin which we find in the Books of Invasions. It is impossible that I should give you the whole account here, or indeed any considerable part of it, but I shall endeavour to make the contents of the tract as intelligible as our time may permit.

The Firbolgs, according to the Annals, arrived in Ireland about the year of the world 3266. Very soon after landing, the chiefs, though wide apart the spots upon which in different parties they first touched the shore, contrived to discover the fate of each other; and having looked out for a central and suitable place to reunite their forces, they happened to fix on the green hill now called Tara, but which they named *Druim Cain*, or the Beautiful Eminence. Here they planted their seat of government ; they divided the island into five parts, between the five brothers, and distributed their people among them. The Firbolgs continued thus to hold and rule the country for the space of thirty-six years, that is, till the year of the world 3303, when *Eochaidh* the son of *Erc* was their king.

In this year the Firbolgs were surprised to find that the island contained some other inhabitants whom they had never before seen or heard of. These were no other than the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the descendants of *Iobath*, son of *Beathach*. *Iobath* was one of the Nemedian chiefs who survived the destruction of Conaings Tower (on Tory Island), and passed into the north of Europe ; whilst another

of them, *Simeon Breac*, passed into Thrace, from whom the Firbolgs descended. Both tribes thus met in the old land once more, after a separation of about 237 years.

The *Tuatha Dé Danann*, after landing on the north-east coast of Erin, had destroyed their ships and boats, and stealthily made their way into the fastnesses of *Magh Rein* (in the County Leitrim). Here they had raised such temporary works of defence as might save them from any sudden surprise of an enemy, and then gradually showing themselves to the Firbolg inhabitants, they pretended that they had, by their skill in necromancy, come into Erin on the wings of the wind.

The king of the Firbolgs, having heard of the arrival of these strange tribes, took counsel with his wise men, and they resolved to send a large, powerful, and fierce warrior of their people forward to the camp of the strangers, to make observations, and ascertain as much of their history and condition as he could. The chosen warrior, whose name was Sreng, went forward on his mission to *Magh Rein*; but before he reached the camp the *Tuatha Dé Danann* sentinels had perceived him, and they immediately sent forward one of their own champions, named *Breas*, to meet and talk to him. Both warriors approached with great caution, until they came within speaking distance of each other, when each of them planted his shield in front of him to cover his body, and viewed the other over its border with inquiring eyes. *Breas* was the first to break silence, and Sreng was delighted to hear himself addressed in his own language, for the old Gaedhlic was the mother-tongue of each. They drew nearer each other, and, after some conversation, discovered each other's lineage and remote consanguinity.

They next examined each other's spears, swords, and shields; and in this examination they discovered a very marked difference in the shape and excellence of the spears; Sreng being armed with two heavy, thick, pointless, but sharply rounded, spears; while *Breas* carried two beautifully shaped, thin, slender, long, sharp-pointed spears. *Breas* then proposed on the part of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, to divide the island into two parts, between the two great parties, and that they should mutually enjoy and defend it against all future invaders. They then exchanged spears for the mutual examination of both hosts; and after having entered into vows of future friendship, each returned to his people.

Sreng returned to Tara, as we shall in future call that place; and having recounted to the king and his people the result of his mission, they took counsel, and decided on not granting to the *Tuatha Dé Danann* a division of the country, but, on the contrary, prepared to give them battle. In the meantime, *Breas* returned to his camp, and gave his people a very discouraging account of the appearance, tone, and arms of the fierce man he had been sent to parley with. The *Tuatha Dé Danann* having drawn no favourable augury of peace or friendship from this specimen of the Firbolg warriors and his formidable arms, abandoned their holdings, and, retiring farther to the south and west, took up a strong position on Mount Belgadan, at the west end of *Magh Nia* (the plain of Nia), which is now called *Magh Tuireadh* (or Moytura), and is situated near the village of Cong, in the present county of Mayo. The Firbolgs marched from Tara, with all their forces, to this plain of Moytura, and encamped at the east end of it. Nuada, who was the king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, however, wishing to avoid hostilities if possible, opened new negotiations with King *Eochaidh* through the medium of his bards. The Firbolg king declined to grant any accommodation, and the poets having returned to their hosts, both the great parties prepared for battle.

The battle took place on Midsummer-day. The Firbolgs were defeated with great slaughter, and their king (who left the battle-field with a body guard of a hundred brave men, in search of water to allay his burning thirst) was followed by a party of a hundred and fifty men, led by the three sons of Nemedh, who pursued him all the way to the strand called *Traigh Eothailé* [near Ballysadare, in the county of Sligo].

Here a fierce combat ensued between the parties, in which King *Eochaidh* fell,—as well as the leaders on the other side, the three sons of *Nemedh*.

The sons of *Nemedh* were buried at the west end of the strand, at a place since called *Leca Meic Nemedh*, or the Grave Stones of the sons of *Nemedh*; and King *Eochaidh* was buried where he fell in the strand, and the great heap of stones known to this day as the Carn of *Traigh Eothaill* (and which was formerly accounted one of the wonders of Erin) was raised over him by the victors.

In the course of the battle, the Firbolg warrior Sreng dealt the king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, Nuada, a blow of his heavy sword, which clove the rim of his shield, and cut off his arm at the shoulder. Nuada had a silver arm made for him by certain ingenious artificers attached to his court, and he has been ever since known in our history and romances as *Nuada Airgead-lamh*, or the Silver-handed.

The battle of *Magh Tuireadh* continued for four successive days, until at length the Firbolgs were diminished to 300 fighting men, headed by their still surviving warrior-chief, Sreng ; and, being thus reduced to a great inequality of numbers compared with their enemies, they held a counsel and resolved to demand single combat, of man to man, in accordance with the universally acknowledged laws of ancient chivalry. The *Tuatha Dé Danann* thought better, and offered Sreng terms of peace, and his choice of the five great divisions of Erin. Sreng accepted these terms, and took as his choice the present province of Connacht, which, down to the time of Conn of the Hundred Battles, was called by no other name than *Cuigead Sreing*—that is Sreng’s province,—in which indeed his descendants were still recognized down so late as the year 1650, according to Duaid Mac Firbis.

The antiquity of this tract, in its present form, can scarcely be under fourteen hundred years. The story is told with singular truthfulness of description. There is no attempt at making a hero or ascribing to any individual or party the performance of any incredible deeds of valour. There is, however, a good deal of druidism introduced ;—but the position and conduct of the poets or bards during the battle, and in the midst of it,—the origin of the name of Moytura, or the plain of pillars or columns,—the origin, names, and use of so many of the pillar stones, of the mounds, and of the huge graves, vulgarly called Cromlechs, with which the plain is still covered,—are all matters of such interest and importance in the reading of our ancient history and the investigation of our antiquarian monumental remains, that I am bold to assert that I believe there is not in all Europe a tract of equal historical value yet lying in MS., considering its undoubted antiquity and authenticity.

There is but one ancient copy of this tract known to me to be in existence, and of this I possess an accurate transcript. The mere facts of the coming in of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, of the battle that ensued, and of the death of King *Eochaidh* only, are told in O’Donovan’s Annals of the Four Masters, at the year of the world 3303. That accomplished Irish topographer lays down the position of Moytura, and other places mentioned in our tract, with his usual accuracy ; but he has mistaken the account of the second battle (which is in the British Museum) for this ; and of that battle I shall now proceed to give you a short sketch, in abstracting for you a second of these Historic Tales, which we may call the Second Battle of *Magh Tuireadh*, or the Battle of *Magh Tuireadh* “ of the Fomorians”.

After the brief record of the first battle by the Four Masters, at the year of the world 3303, they tell us (at the year 3304) that Breas, the chief of the *Tuath Dé Danann*, who was a Fomorian by his father (the same who, as we have seen, held the parley with the Firbolg warrior Sreng), received the regency from his people during the illness of their king, Nuada, who had lost his arm in the battle. *Breas* held the regency for seven years, when he resigned it again to the king ; and Nuada (who in the mean time was supplied with a silver arm by his surgeon, *Diancecht*, and *Creidné*, the great worker in metals,—and thence called *Nuada Airgid-lamh*, or “ of the Silver Hand”) reassumed the sovereignty. The Annals pass on then to the twentieth year of Nuada’s reign, (that is, a.m. 3330), where they merely state that, he fell in the battle of Moytura of the Fomorians, by the hand of Balor “ of the stiff blows”, one of the Fomorians.

Now nothing could be more dry or less attractive than this simple record, in four hues, of the death in battle of the king of a country and people, without a single word of detail, or any reference whatever to the cause of the war, or to the other actors in the battle ; so that any person might take it upon himself to question the veracity of so meagre a record, if there had been collateral evidence to support it. This, however, like the Catha, or former battle, had its ancient history, as well as its dry chronicle ; and from the former I shall lay before you in the following abstract as much of it as will, at least, I hope arouse the curiosity and attention of my hearers,—begging of them at the same time to remember, that notwithstanding all that has been written and spoken for and against the remote history of Ireland, even up to this day, the test of pure, unbiassed criticism, historical and chronological, has not yet been applied to it.

The tract opens with an account of the lineage of *Breas*, and how it was that he became king.

We have seen that the warrior regent resigned the sovereignty at the end of seven years to Nuada the king ; but it was more by compulsion than good will that he did so, for his rule was so marked by inhospitality, and by entire neglect of the wants and wishes of his people, that loud murmurs of discontent assailed him from all quarters long before his regency was terminated. In short, as the chronicler says, the knives of his people were not greased at his table, nor did their breath smell of ale at the banquet. Neither their poets, nor their bards, nor their satirists, nor their harpers, nor their pipers, nor their trumpeters, nor their jugglers, nor their buffoons, were ever seen engaged in amusing them at the assemblies of his court. It is in fine added that he had even succeeded in reducing many of the best and bravest of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* warriors to a state of absolute servitude and vassalage to himself; and his design seems to have been to substitute an absolute rule for the circumscribed power of a chief king under the national law of the claims.

At the time that the discontent was at its height, a certain poet and satirist named *Cairbré*, the son of the poetess *Etan*, visited the king's court ; but, in place of being received with the accustomed respect, the poet was sent, it appears, to a small dark chamber, without fire, furniture, or bed, where he was served with three small cakes of dry bread only, on a very small and mean table. This treatment was in gross violation of public law, and could not fail to excite the strongest feeling. The poet accordingly arose on the next morning, full of discontent and bitterness, and left the court not only without the usual professional complements, but even pronouncing a bitter and withering satire on his host. This was the first satire ever, it is said, written in Erin ; and although such an insult to a poet, and the public expression of his indignation in consequence, would fall very far short of penetrating the quick feelings of the nobility or royalty of these times (so different are the customs of ancient and modern honour), still it was sufficient in those early days to excite the sympathy of the whole body of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, chiefs and people ; and occurring as it did after so many just causes of popular complaint, they determined without more to call upon *Breas* to resign his power forthwith. To this call the regent reluctantly acceded : and having" held council with his mother, they both determined to retire to the court of his father, *Elatha*, at this time the great chief of the Fomorian pirates, or sea kings, who then swarmed through all the German Ocean, and ruled over the Shetland Islands and the Hebrides.

Though *Elatha* received his son coldly, and seemed to think that his disgrace was deserved, still he acceded to his request to furnish him with a fleet and army with which to return and conquer Erin for himself, if he could, from his maternal relations the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. *Breas* was therefore recommended by his father to the favour of the great Fomorian chiefs, Balor " of the Evil Eye", king of the Islands, and *Indech*, son of *Dé-Domnand* ; and these two leaders collected all the men and ships lying from Scandinavia westwards, for the intended invasion, so that they are said to have formed an unbroken bridge of ships and boats from the Hebrides to the north-west coast of Erin. Having landed there, they marched to a plain in the present barony of Tirerrill, in the county of Sligo,—a spot surrounded by high hills, rocks, and narrow defiles ;—and, having thus pitched their camp in the enemy's country, they awaited the determination of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, to surrender or give them battle. The latter were not slow in preparing to resist the invaders, and the recorded account of their preparations is in full accordance with their traditional character as skilful artisans and profound necromancers.

Besides the king, *Nuada* " of the Silver Hand", the chief men of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* at this time were : the great *Daghda* ; *Lug*, the son of *Cian*, son of *Diancecht*, their great Esculapius ; *Ogma Grian-Aineach* ("of the sun-like face"), and others ; but the *Daghda* and *Lug* were the prime counselors and arrangers of the battle. The tract proceeds to state how these two called to their presence—their smiths ; their *cerds*, or silver and brass workers ; their carpenters ; their surgeons ; their sorcerers ; their cup-bearers ; their druids ; their poets ; their witches ; and their chief leaders. And there is not, perhaps, in the whole range of our ancient literature a more curious chapter than that which describes the questions which *Lug* put to these several classes as to the nature of the service which each was prepared to render in the battle, and the characteristic professional answer which he received from each of them.

The battle (which took place on the last day of October) is eloquently described,—with all the brave achievements, and all the deeds of art and necromancy by which it was distinguished. The Fomorians were defeated, and their chief men killed. King Nuada of the Silver Hand was indeed killed by Balor of the Evil Eye, but Balor himself fell, soon after, by a stone flung at him by *Lug* (his grandson by his daughter *Eithlenn*), which struck him (we are told) in the “evil eye”, and with so much force, that it carried it out through the back of his head.

The magical skill, as it was called,—in reality of course, the scientific superiority—of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, stood them well in this battle ; for *Diancecht*, their chief physician, with his daughter *Ochtriuil*, and his two sons, *Airmedh* and *Mioch*, are stated to have previously prepared a healing bath or fountain with the essences of the principal healing herbs and plants of Erin, gathered chiefly in *Lus-Mhagh*, or the Plain of Herbs (a district comprised in the present King’s County) ; and on this bath they continued to pronounce incantations during the battle. Such of their men as happened to be wounded in the fight were immediately brought to the bath and plunged in, and they are said to have been instantly refreshed and made whole, so that they, were able to return and fight against the enemy again and again.

The situation of the plain on which this battle was fought, is minutely laid down in the story, and has been ever since called *Meagh Tuireadh na bh-Fomorach*, or “The Plain of the Towers (or pillars) of the Fomorians”, to distinguish it from the southern Moytura, from which it is distant about fifty miles.

The story does not enter into any account of the setting up of any tombs, towers, or pillars, though many ancient Cyclopien graves and monuments remain to this day on the plain ; but as it appears to be imperfect at the end, it is possible that the tract in its complete form contained some details of this nature.

Cormac Mac Cullinan in his celebrated Glossary quotes this tract in illustration of the word *Nes* ; so that so early as the ninth century it was looked upon by him as a very ancient historic composition of authority.

I have only to add, that the only ancient copy of this tract that I am acquainted with, or that, perhaps, now exists, is one in the British Museum, finely written on vellum by *Gilla-Riabhadh O’Clery*, about the year 1460. Of this I had a perfect transcript made by my son Eugene, under my own inspection and correction, in London, in the summer of last year [1855] ; so that the safety of the tract does not any longer depend on the existence of a single copy.

Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (1861)

Author : O’Curry, Eugene, 1796-1862

Subject : Irish literature — History and criticism; Manuscripts, Irish — Facsimiles ; Ireland — History Sources

Publisher : Dublin : J. Duffy

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Robarts — University of Toronto

Collection : robarts ; toronto

Notes : book in very poor condition - many pages torn and falling out.

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/lecturesonmanusc00ocuruoft>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

June 20 2011