

An Irish Folk's Book

Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts.

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1866

Kilstoheen in the Shannon.

The *Regia* of Ptolemy is supposed to be in existence, and inhabited by beings who once breathed the upper air. It lies in the bed of the Shannon towards its mouth, and is visible once in every seven years. Whoever is so unlucky as to get a sight of this buried city dies within a month. So late as 1823, fifteen men who had been down the river in a sail-boat, were seen by many people at mass in a neighbouring chapel, and even spoken to ; but later in the day terror and grief prevailed in that neighbourhood, on finding that these poor fellows and their boat had been at the bottom of the river at the very time when they were supposed present in the chapel. A little vessel anchored one night near Beale, which is not far from the supposed site of Kilstoheen ; and next morning the crew on awaking found themselves by the quay of a magnificent city. A merchant coming on board engaged the vessel for a voyage to Bordeaux, for a cargo of wine. Thither captain and crew went in a few hours, laid in the commodity, and were back in Kilstoheen with very little delay. The freight being royally paid, the sailors went ashore, and enjoyed life in their peculiar way. One or two unfortunately approached some ladies who were taking the air, with coarse language and rough endearments, and at the same moment a storm began to blow, and the waters to rise. The crew made a hasty retreat to their vessel, and they had hardly gained it when they saw the beautiful city covered by the swelling waters, and their own bark dancing like a nutshell among the frothing waves. There was an unaccountable blank at this point in their after recollections ; but next morning they awoke with their little vessel grounded on a sloping shallow portion of the bed of the river.

The people of Kilstoheen were reported to cultivate a fine breed of horses. A farmer in the neighbourhood found his hayricks invaded several nights in succession. So he set a watch, and found that the depredators, after making their meal, made their way into the Shannon,

The Isle of The Living.

Wonderful as were the stories concerning our lakes, islands, and sunk cities, related by native historians, they were excelled in some respects by the reports of foreign writers, who put down for subjects of general belief what were told to them by some individuals who were over-credulous, or wished to mystify the unfriendly visitor. Thus the choleric and disparaging Gerald Barry, after having told his Anglo-Norman admirers how the Shannon rises in a large lake, and after dividing Connaught from Ulster, flows into the Northern Ocean, gave them this notable piece of information :—

“ In North Munster there is a lake with two islands, one large, the other small. In the former there is a church of ancient veneration ; in the latter there is a chapel devoutly served by a few unmarried persons named *Colidei* (*Culdees*). If a woman or any animal of the female sex enters the larger church she dies instantly ; but no person ever dies, or died, or can die a natural death in the smaller isle, and hence it is called the ‘ Isle of the Living.’ Sometimes, however, they are grievously afflicted and brought to the last gasp by a mortal distemper ; and when all hope is gone, and they feel that nothing of *living* life remains, . . . they

get themselves carried in a boat to the larger island, where they yield up the ghost the moment they reach the shore.”

This lake was known by the name of Lough Cre. The place once occupied by itself and its banks is now called Monincha (Bog of the Island). It lies near Roscrea. According to the same judicious writer, after the Isles of Arran had been blessed by St Brendain, no corpse suffered decomposition there, nor rat could live. So the inhabitants had the privilege of pointing out their great-grandfathers, with their lineaments still recognisable—a questionable benefit ; and if an ill-advised person brought over a rat from the neighbouring Galwegian continent, and gave him his liberty, he incontinently ran direct to the sea ; if stopped and detained, he died on the instant. Irish writers, later in time than Giraldus, convicted him of error as to the antiseptic qualities of Arran of the Saints, but claimed them for Inis na Gloire, off the coast of Erris. However, the learned and credulous Roderic O’Flaherty, zealous as he was of the fame of that sacred island, pronounced the report altogether untrue.

With the following precious pieces of information, obtained from Giraldus, we close this section of our researches :—

“ There is a well in Munster, and whoever is washed with its water becomes instantly gray. There is another well in Ulster, and whoever bathes in it never becomes gray. In Connaught there is a well salubrious for human uses, but whose very taste poisons flocks, and herds, and beasts of burden, and all sorts of animals. The pebbly sand of this well, if only applied to the mouth, at once assuages the cravings of thirst. There is a well in Munster which if touched or even looked at by a man, the whole province will be deluged with rain, which will not cease until a priest, selected for the purpose, and who has been a virgin in body and mind from his infancy, appease the fountain by the celebration of mass, and the sprinkling of holy water and of the milk of a cow of one colour (a custom barbarous enough, and destitute of reason).”

We shall not occupy our readers’ time with such trifling legends of lake lore as that of Fion stamping on a mountain, and thus producing a cavity filled with excellent liquor, for the purpose of slaking the thirst of O’Sullivan Mhor, after & severe day’s hunting. [1] Neither shall we relate all the particulars of Donal Gealach’s dealings with his favourite shepherd, and how he enabled him to convert the waters of a certain mountain lough near Killarney into special strong beer, by merely dipping a bunch of heath into it. He and his family might have enjoyed their jug of beer for many a day, but the poor man’s conscience troubled him for receiving any benefits at the hands of the “ good people.” He revealed his scruples the next time he went to confession, and was obliged to resign his privilege.

If our ancient chroniclers did not, in every instance, succeed in establishing the truth of their records, they certainly deserved more credit than some of them have received, so great was the interest they took in their favourite studies, and so firmly did they seek to establish the foundation of the literary structure they were employed in raising. One of them has even left on record, or invented, some particulars of the primal historian who witnessed some of the evil doings before the Flood.

Fionntuin Mac Bochna. [2]

In the days of Noah, and while the ark was being built, there dwelt in the forests by the banks of the Tigris, Bith, with his wife Birren, of the race of Cain. Near them lived their daughter, Kesára, whose husband, Finntan, was of the blood of Seth. Farther off was the wood-built habitation of their son Lara, and his wife, Blama. None of these paid adoration to

the Creator but Finntan, and to him was revealed the approaching destruction of mankind by a universal deluge. He constructed a rudely-built vessel, and not until it was finished could he induce his relatives to escape with him from the impending danger. His unbelieving consort tenderly loved him, and though fearless of the coming danger, she determined to share his fate. The others joined them at the last hour ; the bark went down the river, and in one year from that day they were entering a bay on the west coast of the then uninhabited woody island, afterwards called Erinn.

They lived by hunting and fishing, and moved inland till they reached that mountain in the centre of the island, which has since borne the name of Lara's wife, Blama. They were all in the prime of their age when they left the far-off eastern land, varying in age from four to five hundred years each. But now a couple of centuries seemed to have passed over their heads in one revolution of the year. Hardly had they reached the hill when Bith and Birren expired on the same day. Their sorrowing children had scarcely interred them, raised their pile, and sung their lamentation, when Lara and Blama followed them to the lone house. Now were Finntan and Kesára the only dwellers on the island ; and as they sat in woe by the side of the neighbouring loch, and looked on the cromlechs laid over their relatives, Kesára burst into a wild passion of grief and reproaches against her gods and against the God worshipped by her husband. He spoke to her of a future state of rest and happiness for those who were submissive to the decree of the All-Wise and All-Good ; but her fury only gathered strength. Just then a volume of white vapour arose from the dark loch. It went round and round, and at last wheeled out between the living pair ; then in rapid whirls it sunk again on the lake, and Kesára was left desolate on the brink. She cried out wildly on her husband not to abandon her ; but seeing nothing but the wild hill round her, the grey sky over her, and the dark water beneath, she flung herself wildly below its quiet surface to find her partner or perish with him. To the bright land of Tirna-n-oge was Finntan conveyed, and there was he conscious of the great flood that submerged the island, of its loneliness for three hundred years, of the landing of the parricide Partholan, and the speedy destruction of his colony by a plague at Ben Edair. Then in succession came the clans of Nemidh, the Fomorian pirates, the Firbolgs, the learned Danaans, the warlike Milesians ; and after a thousand years of their sway, worshipping the Host of Heaven, and the spirits of the seas, the lakes, the forests, and the hills, it was told at the Court of Laeré that a strange Druid, in flowered garments, with a two-pointed ornamented birredh on his head, and bearing in one hand a book inscribed with characters different from the Oghuim, and in the other a double cross, was approaching from the country of Gallian (Wicklow, Wexford, &c.).

It was the Eve of the Sun's Fire (Beltiné), and the learned and the noble from every part of the island were assembled at Teamor, in the Midchuarta. In rows they took their seats, and five fileas in succession recited the deeds of dead heroes, the genealogies of the lines of Heber, Heremon, and Ith, and the different invasions of the island since the landing of Nemidh. The last orator had ceased, and a storm of applause burst over him from the assembled nobles. When silence fell on the benches, he again took up the theme. " More praise than we merit you have given to my brothers and myself Alas ! we have only preserved some of the inscribed staves on which the full chronicle of our country is engraved. There is only one to whom the whole story is known, Fionntuin, son of Bochna, son of Eathoir, son of Annadha, who, from the days of the great flood to this, has been preserved in life in the land of youth. Whenever a filea, endowed with untiring zeal and all the knowledge that can be obtained, appeared among now dead poets, he has at some period of his career been favoured with a visit from this being in the deep dark silence before the dawn, and missing staves of the past chronicles supplied. [3] From the revelations of some of these we learn that his life shall endure till a white Druid, whose writings are made on folded parchments, and not on the corners of staves, and who also bears a cross and wears a flowered

garment, shall come to reveal to us a god whom we yet know not. This Druid of an unknown faith shall wash him from his earthly stains, and his freed spirit is then to depart [4] to some place, as much excelling the Land of Youth as that happy country surpasses this.”

He was yet speaking, when every one in the vast hall was on a sudden seized with awe, united to a certain feeling of pleasure, as they observed a venerable figure in long robes, and with long white hair falling on each side of his agreeable and majestic countenance, gliding from the entrance to the centre where the fileas were seated. He needed not to announce his name. Every one felt that he was in the presence of Fionntuin, son of Bochna, son of Eathoir.

“ Kings, chiefs, and men of learning,” said the vision, “ great is my joy to see this happy day, and behold so many of my kind on whose souls divine light will soon dawn, and not only on them, but on all who rule within our seas. This light will come from one who is at hand, and to whom I leave the glorious task of instructing you in the heavenly scheme, which I only know in part, and which I am unfit to reveal. What I am permitted, I shall speak.”

Then he proceeded in flowing words, while his hearers, with their hearts flooded with pleasure, sat entranced, to announce that, before man was sent on earth, spirits created for happiness rebelled against the Master of sea, land, sun, moon, and stars ; and that they were since that moment suffering pains not to be conceived. He then went on to describe the creation of man and woman, their pristine happiness, their fall through the wiles of the chief of the evil spirits, the after-wickedness of mankind, and the destruction (one family excepted) of the human race. The remainder of the oration chiefly related to the fortunes of the ancestors of those before him. He told of the preservation of letters after Babel ; of the wanderings of the early Scots, and of their relations with Moses, when he was conducting the people of God from their thralldom. From the remainder of the discourse the fileas afterwards completed the full tale of their inscribed staves, soon to be changed for the characters and the rolls of vellum introduced by Patrick, and hence the perfect state of the annals of the Scots of Ireland compared with those of all nations that see the sun rise and set

That evening, no fire or lamp was found burning through the length and breadth of the land, and all were watching in silence from the summits of the hills, in the direction of Teamor, for a tongue of flame from the next hill that lay between. Laéré, preparing to kindle the sacred fire in the great bawn of Teamor, whose flaming up was to set all the fires on all the hills in Erin ablaze, was dismayed on beholding, a small distance to the east, a lamp suddenly enkindled, and a man of a most attractive and venerable countenance gazing by its light on the leaves of an open book.

This was the humble, the gentle, the fervent Apostle Patrick, who, being summoned to the royal presence, preached the Word of Life. Small was his difficulty to turn the hearts of his hearers (the king excepted) from the practice of idolatry. The ground had been prepared by Finntan, and the seed sown by Patrick at once struck root, and soon the land was white with the Christian harvest.

The practice of magic being resorted to for the acquisition of supernatural power, its form and nature must depend on the religion, true or false, which is supposed to influence the practitioner. And here we must take occasion to remark in what a satisfactory state our knowledge is with regard to the Teutonic, and how comparatively trifling and conjectural is our acquaintance with the Celtic, forms of belief before the light of Christianity dawned on the people. Soon after the Scandinavians became Christians, their Pantheon was epitomized in verse by Saemund, a priest ; and about a hundred years later, the prose “ Edda,” furnishing

the adventures of the gods, the heroes, and the giants, was compiled by the turbulent and talented Snorro Sturlason.

Now, the great change among the Celtic peoples had taken place by the fifth century, and it happened that no Saemund or Sturlason was vouchsafed to them ; or if vouchsafed, the writings left by him were early lost in the confusion attending the determined struggles between themselves and their dogged, troublesome neighbours of the Teuton stock.

Owing to this unfavourable state of things, our knowledge of the nature of religious usages among our ancestors is necessarily limited. It has been obtained from casual allusions in early Christian writers on serious subjects, and, to a greater extent, from ancient poems and romances, and the relics of their festivals—still celebrated, but changed in object, and devoted to honour events in the life of our Lord, or the memory of saints. We have already gone over this ground. The Sun and Moon ; Mananan Lir, the sea deity, and peculiar patron of the Isle of Man ; Dagdæ, the Danaan chief ; Morrighu, his spouse, the Celtic Bellona ; Crom ; and the spirits of the hills, streams, and forests, received worship from the heathen Scots. Their Elysiums were delightful islands in the Atlantic—alas! no longer visible—meadows of asphodel, sun-enlightened, below its waves, and the placid lakes of Erinn ; and grottoes under the sepulchral mounds of old Danaan kings and sages.. When cruelty, inhospitality, and treachery developed themselves to a monstrous extent in any individual, his thin, shivering ghost [5] suffered in the winds, and rains, and cold rigours of upper air, after its separation from the body. Besides the worship given to the divinities mentioned, it is conjectured by some ardent Celtic scholars that a fetich reverence was paid to some traditional bulls, cows, bears, and cats ; even Dallans were not without reverence of some kind.

Everything of a magical character connected with the history or social state of the early inhabitants of Ireland, is traceable to the people called the Danaans, of whom we subjoin a brief sketch, claiming the same belief for its certainty as we would for the exploits of Romulus or Theseus.

The Firbolgs and Danaans.

Nemedius (a wanderer from the East) and his thousand men reached Erinn from Thule (Jutland, or the Belgian Peninsula), in thirty skin-covered corrachs. He employed four Phœnician or African architects to raise four palaces for him in different parts of the island ; and to prevent their doing as much for any other chief or prince, and thus detracting from his own greatness, he had each skilful artist pitched from the battlements as soon as his work was achieved. But there was such a principle as poetical justice extant in Erinn, even so early as the days of Abraham. The Fomorians from Africa—all cousins-german to Rog, Robog, Rodin, and, Rooney, the murdered men—assailed Nemidh from the bleak northern Isle of Torry, deprived the four castles of their master, by sending him to Tir-na-n-oge, and scattered his people to east, south, and north. Some under the leader Jarvan sailed to the Danish Isles, and the south of Sweden ; and their descendants established themselves in four cities—Falias, Gorias, Finias, and Murias—and taught the simple Scandinavians magic rites, and the other branches of the polite literature of the day. After a few hundred years, their descendants took the resolution of seeking out the pleasant isle of their fore-fathers, and set sail, bringing from city No. 1 a magic glaive, from No. 2 a magic spear, from No. 3 an enchanted caldron, and from No. 4 the *Lia Fail*, or “ Stone of Destiny,” at present resting in the lower part of St Edward’s Chair, in Westminster Abbey. [6]

At the time of their approach to the island, it was held by a kindred race, the Firbolgs, lately returned from Greece, to which country they had fled when routed by the Fomorians.

The new-comers, landing somewhere in the north-west, enwrapped themselves in a *druidical* (magical) fog, and were never seen by mortal till they had attained the plain of southern *Moy-tuir* (plain of the tower), near Cong. The Firbolg king, Achy (*Eochaidh*, Chevalier), sent a herald to demand their business. They said they merely wanted possession of the country, and would allow their cousins in the tenth degree—the Firbolgs—to retire to the islands of Arran, Inisbofine, &c. ; moreover, that it was useless to brandish sword, or fling spear at them, as their Druids, on the morn after a battle, would pass through the slain, and by their spells of power recall every dead warrior to his pristine life and strength. “ We defy your Druids,” said the Firbolg spokesman. “ Every one of our *curai* (companions) shall be attended by a kern bearing twenty sharpened stakes of the rowan-tree ; and as every Danaan warrior falls in fight, his body shall be pinned to the sod by one of these charmed staves.”

The threat had its effect ; and the succeeding battles were fought without the aid of *draoideacht* on either side. The Firbolgs being defeated, were allowed to people the islands off the western coast ; and it is supposed that Dun Ængus in Arran, and other stupendous *caisiols* (stone forts), are the architectural remains of this brave but unsuccessful people. The ancient martial games and marriage-fairs held at Tailtean, now Telltown, in Meath, were instituted in honour of Tailte, wife of the brave Firbolg king slain at Moy-tuir.

Inis Na Muic [7]

The fated children of Gael Glas sailed from Egypt into the Black Sea, and thence through the waters which filled the Riphean Valley, [8] and made a temporary lodgement in the southern part of Scandinavia. Their next voyage was to Spain ; and at last, the great-grandchildren of those who had quitted Egypt (*temp.* Phar.) determined to make their permanent abode in the green island, which Breogan, their chief, had discovered from a watch-tower on Cape Ortegá. The brave old historians occasionally omitted details : they have left no account of the construction of the telescope used in the operation.

The Danaan Princes, either through negligence or design, allowed the invaders to land without opposition, and then a parley ensued. They demanded of the newcomers their objects and conditions, and received an answer similar to that given by themselves to the poor Firbolgs some generations back. They rejoined that it was a most unhandsome thing to take people by surprise in that fashion ; but if they only re-embarked, and withdrew nine waves from the land, they would then receive them in a manner meet for warlike visitors, and their own relations in the twentieth degree. The simple Milesians consented ; and by the time that the nine waves were passed, a druidic fog had fallen between them and the shore. Occasionally a luminous rift was made in this dark curtain, and the island was seen in the guise of the back of a black swine, weltering on the waters, and shooting up huge spear-like bristles. A mighty storm next swept the vessels round the rocky shores. Some effected a landing in Kerry, others in Louth, and the rest on the bleak western coast. The wise and valiant Danaans at last found their spells and their arms too weak before the resistless might of the Milesians, and a new dynasty began.

Mrs. K., of Cromogue, in the “ Duffrey,” is the only authority we have for the veracity of the following very ancient tradition. A version of it is to be found in Keating ; but we have several reasons for believing that she and her authorities had got their legend through an oral channel. It is out of our power to settle the question of the navigability of the Slaney to Enniscorthy at the date of the story. The corrachs, as may be supposed, drew but few feet of water. Another admirer of past things, who only remembered a small portion of the story, placed this fortress some miles lower.

The Bath of The White Cows.

A great many years ago, when this county was so thick with woods that a very light person might walk on the tops of trees from Kilmeashal to the Lady's Island, a little king, or a great chief, had a fortification on the hill side, from the Duffrey gate in Enniscorthy, down to near the old abbey—but I don't know if there were any abbeys at the time.

This chief had three beautiful daughters, and all were married, and themselves and their husbands lived inside of the fort ; for the young families in old times were not fond of removing far away from the old stock. One fine morning in harvest, the watchman on the big ditch that ran round the fort struck his shield, for down below was the river covered with corrachs, all full of foreigners, and all with spears, swords, shields, and helmets, ready to spring out and attack the dun.

But my brave chief, and his son, and his *son-in-laws* had no notion of waiting an attack within their ditches and palisades. Out themselves and their kith, kin, and following, rushed, and attacked the Welshmen, or Woodmen, as they were called ; and a bloody fight went on till the sun was near going behind the White Mountain. At last the captain of the strangers blew a great blast on his bugle-horn, and asked the Irish chief to lay aside the fight till next morning. He consented, and both sides separated, one party moving up to the great rath, and the other down to the boats that brought them up from the Bay of Wexford, that was called Loch Garman in old times. Well, just as they separated, a flight of arrows came from the hill on the far bank, and struck several of the Wexford men. No matter how small a scratch was made, the flesh around it began to itch, and smart, and turn purple, and burn, till the man dropped, crying out for water, and twisting himself in the greatest agony. Those that were untouched hung their shields behind their backs, and carried all that were not yet dead inside the gates.

The three son-in-laws were dead before they could cross the drawbridges, and in the chiefs family there was nothing but lamentation. One of the married daughters fell on the dead body of her husband in a faint, after striving to pull out an arrow-head that had pierced into his side. But the beard of the arrow scratched her nice white wrist, and she was soon roused from her faint with the purple spreading round the mark, and the pain going to her very heart.

Well, they were bad enough before, but now they didn't know which way to turn ; the poor father and the mother and brothers and sisters looking on, and no one able to do a single thing. While they were expecting every moment to be her last, three strangers walked in—an old and a young warrior, and a Druid. The young man came at once to the side of the dying princess, took hold of her arm, and fastened his lips to the wound. The Druid cried out to bring a large vessel, and fill it with the milk of a white cow and water from the Slaney ; and to get all the milk from all the white cows they could lay hands on, fill vessels with it and Slaney water, and dip every wounded man that still had a breath of life in him. The young man sucked away until the bath was ready, and she was hardly lain in it till the pain left her, and in half an hour she was out of danger. All the still living men recovered just the same ; and after a great deal of bustle and trouble, things got a little quieter, and ifs a wonder if they weren't grateful to the strangers.

Just as the armies were parting in the evening, these men crossed the river about where the island is now. They left a hundred men at the other side ; and when they all sat down in the rath to their supper, you may be sure there was *cead mile failthe* for these three.

The chief and his people were eager enough to know something about their welcome visitors, but were too well bred to ask any questions till supper was over. Then the old man began without asking, and told all that were within hearing that himself and his son, and all their people, were descendants of a tribe that was once driven out of Ireland by enchanters and pirates, and sailed away to Greece, where their own ancestors once ruled. They were badly treated by their relations, and made to carry clay in leather bags to the tops of hills. “ And even my own daughter,” said he, “ was carried away from her home by the wicked young prince while I was away fighting for his father. My son, at the head of some of our people, overtook and killed him ; and when word was brought to me I quitted the army at once. We seized some ships and sailed away, searching for the old island where our forefathers once dwelt. My daughter fell sick on the voyage ; but our wise Druid foretold that a draught of water from the Slaney would bring her to health, and that on our reaching its banks we should save hundreds of lives.”

Well, there was not much sleep in the rath that night. The friendly strangers on the other bank where the chiefs sick daughter still stayed were provided with everything they wanted. Other things were looked to, and a little after sunrise the men of the rath were pouring out of their gates, and the men of the woods landing from their corrachs, and forming their battle ranks. Before they met, a shower of darts flew from the woody hill down on the Irish, but pits were ready, lined with yellow clay, and filled with milk and Slaney water, and the moment a man found himself struck he made to the bath. The ranks were on the point of engaging, when a great shout was heard from the hill, and the Woodmen were seen running down to the bank, pursued by the strange young chief and his men, that were slaughtering them like sheep. They were nearly all killed before they could get to the boats ; and into these boats leaped the friendly strangers, and rowed across. So between themselves and the men of the fort rushing down hill, the Woodmen were killed to a man. No quarter was given to the people that were so wicked as to use poisoned arms, and no caoine was made, and no cairn piled over them, and no inscription cut on an upright stone to tell their names or how they perished. Their bodies were burned, and the ashes flung into the river ; and the next night, though there was some lamentation in the fort, there was much rejoicing along with it. .

The Druid did not allow his people to remain long there ; he said that Scotland was to be their resting place. Some of them stayed all this time in a little harbour near the place now called River Chapel, and there they set sail again. But the young chief and two friends would not leave without the three widowed princesses, and the only return he made was to leave his sick sister, that was now as well as ever she was, with the son of the chief of Enniscorthy. The lady whose life he saved was not hard to be persuaded to marry him after he risked his life for her, and her sisters did not like to let her go alone among strange people. Maybe that’s the reason that the Irish and the Highlanders like one another still, and can understand one another when they meet and begin a conversation.

The party who brought such timely succour were descendants of the Nemedians, who had been driven out of Ireland by the Fomorian pirates after the defeat at Tory Island, and afterwards got the name of *Firbolgs* (Men of the Bags), from their forced employment in Greece. Keating says that King Heremon, jealous of this colony who succoured the Wexford men, obliged them, by a kind of moral pressure, to proceed to Scotland, where the children of the Irish ladies enjoyed ascendancy over the rest. The Picts, according to the same authority, were the offspring of these people, and their country was called Caledonia, from Cathluan, the young chief of the tale. The western Highlands and Islands being colonized by other Irish tribes, got the name of Alba.

A high antiquity must be assigned to some of the Irish fictions, both in prose and poetry. We have mentioned some poems attributed to Oisín, preserved in the Book of Leinster, written in the early part of the twelfth century. The poems were copies in a dialect antiquated even then. The *Tain-bo-Cuailgne* [9] was copied into the “Book of the Dun Cow” by Maolmuire, a monk of Clonmacnois, whose death occurred in 1107; and the tale, in its construction and orthography, was less familiar to the scholars of the time than the first book printed by Caxton would be to a student of this day, whose favourite researches were bounded by the London journals. Moreover, there is a significant absence of religious rites, or reverence for beings higher than the hill folk—the men and women fairies residing in caverns, and favouring or persecuting the worthies of the epic according to circumstances.

The Quest for the “*Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*.”

Among the Celtic fictional remains, the “*Tain-bo-Cuailgne*” is one of the most remarkable. It was in such high consideration, that the author of the “*Proceedings of the Bards*” ascribed its production to the spirit of a dead hero. Seanchán, the chief bard of Erin (contemporary with the magnanimous Guaire of Conacht), and his numerous suite, not only tried the patience of Guaire’s people and Guaire himself, but even that of his sainted brother, Marvan, the swineherd (hence, probably, the saying, “You’d try the patience of a saint”). He bore all like a Christian, till they demanded that his favourite boar should be sacrificed for their entertainment. Under this last impertinence his patience broke down. For this valued pig used to search for, and drive home before him all the vagrant silly swine that were attempting to get out at any of the nine passes of the valley on cold evenings. When the saint’s feet were bleeding after the day’s fatigue, as he lay resting himself in his hut before the fire, this boar would completely stop the blood, and heal the scratches, by licking them with his tongue. When the saint required a little relaxation from mental and bodily fatigue, he nudged his bristly servant with his foot, and he forthwith emitted *Cronan* (purring) music, such as could not be excelled by thrush or blackbird.

So in his resentment he laid *geasa* on the whole bardic body, that they should at once lose their powers of invention and composition, and that they should never sleep for two consecutive nights in the same place till they discovered and were able to repeat the tale of the *Tain* in perfection. They repaired to the palace of the King of Leinster at Naas, they crossed the sea to Mann, they explored the hills and lochs of Alba, and at last were obliged to return and implore St. Marvan to relieve them. Being satisfied with the amount of punishment already inflicted, he directed them to collect the Twelve Apostles (bishops or saints) of Erin, including St. Colum Cille and St. Kieran, to the grave of Fergus Mac Roigh, in Mayo, in order that they might induce the spirit of that defunct warrior (himself one of the personages in the great cattle spoil), to appear and reveal the story to them. The ecclesiastics assembled, and after three days’ invocations, the shade of Fergus, “high, mighty as in life,” issued from his mound, and told the weird, heroic legend. St. Kieran, of Clonmacnois, produced the skin of his pet dun cow, on which he engrossed the narrative as it came from the mouth of the ghost, and when the task was achieved he reentered his dark abode in the Tulach. This first draft has been lost, but we have the defective copy made (as already specified) some time prior to 1106; and the volume in which it is preserved derives its name from the skin on which the saint penned the original. [10]

Seanchán and his companions, having their proper faculties now restored, were ordered by the saint to disperse, and never again oppress or annoy king or chief by visitations in a large body, extravagant demands, or unlawful use of the terrible powers of satire. Evil usages and principles seem possessed of surprising vitality. Kings, and chiefs, and common men—even

rats (if legends tell truth)—feared satire in the sixth century when St. Kieran ruled Clonmacnois. So late as 1800, poetic satirists by profession had free bed and board in the provinces among the gentry and farmers, by whom a lampoon for stinginess or some domestic scandal was very much dreaded.

The subjoined historical tale is worth giving in outline, as illustrating the fear of satire which prevailed long ago among Irish kings, as well as other characteristic specialties of Irish life at the dawn of the Christian era :—

The Progress of the Wicked Bard.

There flourished in Ulster in the days of the Knights of the Red Branch and their Grand Master, Connor Mac Nessa, a poet named Aithirné the Importunate. He well deserved his *sobriquet*, for he seldom asked for anything easy or honourable to grant. At the time of our story the King of Ulster and his knights were in an uncomfortable state. They had subdued all the fighting forces in the island, were consequently at peace with everybody, and as uncomfortable as the great Neal Malone himself “for want of a batin’.” Paddy Kelly trails his coat in the dust, and defies the world to tread on it ;—King Connor sent the vicious master of satirical song through the kingdom to find out what prince would dare refuse his most insolent demand.

He first took his way to Cruachan in Conacht, and was disappointed by the ready assent given by the monarch to his unreasonable demands. He then sought the court of Achy, King of Mid-Erinn, at his fortress near the Shannon, on the borders of Clare and Galway, and after exhibiting his poetic powers, he demanded the king’s eye for his guerdon. The poor monarch had only one, but rather than be considered ungenerous to a bard, or involve his people in a useless war, he tore it out at once and handed it to the wicked poet. Led by his servant to the nearest point in the Shannon to have his wound washed, “Alas ! dear master,” said the sorrowing follower, “the water is all red with your blood.” “Let that circumstance give it a name for all future time,” said the king. “Loch Derg Dheirc (Lake of the Red Eye) shall it be called while the Sionan runs to the sea.” Let the tourist, as he approaches Killaloe through Lough Derg, remember this legend.

At the palace of Carn Tiernach, in South Munster, he met no refusal. At Fort-Brestiné, in the modern county of Carlow, he received from the King of South Leinster, Fergus Fairrge, a much valued brooch lost by his (the poet’s) uncle in an unsuccessful fight near the same fort several years before.

At Naas, the seat of Mesgera, King of North and South Leinster, he abode a year, and at his departure insisted on getting seven hundred white cows with red ears, [11] sheep without limit, and a hundred and fifty of the most noble of the ladies of the province to be led into Ulster as slaves.

Even this detestable demand was not refused ; but the Leinster nobles accompanied him and his convoy apparently through respect, till they came to the edge of the Avan Liffey (the then boundary of Leinster and Meath), at a ford, near a deep pool, called Dubhlinn, from the circumstance of a lady named *Dubh* having been drowned there. It being found that the sheep could not be got across at this ford, a floating causeway was constructed with wattles and boughs, which being secured at each bank, they were conveyed safely over. [12] When all were fairly in the province of Meath, the Leinster men took their wives and daughters by the hand, and directed them to recross the stream. They would have also turned back the cattle, but a body of Ulster warriors, previously warned by the suspicious poet, and watching the

proceedings from near the mouth of the Tolka, interposed. A terrible fight took place, in which the wrongdoers sustained defeat, though they managed to carry off the white cows with red ears and the sheep. They retreated with their spoil to a fort on the side of *Beann Edair* (Hill of Oaks—Howth), and held out against their foes till the siege was raised by new reinforcements from Ulster, under the command of the renowned Conall Cearnach.

Before this invincible champion the Lagenians were obliged to retire, and the furious Ulster chief, pursuing them through Dublin and Kildare in his war-chariot, at last came up with King Mesgera beyond Naas, and near to the Liffey. Neither warrior (an accident frequent in stories) had any of his men near him. So, with no fear of odds on either side, they fell to sword and shield play, and the beam of battle at last inclined to the champion of the evil, cause. The savage Conall, taking the brains of the gallant king, mixed them with lime, and formed a ball, which having been dried in the sun, became a "*Lia Milidh*" (champion's stone), and in the end proved fatal to Conall's own master. King Connor.

Taking the chariot of the king for his prize, and carefully laying the head of its late master in one of its corners, he was proceeding northwards (the historian laying no stress on his having to pass through an enemy's country), when who should come that way but the widow of the slain hero, the charitable Queen Buona, attended by fifty ladies. She was returning from a short sojourn in Meath. "Who art thou, O lady?" said Conall. "I am Buona, wife to Mesgera, King of Leinster." "Thy lord has sent me for thee: behold his horses and chariot." "My lord is generous; he may have given them to thee as a present." "Well, you will at least credit this token," said the savage Curadh, worthy to be one of Homers mailed butchers, and as he spoke he held up the bloody trophy. Wild shrieks rose from her attendants, but she neither uttered cry nor shed tear. "I am then free," said she, in a serene voice. "But give me my husband's head, that his spirit may not hereafter accuse me of neglecting his caoiné." She received it into her arms, kissed the pale bloody face, and then burst out into a wild lamentation. At its conclusion she fell lifeless on the turf, and her spirit rejoined that of her loved lord in the happy valleys of Tirna-n-oge. The rough warrior and his no less rough charioteer were affected. They interred the devoted wife, laying her husband's head by her side.

The sepulchral mound lay a little to the north of the ford of Claen. In time a hazel sprung from the turf over her remains, and it was long known by the name of *Coll Buona* (Buan's Hazel). [13]

[1] This was the origin of the "Devil's Punch-bowl," Killarney. The Donal Gealach mentioned was the king of the Killarney fairies.

[2] Fair Wave, Son of Ocean.

[3] The Oghuim writing of the Pagan Celts was commonly cut on thin staves.

[4] *Soar* would be more poetical than *depart*; but the filea knew his audience. The cold upper air, with its fogs, snows, and harsh winds, was the Celtic Tartarus.

[5] James M'Pherson was only imperfectly acquainted with even the oral literature of the Highland Gael. The ghosts of his good characters look complacently from their bright clouds of rest on the actions of their former friends or their own brave descendants.

[6] Dr. Petrie insists that the Stone of Destiny is the Dalian still to be seen on Tara Hill. He may be right; but we are determined not to believe him while treating the present subject. (This was written when we had the amiable archaeologist still amongst us.)

[7] Island of the Pig.

[8] The maps used by Homer, and the romantic annalists of Ireland, exhibited a sea (part of the great Ocean Stream) covering the sites now occupied by South Russia, Poland, and North Germany, thus connecting the Euxine with the Baltic.

[9] The Cattle Raid of Cuailgne.

[10] This copy is reverently preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, Dawson-street

[11] If one of the most delightful of our bards, poor Oliver Goldsmith, had met with this tale in his youth, it surely supplied him with a hint for his “ White Mouse with Green Eyes,” in the charming story of Prince Bonbenin Bonbobbinet.

[12] This raft or bridge was thenceforward called “ Ath cliath,” the Pass of Boughs or Wattles, and the future city got the name of “ Baile Atha Cliath,” the Town of the Pass of Wattles.

[13] The Irish *Ban* (white), *Bean* (woman), *Finn* (fair), and the Latin *Bonus*, are cognate words. Here follow some names of women in the Celtic : — Brighid, Fionula (fair shoulder), Grainné, Sorcha (bright), Dervorglan (true oath), Dunfla (lady of the fort), Eiver, Gormfla (blue eyed lady), Niamh (effulgence), Orfla (golden *haired* lady), Siobail (pr. *Shibail*, Elizabeth), Sioban (pr. *Shivaun*, Joanna). The six best women in Ireland and the world are mentioned in this quatrain :—

“ The six best women that in the world were.
After Mary the Virgin-Mother,
Were Maev, Saav, and fair Sarai,
Faïnd, Eimer, and the sorrowing Acal.”

Eimer was the hard-won bride of Cuchullain ; Acal, the wife of Erc, son of King Cairbre, before mentioned. Conall Cearnach slew him in revenge for the death of Cuchullain, and Acal, like Queen Buona, died of grief for his loss. All good women should be endowed with these gifts, viz. : — Beauty of person, a good voice, skill in music, in embroidery, and all needlework, the gift of wisdom, and the gift of virtuous chastity.

Legendary fictions of the Irish Celts (1866)

Author : Kennedy, Patrick, 1801-1873

Subject : Folklore

Publisher : London, Macmillan and Co.

Year : 1866

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : Harvard University

Collection : americana

Notes : “ No story in the present collection is copied either in substance or form from any writer of the present or past generation.” —p. ix.

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/legendaryfictio01kenngoog>

Edited and uploaded to www.augty.org

December 19 2011