

## Irish History - A Catechism

William O'Neill Daunt

1844

*A catechism of the history of Ireland, ancient and modern*

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I intend this little Catechism for a schoolbook. I hope it may help to train up Irish children “in the way in which they should go.” I have often been thoroughly disgusted at the deceptive character of those quasi-historical abstracts which are put into the hands of our youth, and which are calculated to create in their minds a contempt for their own brave and gallant Celtic forefathers, a political idolatry of England, and a total misconception of the real, substantial interests of their native land.

It was necessarily impossible in a compilation so limited in extent as the present, to enter into full details of historical incidents. The outlines of our national annals are all that could be given ; accompanied, sometimes, by a brief word of comment, meant to guide the youthful student with respect to the *moral* of his country’s history. School-books about Ireland too often been designed to train their readers to look through English spectacles at Irish transactions. *I* have looked at those transactions through an Irish medium ; I have sought to extend to the rising generation, that teaching which has been disseminated with such potent efficacy among their seniors, My my able friends who conduct the NATION Newspaper; being deeply convinced that the welfare of the country and the cause of political truth, can alone be promoted and secured by infusing into the hearts of its inhabitants the sacred principle of nationality.

Of religious differences, except so far as they have affected politics, I have said nothing whatever. Some of the best and warmest Irish patriots are, and have been, Protestants. There is nothing in any Christian creed to prevent its professors from working honestly and efficiently for their country.

I have not screened the faults and follies of our ancestors. Their great and noble qualities were too often neutralized by their sin of mutual dissention. It is true that in this respect they were not worse than the contemporary inhabitants of other lands ; but the evils arising from internal differences, have, from peculiar circumstances, been more grievous and enduring in Ireland than almost in any other country. It is time that *party* should be merged in *nationality*.

There exists not on the surface of the earth a nation richer than our own in all the moral and physical resources of greatness, prosperity, and happiness ; or more fertile in all the materials of self-government. Every page of our history impresses the conviction, that, if intestine divisions were abandoned ; if men would use the energies and powers God has given them for the common benefit, instead of for the purposes of faction ; if, instead of a miserable strife to exalt Whig over Tory, or Tory over Whig all, parties would unite to exalt Ireland, by restoring to her legislative freedom ; then we should see those great qualities which now lie nearly dormant, called forth into active exercise, and productive of unnumbered blessings to our fatherland.

W. J. O'NEILL DAUNT

*Kilcascan, County Cork,  
23rd September, 1844.*

*Of the Original Inhabitants of Ireland.*

Question. Whence was Ireland first peopled ?

Answer. There are many accounts of the origin of her earliest inhabitants ; the most probable belief is, that Ireland was peopled by a colony of Phœnicians.

Q. Who were the Phœnicians ?

A. They were a branch of the great nation of the Scythians.

Q. How did the early inhabitants divide Ireland ?

A. Into five kingdoms.

Q. Name them ?

A. Ulster, Leinster, Connaught, Munster, and Meath.

Q. How were these five kingdoms governed ?

A. Each by its own prince ; and the king of Meath was also paramount sovereign of all Ireland.

Q. Did these kingdoms descend from father to son by hereditary right ?

A. No ; the succession was regulated by the law of Tanistry.

Q. What was Tanistry ?

A. Tanistry was a law which restricted the right of succession to the family of the prince, or chief ; but any member of the family might be elected successor, as well as the eldest son.

Q. What does Tanist mean ?

A. Tanist was the title borne by the elected successor, during the life of the reigning prince, or chief.

Q. What qualities was it necessary that the Tanist should possess ?

A. He should be a knight, fully twenty-five years old, his figure should be tall, noble, and free from blemish ; and he should prove his pedigree from the Milesians.

Q. Was Tanistry a good custom ?

A. No ; for the struggles of the different candidates to be elected, caused great warfare and bloodshed.

Q. Where did the king-paramount of all Ireland reside?

A. At the palace of Tara, in Meath.

Q. What was the ancient law of Ireland called ?

A. THE BREHON LAW [1]

Q. What was most remarkable in the Brehon Law?

A. The nearly total absence of capital punishment.

Q. How was murder punished ?

A. By a money-fine called an *eric*.

Q. Had the lenity of the Brehon law in that respect a good effect ?

A. Not always ; for the friends of the murdered person often deemed the penalty inflicted by the law too slight : and in avenging their own wrongs, bloody feuds and clan-battles often occurred.

Q. How were men appointed to the office of Brehon ?

A. The office of Brehon was hereditary in certain families.

Q. Were the other great offices in Ireland, in like manner, restricted to certain families ?

A. Yes ; in those days all great offices were thus restricted.

Q. Can you state any ancient custom of those early times which still exists in Ireland ?

A. Yes ; the custom of *fostering*. The children of the chiefs and nobles were always suckled by the wives of the tenants.

Q. Was the link thus formed considered a strong one ?

A. As strong as the tie of actual relationship. Nay, foster-brothers and foster-sisters often loved each other better than if they had been the children of the same parents.

Q. Can you mention any other ancient custom ?

A. Yes ; that of *gossippred*. The chiefs and nobles frequently became god-fathers to the children of their vassals and dependents.

Q. Had these old customs any good effect ?

A. They had ; they helped in some degree to connect different classes in the bonds of affection with each other.

Q. Are there any remarkable remains of early Irish buildings ?

A. Yes ; there are fifty-two round towers in Ireland, of a very high antiquity.

Q. What was the origin and purpose of those buildings ?

A. Both their origin and purpose are unknown ; there is, however, a rather probable opinion that they were intended for the fire-worship of the pagans, before the Christian religion was brought into Ireland.

Q. Are there similar round towers in any other part of the British islands ?

A. No ; excepting two which still remain in Scotland.

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*Invasion of Ireland by the Danes.*

Q. When did the Danes invade Ireland ?

A. In the ninth century.

Q. By what name were they known ?

A. They were called Eastmen, or Ostmen.

Q. Did they succeed in subduing the country ?

A. Their success was at first only partial. They soon, however, seized upon towns and villages along the coast, and built castles to strengthen their position.

Q. Did they soon become more powerful ?

A. Yes ; before long they overran the whole island.

Q. Who was the Danish King of Ireland ?

A. Turgesius.

Q. How was he enabled to conquer the whole kingdom ?

A. By the disputes and divisions of the Irish chiefs themselves. The native princes were too busy quarrelling with each other, to oppose a united and effectual resistance to the conquering Danes.

Q. What useful lesson do we learn from this fact ?

A. That Ireland never can be great, prosperous, or happy, so long as her people are divided amongst themselves.

Q. Did Turgesius reign long ?

A. No. He was soon cut off by the contrivance of an Irish prince to whom he had made himself obnoxious.

Q. What followed ?

A. The Irish revolted against the Danes ; and as they combined together tolerably well, they drove the invaders out of the centre of the country to the coasts ; where, however, they still kept possession of the seaports.

Q. Did the Danes ever recover their former power in Ireland ?

A. No. In the eleventh century the Irish resolved to make a grand effort for their final

expulsion from the island ; and a battle was fought on the plains of Clontarf, near Dublin, on Good Friday, 1014, in which the Danes were driven to their ships with great slaughter.

Q. Who was the leader of the Irish army upon that occasion ?

A. Brian Boromhe, king paramount of Ireland, the greatest and best king that Ireland ever saw.

Q. Did he live to enjoy the fruits of his victory ?

A. No ; he was slaughtered while at prayer in his tent, by a straggling party of the enemy.

Q. What was the result of Brien Boromhe's death upon the general interests of the kingdom ?

A. In the last degree disastrous. On the death of the monarch, whose skill and wisdom had for many years governed the land in prosperity and peace, the absurd and criminal squabbles of the petty princes were revived, and the country was ravaged with intestine warfare.

Q. Is there any use in recording and dwelling on these disgraceful contentions ?

A. Yes ; they teach us a useful, though a bitter, lesson. The crimes of our forefathers show us what we should avoid. We see, in their miserable domestic quarrels, the true cause why foreign power was able to introduce and to establish its supremacy in Ireland.

Q. Did the unsettled condition of the country afford strong encouragement to the English king, Henry the Second ?

A. Of course it did. Several of the Irish princes and all the Irish prelates, wearied with perpetual civil discord, were not unwilling that the kingdom should be placed under a strong sovereign ruler ; and this circumstance gained a welcome for Henry from the heads of the church, and a large number of the temporal rulers of the island.

Q. What circumstance first drew the British invaders to Ireland ?

A. Dermot, king of Leinster, having been driven out of his kingdom by O'Rorke, prince of Breffny, and O'Connor, king of Connaught, sought the assistance of Henry the Second of England against his native rivals.

Q. In what year did Dermot thus seek help from Henry ?

A. In 1168.

Q. How did Henry receive Dermot's application ?

A. He required the Irish king to do homage to him for his possessions, and being then unable to go to Ireland himself, he gave Dermot letters-patent, authorising any English subjects who might be so inclined, to assist Dermot against O'Connor and O'Rorke.

Q. Whose assistance did Dermot procure ?

A. That of Richard, Earl of Strigul and Pembroke, usually called Strongbow from his skill in archery.

Q. What reward did Dermot promise Strongbow for his help ?

A. He promised to give him his daughter Eva in marriage, and also to bequeath to him the inheritance of his kingdom.

Q. Did Dermot obtain any other help than Strongbow's ?

A. Yes ; he got the aid of Robert Fitz-Stepheu, Maurice Fitz-Gerald, Meyler Fitz-Henry, Maurice de Prendergast, Hervey Montmarisco, and several other knights.

Q. When did the Anglo-Norman invaders first land in Ireland ?

A. They landed on the coast of Wexford in the month of May, 1170.

Q. Was Strongbow among their number ?

A. No ; he had waited to obtain the express permission of King Henry for his Irish expedition.

Q. Did Henry grant permission to Strongbow to go to Ireland ?

A. No ; he was jealous of Strongbow, and doubted his allegiance.

Q. What did Strongbow then do ?

A. He sailed for Ireland *without* Henry's permission, carrying with him a considerable force, with whose aid he seized Waterford.

Q. What followed?

A. Strongbow married Eva, the daughter of Dermot Mac Murrough, king of Leinster ; and on Dermot's death he succeeded to his Father-in-law's territory.

Q. In what year did Henry visit Ireland ?

A. In 1171. He pardoned Strongbow, and confirmed to him the possession of his territories under the English crown.

Q. Did the Pope sanction Henry the Second in his invasion of Ireland ?

A. Yes ; Pope Adrian the Fourth had, many years before, (about A.D. 1155,) been solicited by Henry to sanction the conquest of Ireland ; and being himself an Englishman, he readily consented to a scheme that promised to extend the power of his native country.

Q. Did all the Irish submit to King Henry the Second ?

A. No ; the larger portion of them resisted his authority.

Q. Were the English laws extended to the whole of Ireland ?

A. No ; they were at first granted only to the Norman colonists, to some of the seaport towns, and to a few native septs or clans who obtained the benefit of them as a matter of favour.

Q. How many clans obtained the benefit of the English laws ?

A. Five.

Q, Name them ?

A. The O’Neills of Ulster, the O’Connors of Connaught, the O’Briens of Thomond, the O’Lachlans of Meath, and the Kavanaghs (otherwise Mac Murroughs) of Leinster.

Q. How long did this exclusion of the great body of the natives, from the benefit of the English law, continue ?

A. For several centuries ; so late, in fact, as the reign of Elizabeth.

Q. What was the practical effect of this exclusion ?

A. To deprive the whole Irish nation, (excepting the five tribes already mentioned, the descendants of the colonists, and the inhabitants of the seaports,) of all remedy in law for any injury done to them, and even of all power of suing for redress in any court of justice.

Q. Was not an effort made by the natives to expel the Anglo-Norman invaders ?

A. Yes ; and their hopes were excited by a victory they had gained over Strongbow, the English commander, who was defeated in an engagement near Thurles.

Q. Who was at the head of the new confederacy against the invaders ?

A. Roderick O’Connor, king-paramount of Ireland.

Q. Did Roderick succeed ?

A. No ; his efforts were marred by the old curse of Ireland : the want of unity and combination amongst her inhabitants.

Q. Had the Anglo-Normans any other advantage over the natives, except that which they derived from the dissensions of the latter ?

A. Yes ; they understood the art of war much better than the Irish. They were clad in complete suits of steel armour, and were perfect in the management of their chargers. Whereas, the Irish had but slight defences, and had merely the rude weapons of their forefathers to oppose to the array and discipline of their powerful invaders.

Q. What was thenceforth the condition of Ireland ?

A. Most wretched. There was constant warfare between the natives and the settlers ; in which the victory was sometimes with the Irish. They were brave and ardent, and often made their enemies (although cased in armour) feel the weight of their rude and simple weapons.

Q. What were the weapons of the Irish warriors ?

A. They had a short lance, or javelin, and a steel hatchet, named a “ Sparthe.” They acquired so much skill in the use of this Sparthe, that in close combat they often clove through the steel armour of their adversaries with it.

Q. What were the houses of the Irish built of at that period ?

A. Of timber and wicker work, and constructed with such skill as to excite the admiration of foreigners.

Q. What was the state of religion in Ireland in the twelfth century ?

A. Religion of course suffered severely by the license and havoc resulting from domestic warfare, and its precepts were too often forgotten and neglected by the turbulent factions who divided the country.

Q. What was at that time the character of the clergy of Ireland ?

A. The ancient historian, Giraldus Cambrensis, although extremely prejudiced against the Irish nation, yet describes the clergy as being most virtuous.

Q. What good qualities does he ascribe to the Irish priesthood ?

A. He says they were pre-eminently chaste, [2] temperate in their food, and attentive to their religious duties. He, however, censures the bishops as slothful ; an accusation not easily reconciled with the admitted virtues of the priesthood from whose ranks they had risen to the episcopacy.

Q. Who was Laurence O'Toole ?

A. One of the best and greatest prelates who have adorned the Irish church. He was Archbishop of Dublin, and afterwards of Armagh.

Q. What was his conduct in reference to the English invasion ?

A. He exerted himself to rouse the Irish chiefs and princes to a grand combined effort to resist the English invaders, and even bore arms himself to encourage his countrymen.

Q. When and where did this good Prelate die ?

A. He died in 1178, at the Monastery of Eu, in Normandy.

[1] Brehiv is the modern Irish for a judge.

[2] " Inter varias quibus pollet virtutes, castitatis prerogativa præ-eminet atque præcellet." c. 27.

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