

The Norsemen in Ireland

Ireland : elements of her early story

Sean Ua Ceallaigh

SINCE the earliest times there had been intercourse between the Gael and the Norseman. From the Viking land, we have been told, came the Lia Fail, or Stone of Destiny. With the men of Erin at the Hill of Slane, when Conchubhar mac Neasa came to avenge the wounding of Cuchulainn, were the nine chariot-fighters of Norway's warriors. The mother of Conn Ceadchathach was daughter of the king of the Lochlainn ; and two sons of the king of the Lochlainn were present at a feast given by Fionn in honour of Cormac. The kindred Fian of Lochlainn are also referred to at this time. Baodan, for one year king of Ireland—before the Battle of Cul Dreimhne—was married to Ceacht, daughter of the king of the Fionnghaill. About 680, in the reign of Ceannfhaolaidh, king of Ireland, the foreigners burned the monastery of Bangor. [1] On the Continent, Charlemagne was busy from 777 defending his maritime territory against the Vikings. A decade later, in 787, "came three ships," says the *Saxon Chronicle*, "the first ships of Danish men that sought the land of the English race." And in 793 and 794 these "heathen men came with larger fleets" and dreadfully destroyed the churches of Christ." They "trode down holy places with their unholy feet, slaughtered priests and Levites and multitudes of monks and nuns, undermined the altars, and carried off all the treasures of Holy Church." Lindisfarne was totally destroyed in 793 ; "the abbey," says Lingard, "was reduced to ashes, while the bishop and monks fled to the mountains ; at Coldingham, the nuns perished in the flames." In 794, after the 'heathen men' had ravaged Northumberland, they destroyed Ecgferth's monastery at Weremouth." They "fell on all the shores of England from the Forth to the Channel . . . from the Clyde to the Land's End." Steadily "they slew every English king and wiped out every English royal house save that of Wessex, and in their place set up their own." In 795 the Gentiles pillaged the holy isle of Iona. In 795, too, say the *Annals of Innisfallen*, "the Danes were first seen hovering around the coasts of Ireland." That same year, the Four Masters tell us, "Reachra was burned by them, and its shrines broken and plundered." About the same time they ravaged Wales, and three years later the Isle of Man. They soon appeared off the coast of Kerry in one hundred and twenty ships, plundering the islands from Kenmare River to the Shannon until, two years before the death of Charlemagne, they met with a crushing defeat at the hands of the Eoghanaicht of Loch Lein, near Killarney, when upwards of four hundred of them were slain. Eginhard, tutor of Charlemagne, bears witness in his well known Annals, to this victory, and writes, A.D. 802 : The fleet of the Northmen having invaded Hibernia, the island of the Scots, basely took to flight and returned home after a battle had been fought with the Scots and no small number of the Norsemen slain. [2]

Five years later another fleet carried off a great prey of women from Howth and pillaged Beigeire and Dairinis in Wexford Harbour. Having, after two years more, plundered Bangor in the north, they again turned their attention to Cork and Sceilg Mhichil in the south and other less known places around the coast, eventually carrying off Eadgall the famous hermit of the Sceilg Rock. The following year, another foreign fleet re-plundered Bangor, broke the shrine of Comhgall, killed the bishop and clergy, and sacked the city. Within twelve months "Blathmac, son of Flann, received the crown of martyrdom, for he was killed by the foreigners at Iona," because he refused to disclose to the marauders the whereabouts of the gold adorned shrine containing the relics of its founder. Walafridus Strabo, a German monk, composed a poem of 180 Latin hexameters on the lofty Christian courage of this Irish monk. The same year, 823, they ravaged successively, Teach Muna, Teach Molaing and Inistioge, devastating Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny until they were met by the people of Osraighe and routed with a loss of close on two hundred men.

After this reverse, however, we find them ravaging Lismore, burning Ceall Molaise, Dunderrow near Kinsale, Innishannon, Discart Tiobraide and other churches and retreats in the south-west. Dunleer, Duleek, Swords, Glendaloch, and the chief monasteries of Wexford, Carlow and Kilkenny were again plundered by them, as were Cloyne in Cork, Ceann Sleibhe in Kerry, Mungret in Limerick : in fact, between 825 and 830, “ the greater part of the churches of Erin were attacked by them.”

After this came the great royal fleet of Tuirgeis. He at once assumed the sovereignty of the foreigners and occupied the whole of Leath Chuinn. Co-operating with him were powerful fleets at Lough Neagh, Lough Ree, Limerick, Dublin and Dundalk, with the result that in 833 Armagh was plundered three times in the space of a month, “ the first plundering of the ancient city by the Gentiles,” Soon after, however, the Irish gained three distinct victories, the Cineal Conaill at Assaroe, the Dalcassians at Loch Derg, and the men of Breaghmhagh in North Dublin, where Saxulf the foreign chief was slain by Cianaoth. In return, Turgeis plundered from central forts the monasteries of Clonmacnoise, Glendaloch, Lothra, Clonfert, Terryglass, Iniscealtra, and all the churches of Loch Derg. From a fortress at Linn Duachaill near Castlebellingham the whole country was plundered as far as Sliabh Bladhma in 840, and in 841 Caomhan abbot of Linn Duachaill was slain and his body burned to cinders. This very year Tuirgeis himself usurped the Abbacy of Armagh. Forannan, the abbot and chief *comharb* of Patrick, taking with him St. Patrick’s sacred shrine, fled to Imleach Iobhair as did the archbishop and clergy of Cashel also. After four years’ sojourn in Munster, Forannan was taken prisoner by the Danes of Limerick, who bore him off to their ships, having first broken the shrine of St. Patrick. Just at this time, the *Chronicum Scotorum* refers to Tuirgeis as having erected a *dun* at Loch Ree from which he plundered Connacht and Meath. And, further to manifest his authority, his wife Ota, in the cloak of the prophetess, gave her oracles from the high altar at Clonmacnoise, while he set up the worship of Thor at the shrine of Armagh. But the day of reckoning soon overtook him : he was seized by Maelsheachlainn, then king of Westmeath, and cast into Loch Uair near Mullingar.

The very year that Tuirgeis usurped the See of Armagh, the Danish pirates, say the *Annals of Bertin*, made an irruption into the territory of Rouen, gave up the city, the monks and the whole people to pillage and carnage and captivity. They devastated the monasteries and other places along the Seine and, having received much silver, left them filled with terror. In 843 they arrived in the city of Nantes, pillaged the place, killed the bishop, many priests, laymen and others without distinction of sex, and ravaged the lower parts of Aquitaine. “ In the year 848,” says the *Norman Chronicle*, “ the Northmen lay waste and burnt Burdegala, *i.e.* Bordeaux, in Aquitania, captured through the treachery of the Jews, afterwards Metullus which they lay waste and give over to the flames. The Scots breaking in upon the Northmen, by God’s help victorious, drive them forth from their borders. Whereupon the king of Scots sends, for sake of peace and friendship, legates to Charles with gifts.” For twenty long years, notwithstanding this reverse, they devastated in turn Frisia, Amiens, Nantes, Toulouse, Galicia, the coast of Spain, Pisa and even northern Africa. Peronne, “ the city of Fursa,” was first invaded by the Northmen in 880. They advanced along the Elbe, the Rhone and the Seine, and from November, 885, to May, 887, laid siege to Paris, their fleet extending over six miles and shutting out the whole face of the river.

Meantime we find immense new fleets arriving in Ireland ; old monasteries re-plundered ; Freshford, Aghaboe, Roscrea, Kildare ravished ; the abbots of Kildare and Terryglass put to death ; sainted Iona pillaged by a mighty fleet on its way to Ireland, and Inisgluire on the Sligo coast on its way out.

Then came the “ Black Gentiles” or Danes, to plunder, after great slaughter, the “ White Gentiles” or Norwegians. “ Thus the Lord took away from the Lochlannachs all the wealth

they had wrenched from the churches and sanctuaries and shrines of Erin.” At a battle in Louth, and one later at Carlingford, which lasted three days and three nights, the Danes repeated their successes, so that the Norwegians had to abandon eight score of their best ships. One of their leaders was beheaded, the other escaped by flight, to return re-inforced, and win, and lose again.

At this stage considerable success came the way of the Gael. The combined forces of the South under the kings of Leinster and Munster gained a great victory near Castledermot, where twelve hundred foreigners were slain, including the heir-apparent to the throne. Subsequently seven hundred foreigners were slain by Malachy, Airdri, and five hundred by Tighearnach, lord of Loch Gabhair, near Dunshaughlin. Similar victories attended the arms of the king of Munster and the Eoghanacht in the South, and—four hundred of the Danes were slain by the Norwegians. In two battles near Balrothery and Duleek, the foreigners lost five hundred men, and they met with further reverses at the hands of the Airdri and of the people of Ciarraighe Luachra.

But the tide of fortune soon turned against the Gael. Amhlaoibh son of the king of Lochlainn arrived in Ireland about 853. He signalled his coming by the drowning of Conchubhar a chieftain of Meath, the murder of the son of Ceannfhaolaidh chief of Muscraige Breoghain in Tipperary, the smothering of Muchdaighean son of Reachtabrat of the Deise. Five years later, in 859, Maolghuala son of Donghaile king of Munster had his back broken with a stone. “Iomhar joined forces in 866 with Amhlaoibh the White who with the Gaill of Ireland had just plundered all Pictland and taken hostages.” They both crossed the Humber, slew the kings Osbriht and Ella, and remained a year at York.

The Little Book of the Icelanders has the curious entry at this time : “There were then here”—on the arrival of the Norwegians in Iceland about 870—“Christian men whom the Northmen called Papa ; but afterwards they went away because they would not be here with heathen men. And they left behind them Irish books and bells and croziers whereby it might be perceived that they were Irishmen.”

Then came Oisli, son of the king of the Lochlainn. He succeeded in plundering “the greater part of Ireland” ; but his army was eventually cut off by the men of Erin and himself slain. The same year Colphinn with the fleet of Dun Meadhoin was defeated at Ceann Corraigh on the Suir near Clonmel. The subsequent drowning of Badbarr in Dublin was attributed to the vengeance of Saints Ciaran, Aedh and Seachnall whose monasteries at Clonmacnoise, Ferns and Aghaboe had been besieged by him. Meath and Connacht as far south as Loop Head subsequently came in for attention. Next came Baraid, a Scandinavian chief who with the foreign garrison of Dublin plundered as far as Kerry, over-running Limerick and Cork, and burning Emly and the Deise. They explored the very sepulchral caves in their greed for the relics believed to have been buried with the Irish dead.

Aodh Finnliath the Airdri, who in 864 had defeated the foreigners at Loch Foyle with a loss of twelve thousand men, now gained a second victory over them in Dublin. The son of Sigurd Serpent-Eye who was in command escaped, but was slain soon after in a battle between the Black and the Fair Gentiles. The Black Gentiles, as a result, were driven of Ireland, and betook themselves to Scotland, where in 877 they gained a battle over the men of Alba in which Constantine and many others were slain. “These fierce heathens of the Northern Sea,” says the *Story of Scotland*, “sailed up the creeks wherever there was a town or abbey. Then landing they took the people by surprise. The young were carried off as slaves, the old were slain. The booty was piled on board, and, before the country folk could come together, the pirates were off.”

To Ireland came a period of comparative rest for close on forty years. To escape the Vikings, Ruaidhri son of Muirmhinn, king of Britain, fled to Erin in 877, say the *Annals of Ulster* ; and the following year the shrine and relics of Colm Cille were removed hither from Iona for protection. There was endless internal dissension between the foreigners of Dublin. The native Leinster chiefs, taking advantage of the subsequent weakness, attacked the Danes who “ escaped half dead across the sea, leaving behind a great many of their ships.”

About 913, foreign fleets with the co-operation of their resident brethren at Waterford began again to despoil Munster. They were defeated in four successive battles in Tipperary and Kerry. Then the Northmen of Limerick came to their aid, but were defeated at the Leamhain near Killarney, and later by the men of Connacht. The east of Ireland was next attacked by another great fleet under Sitric who won a battle over the king of Leinster and proceeded to ravage most of the churches of Ireland. His raids culminated in a great battle at Cill Moseamog near Dublin, September, 15, 919. Niall king of Ireland, a host of the nobles of Ulster and a countless army of the Irish were slain. The disaster was avenged within a year by Donnchadh grandson of Maelsheachlain on the borders of Dublin where fell vast numbers of the enemy. “ Not more than enough to tell what happened escaped of the Danes on this occasion.”

Tomar now arrived with an immense fleet, and in the reign of Lorcan, king of Cashel and grandfather of Brian Boirmhe, plundered most of Munster, its churches and chieftainries. There was constant conflict at this time between the men of Munster on the one hand and the Danes of Limerick, Waterford and Dublin on the other. But it was only on the arrival of Oitir Dubh in Waterford with a fleet of a hundred ships that the oppression of the south began in grim earnest. Innumerable hosts came in his train, so that there was not a harbour, a landing place, a dun, a fortress or a fastness in all Munster without fleets of Danes and pirates. They carried captives of both sexes over the dark green sea : and historians of the time thought our chequered story holds little more heart-rending than the enforced separation at that period “ of son from father, daughter from mother, brother from brother, and relatives from their race and tribe.” Meanwhile the Danes of Dublin harassed and pillaged adjacent districts,—the historic caves and tumuli along the Boyne, Newgrange, Knowth, Dowth, Drogheda being repeatedly plundered between 862 and 934—and in a battle in 942 fought between themselves and the native Irish chieftains, Muirheartach of the Leather Cloaks and many of the nobles of the north were slain, after they had obtained many striking victories over the enemy. Kells was again plundered in 949, and Cinneide, king of Thomond and father of Brian Boirmihe, was slain.

It was about this time the renowned Ceallachan of Cashel pitted his linen-shirted followers against the legions of foreigners clad to a man in mail. Having captured Limerick, Cork and Waterford and driven the Danes out of Munster, Ceallachan was treacherously seized by the Danes of Dublin under Sitric, son of Tuirgeis, and hurried thence to Armagh. Cinneide, father of Brian Boirmhe, instantly organised land and sea forces to proceed to the rescue of their king. The land forces under Donnchadh, king of the two Fearamaighe, proceeded by Connacht, sending skirmishing parties to Muaidh and lorrus and Umhall. On the way they were joined by friendly hosts, and reached Armagh to find that Sitric and his followers had fled with Ceallachan and Donnchuan to Dun Dealgan. Thither they pursued them, and while parleying on the strand a huge fleet was seen to approach the harbour. These were the ships of Munster, from Galway to Kinsale, under the command of Admiral Failbhe Fionn, king of Desmond. Keating thus describes the combat which ensued :

“ Failbhe and his fleet proceeded by direct route to meet the Lochlannaigh, and he made an attack on the ships on which were Sitric and Tor and Maghnus ; and he boarded Sitric’s ship, having a sword in either hand. With the sword that was in his left hand he set to cutting the ropes that bound Ceallachan to the mast and, so setting him free, let him down on the

ship's deck, and then gave him the sword he had held in his left hand. Ceallachan went from Sitric's ship to that of Failbhe ; and Failbhe himself continued to hew down the Lochlannaigh until they, overpowering him in the end, slew him and cut off his head. Fianghal a leader of Failbhe's followers took his place in the conflict and, forcibly seizing Sitric by the breast, cast both of them overboard, so that they went to the bottom and thus were drowned.

“ Two other leaders, Seaghdha and Conall, came on and seized Sitric's two brothers, Tor and Magnus, and swept them overboard so that the four were drowned in that manner. In like manner acted every other company of the Gaels : they sprang on the Lochlannaigh and broke them up ; made gaps through them, slew them, threw them into disorder, so that there escaped but a few who were saved by the swiftness of their ships” :

“ With terror struck, the affrighted Danes at every point
gave way,
And few were left to tell the tale of that destructive
fray.”

After the battle Ceallachan and his host proceeded to Munster. On their setting out from Ath Cliath, Murchadh king of Leinster sought to give them battle, but desisted on realising how brave and valiant were the men of Munster. On reaching Cashel, Ceallachan drove out a colony of Danes that had settled there, and in turn subdued and took hostages from the Danes of Limerick, Cork and Waterford.

Yet the next achievement recorded of the Danes of Dublin was the slaying of Congallach the Airdri. So disorganised was the native government of the period that for seventeen years not a single move was made in retaliation. And when the first battle was fought, at Cill Mona near Dunshaughlin, Domhnall, unworthy son of the murdered monarch, fought in alliance with the Danes against his kinsman Domhnall son of Muircheartach of the Leather Cloaks and legitimate successor of the Viking's victim. Domhnall the treacherous, however, did not realise the object of this alliance, which was nothing less than the sovereignty.

In 973, Muircheartach and Congallach, the two heirs to the throne of Ireland in the Northern and Southern lines were slain by the foreigners. This left the way to the throne on the death of Domhnall unexpectedly clear for Malachy II, whose dethronement by Brian Boirmhe has been so much discussed ever since. Singularly it is on the records of this very year we first meet with Brian's name. It was significant of his subsequent career that he first signalled himself by defeating a combination of the Danes of Limerick and some native chiefs at Cahircon on the Shannon. Brian must have been thoroughly conversant in his youth with the high reputation of the Irish schools which attracted students from all the countries of Europe, as with the glorious record of the Irish missionaries on the Continent. Equally must he have heard full oft of the barbarities of the Norsemen, “ bitter in their battle-work,” as has been tersely said ; of the preys of comely blue-eyed women borne into slavery and exile, of the monks and scholars slain or hunted abroad for refuge with their ornaments and manuscripts, of the cattle-herds on cattle-herds driven shoreward for the strand-hewing, of caves explored and graves despoiled, of outraged homes, and cloisters sacked, and altars rifled, so that the art treasures of the Northmen must have been enriched beyond their dreams. Moreover, says the *Wars of the Gaedheal and Gall*, “ there came after that an immensely great fleet, more wonderful than all the other fleets. . . . Munster was plundered and ravaged on all sides by them. . . . And such was the oppressiveness of the tribute and rent over Erin at large that there was a king from them over every territory, a chief over every chieftainry, an abbot over every church, a steward over every village, and a soldier in every house, so that none of the men of Erin had power to give even the milk of his cow or eggs of one hen in succour or in kindness to an aged man, or to a friend, but preserve them for the foreigner. Though there were but one milking cow in the house she durst not be milked for an infant nor

for a sick person, but kept for the foreign steward or bailiff or soldier ; or killed for the meal of one night if necessary. And the most fit person of the family was obliged to take wages the day he embarked on board ship with his lord and be supplied with provision as if at home. An ounce of *fiondrúine* had to be paid for every nose, and he who was unable to pay it had to go into slavery.”

The existence of this condition of absolute bondage within the realm of his brother Mathghamhain, king of Cashel, coupled with his knowledge of the history already narrated, convinced Brian that the only hope of national emancipation lay in the complete overthrow of the foreigners. He realised moreover that

“ It was the privilege of Lughaidh’s race
To lead the battalions of the host of Mumhan
And afterwards to be in the rere
In coming from a hostile territory.”

So he and Mathghamhain who led the Dal gCais transferred their people and their chattels to the west of the Shannon and instantly engaged the foreigners in desperate warfare amid the woods of Thomond. Mathghamhain in time grew tired of the struggle ; but Brian fought until his followers were reduced to fifteen warriors. Then, coming to Mathghamhain and upbraiding him for his inaction, he had little difficulty in prevailing on the Dalcassian forces, aided by their hereditary allies, the Eoghanacht of Loch Lein, to try conclusions once more with the foreigners. At Sulchoid in Tipperary, memorable in history as the scene of a Titanic struggle between Cuchulainn and Curoi, Gael and Norseman measured swords in 968. After a terrific battle the foreigners were utterly defeated : the few who escaped alive were pursued to Limerick, and there taken into captivity, while the city was given to the flames by the victorious legions of the royal brothers of Thomond.

Mathghamhain thereafter inflicted seven successive defeats upon the foreigners in various parts of the South. He made a red slaughter of them, and banished their leader, Iomhar, overseas. But Iomhar with a great fleet returned to the western harbour of Limerick. After a considerable time he induced Maolmhuadh and Donnabhan, two native chiefs, to join in a revolt against Mathghamhain who had been ruling at Cashel with signal success. Mathghamhain, as a result, was most treacherously slain. Brian, hero of a hundred fights, succeeded to the leadership of the Dal gCais and the sovereignty of Munster. He smote Iomhar, Donnabhan and Maolmhuadh with their respective followers, native and foreign, subdued the Deise as far as Portlairge, banished Domhnall who had forced a conflict on him, and took hostages of the principal churches of Munster that they should not receive rebels or thieves to sanctuary.

Hereupon there was an expedition of all the men of Munster and Brian into Osraighe. Giolla Padraig was put in fetters and his hostages taken. Brian next proceeded to Magh Ailbe, where the two kings of Laighean, Domhnall Claon and Tuathal king of western Lithfe, “ came into his house,” and he took their hostages. Thus within eight years after the death of Mathghamhain, Brian was king of Leath Mogha. This was regarded as the alternate right of his royal house since his remote ancestor divided Ireland with Conn Ceadchathach :

“ Cashel of the kings of great prosperity, [3]
Its prince has five prerogatives :
The cattle of Cruachan when the cuckoo sings,
The burning of northern Laighean.

“ By fifty attended, over Sliabh gCua to pass
After the pacification of the South of Eire,
To pass the plain in goodly mode

Of Ailbe with light-grey host.”

Such the prerogatives of the king of Cashel according to Cuan O Lochain. So history, tradition, the native code of laws and the march of events all justified Brian’s presence in Leinster. Unfortunately Domhnall Claon king of western Liffey died soon afterwards. He was no sooner laid to rest than all Leinster became unruly and even aggressive. While Brian was engaged in pacifying the tribes in revolt, Maelsheachlain the high-king—though Brian’s junior by decades—had the bad grace and the ill-luck to uproot wantonly in 982 the ancient tree at Maigh Adhair under which the Dalcassian kings for generations had been inaugurated. Here truly was the signal for relentless war. Brian instantly sent three hundred ships up the Shannon. This, according to “the Book of Rights” was another of his prerogatives :

“ The three prerogatives of the king of Cashel :
To have a queen out of Connacht,
To have a fleet on the ample Shannon,
And to maintain Cashel.”

But these privileges did not in themselves justify Brian’s troops in ravaging Connacht and Breifne and Meath. In seeking to avenge the insults offered at Maigh Adhair, the southern forces met with one reverse at the hands of the people of Connacht and four at the hands of Maelsheachlain whose troops eventually burned Nenagh to the ground. It was then that Brian mustered a great force at Blein Patoige where Maelsheachlain came to meet him, and fortunately a truce was agreed to. Brian now proceeded towards Dublin. At Glenmama on the way he found himself opposed by a powerful combination of the men of Leinster and the Danes of Dublin. One of the fiercest battles recorded in Irish history ensued. Brian was victorious at every point. Upwards of two thousand of his enemies were left dead upon the field. After the battle he continued on his way to Dublin, and took possession of the stolen treasures accumulated there. On the way home he enslaved every foreigner met with from Binn Eadair near Dublin to Tigh Dhuinn off the Kerry coast.

This crushing overthrow of the foreigners and Maelsheachlain’s earlier truce rendered it impossible that Brian could continue to occupy a subordinate position to one incapable of enforcing his own will. So, having made arrangements for the better government of Leinster and Dublin, and returned to Ceann Coradh, Brian sent a great hosting to Tara to demand hostages of Maelsheachlain. The latter, not quite prepared perhaps for such a visit, demanded and was granted a month’s respite. He immediately sent his laureate, Giolla Comhghaill O Sleibhin, one of the most fascinating poets of that glorious age of song, to seek the aid of his Northern kinsmen against Brian. No pleading, no offer, no appeal of ties of blood, nothing, not even the sacred duty of defending the Constitution would induce the Ulster chiefs to comply. On the return of his disconsolate agent, Maelsheachlain himself approached them. But even his immediate offer of Tara itself would not tempt them to try conclusions with Brian. Whereupon Maelsheachlain in despair, accompanied by a small escort of twelve score horsemen, sought out Brian, and offered him hostages. Brian chivalrously afforded him a further twelve months’ grace. Maelsheachlain had time in his adversity to brood over the wrongs by which he had, himself, estranged and antagonised his people. For, though Maelsheachlain fought valiantly in his early days against the Vikings, we have it on the authority of the Four Masters that in the year 992 he conducted a vast cattle-drive out of Connacht. The Four Masters say also that he murdered Eichneach O Lochlainn in the abbot’s house at Domhnach Padraig the very same year, and that he stole the shrine of St. Patrick from Ardee seven years later. The Annals of Ulster tell us, further, that Maelsheachlain devastated Connacht, plundered its islands and slaughtered its chieftains in the year 984 ; that he killed Donnchadh O Congallaigh, heir to the throne of Tara, in 990 ; that his forces bore off with them a troop of hostages from Connacht a year later, and that a year still later Sord Cuilm Cille was burned for Maelsheachlain.

And as for Brian having usurped the throne, as we are so often reminded, the truth unfortunately is that more than once before his time provincial kings not only ignored the authority of the high-king but required him to give hostages whenever circumstances rendered it within their power to compel or overawe him. In the year 709, for example, Cathal king of Munster compelled Cearbhall king of Ireland to give him hostages, and thenceforward until his death in 742 the people recognised Cathal, and Cathal only, as Airdri. Similarly the people of Munster recognised Feidlimidh as Airdri from the day on which Niall the high-king gave him hostages at Clonfert until his death in 840. Domhnall mac Congallaigh, father of the deposed Maelsheachlain, set the bad example at a most inauspicious juncture of fighting in conjunction with the Danes against Domhnall O'Neill the high king at the battle of Cill Mona in 978, just a decade after Brian and his brother Mathghamhain had gained their memorable victory over the Danes of the South at Sulchoid. Moreover, it was not uncommon to witness an unscrupulous scramble between the Northern and Southern Ui Neill for the title of Airdri, as there was for lesser ends between chiefs elsewhere, as instanced by the treacherous slaying of Feargraidh and Mathghamhain in the south and the mutual annihilation of the northern chiefs at the bloody battle of Craobh Tulcha. So the friends and foes of Ireland alike came, for a period, to look on the Airdrioghacht with comparative disregard ; and the multitude interested in the preservation of the nation were glad to substitute for a dishonoured tradition the more venerable national principle of selecting for the sovereignty those who were most accomplished and most industrious in promoting the public weal, like Slainghe and Ollamh Fodla, Tighearnmas and Cormac mac Airt.

Thus was Brian called on to govern his country and emancipate its people. Before the year's grace granted to Maelsheachlain had expired, Maelsheachlain and the chieftains of Connacht had sent him hostages. Then he made a great hosting to Dundalk where the two northern kings gave him assurances they would not molest Maelsheachlain for a year. In due time he made another hosting to the North, and got hostages from most of the Ulster chiefs. After the disastrous battle of Craobh Tulcha, where the Cineal Eoghain and the people of East Ulster fairly annihilated each other, he once more journeyed Ulsterwards and stayed for a whole week at Armagh. It was on this occasion he left twenty ounces of gold on the altar of the church of Armagh and had his *anamchara* make the historic entry in the Book of Armagh subordinating the constitutional to the ecclesiastical power in Ireland. It is to be noted that at that very time his own brother Marcan was head of the clergy of Munster.

“ He came back from Ard Macha bringing with him the hostages of Ireland,” so do the Annals of Ulster close their record of 1004. The following year he made “ a hosting round Ireland—to Connacht, over Eas Ruaidh into Tir Chonaill, through Cineal Eoghain over Feartas Camsa in Ulidia to Aonach Conaille ; and they arrived about Lammas at Bealach Duin when he granted the full demand of Patrick's congregation and of his successor, *i.e.* Maolmhuire, son of Eochaidh.” In 1006 Brian made a further hosting to Cineal Eoghain, who had resisted him three years earlier, and brought off Ua Crichidhein, successor of Finnein of Magh Bhile, who had been a hostage from the Ulidians with the Cineal Eoghain. Another “ hosting by Brian” is recorded in 1009—to Claonloch of Sliabh Fuaid “ when he received the hostages of Leath Chuinn,” and yet another the following year “ to Magh Corain when he brought with him the king of Cineal Conaill, *i.e.* Maolruanaidh Ua Maoldoraidh, in submission, to Ceann Coradh.” By the close of the year “ Brian and Maelsheachlain were again in camp in Eanach Duibh and two years later Maelsheachlain made a predatory expedition into Conaille Muirtheimne “ in revenge of the profanation of the ‘ Fionnfuidheach’ of Patrick and of the breaking of Bachall Phadraig by the advice of Maolmhuire and of Brian.”

The supremacy of the See of Armagh having been established, Brian in a spirit of the most exalted patriotism proceeded to promote education and the arts, and develop the institutions and the general resources of the country. From his quiet retreat at Ceann Coradh he directed

the affairs of the nation with signal success, sent agents abroad to procure books, and obliterated all trace of the foreign oppression of earlier days. An index of the peace and harmony that resulted from his rule was afforded by the confiding lady

“ Whose maiden smile
In safety lighted her round the green isle,”

That was the traditional condition of Irish society restored by Brian after the ravages of the Danes. “ King Brian,” says a Scandinavian Saga, “ thrice forgave all his outlaws the same fault. But if they transgressed oftener, he left them to be judged by the law. From this may be imagined what a king he was.” Thus did he conciliate and consolidate the clans of Ireland, and emancipate and ennoble them.

During all this time he evinced every consideration for the feelings of Maelsheachlain. When an unfortunate misunderstanding arose, over a game or chess, at Ceann Coradh between Murchadh son of Brian and Maolmhordha king of Leinster, who had crossed the Shannon to present personally to the Airdri some stately trees from which to make masts for his ships, Maolmhordha deemed it proper and politic on his return home to attack Maelsheachlain by way of retaliation. It was mainly to defend Maelsheachlain against Maolmhordha’s attacks that Brian set out on the expedition which culminated in the Battle of Clontarf. There on Good Friday, 1014, he met and vanquished the allied Viking power of Western Europe and shattered for ever the ambition of Sweyn Forkbeard the year after England had become portion of the Danish dominions. The struggle lasted from sunrise, when the whole coast of Clontarf was black with Danish ships, until the shades of night mercifully covered from human gaze the countless hosts of slain and dying. We have many graphic pictures of it in the Irish and the Scandinavian literature. “ The battalions were now arranged and drawn up on both sides,” says an eye-witness, “ in such order and in such manner that a four-horse chariot could run on the heads of the troops on either side from one end of the lines to the other. And each party of them remembered their ancient animosities towards each other and made mutual attack. One of the wonders of the Day of Judgment will be to relate the details of that tremendous onset. I could compare it only to the wonderful firmament, boundless and many-coloured, casting a heavy shower of flaming stars over the earth, or to the startling, fire-darting roar of the clouds and the heavenly orbs confounded and crashed by all the winds in wild contention against each other. . . .It was attested by the foreigners and foreign women who watched from the battlements of Ath Cliath that they saw flashes of fire from them in the expanse of air on all sides.”

“ If we attempted to perform any deed of valour,” said Malachy, who with his troops watched the battle’s progress from a distance, “ we were unable to do it because our spears over our heads had become clogged and bound with long locks of hair which the wind forced upon us as they were cut away by well-aimed swords and gleaming axes.”

By the men of Connacht was encompassed the final defeat of the retreating Danes. But, only twenty of the “ Men of the West” escaped alive.

Murchadh son of Brian performed prodigies of valour, as did Dunlang, Conang, Toirdhealbhach and many others of the Dalcassians and the Eoghanacht. Three times did Murchadh hew his way through the battalions, a sword in his right hand, another in his left.

Brian who prayed in his tent was kept informed of the progress of the battle, in which, owing to his age, he was not permitted to join. On being told towards evening’s close of the fall of Murchadh’s standard, he exclaimed, “ Eire has fallen now indeed,” and proceeded to make his will, “ My body and my soul to God and to St. Patrick,” he said ; “ and I wish to be buried at Armagh. My blessing to Donnchadh for discharging my last bequests after me, viz.: twelve score cows to be given to the *Comharba* of Patrick and the community of Armagh,

and their proper dues to Killaloe and the churches of Munster. And he knows I have neither gold nor silver, but he is to pay them in return for my blessing and the succession to the sover-eighty. Go this night to Swords ; ask them come to-morrow early, and convey my body there ; thence to Duleek, and thence to Louth ; and let Maolmhuire and the Community of Armagh come to meet me there.”

Then Brodar, hastening from the field, appeared, and dealt the aged king a stroke which cleft his head. But Brian in falling gave the Viking a sword-cut which severed one leg at the knee, the other at the ankle.

Brian’s remains were met, as directed, by the clergy of the North, borne to Armagh, and there interred with the remains of Murchadh. His obsequies lasted twelve days and twelve nights.

The Scandinavian and the Irish annals vie in laudation of Brian’s character. Ospac, brother of Brodar, so admired him that he came to Kincora to give him warning of the intended Viking attack on him at the instigation of Gormflaith, the Danes of Dublin and their treacherous Leinster allies. He has been likened to Solomon and David and Moses, his son Murchadh to Samson and Hector and Lughaidh Lamhfhada. The mutual comparison might be extended to Philip of Macedonia and his famous son. Surpassed by neither Philip nor Constantine the Great, no man of our race has better deserved to be commemorated with pride. Not alone did he by his gifts of statesmanship emancipate the Irish people, by his foresight and loyalty he helped incalculably to render the native Irish Church impervious to the later Danish designs of subordinating it to Canterbury.

Colonies of Norsemen—mainly in Dublin, Waterford and Limerick—survived the Battle of Clontarf. Some of them ventured on spasmodic raids which may, however, be regarded as negligible until “ Magnus king of Lochlann and the Islands, a man who had contemplated the invasion of all Ireland,” landed on the Ulster coast in 1103. But Magnus was cut off and slain ; and with his death came a fatal check to the imperial prospects of his race, though their bishops were found half-a-century later at Waterford and Limerick. In England their fortunes were different. There, at the death of Alfred, at the very beginning of the tenth century, they had obtained undisputed mastery of two-thirds of the country ; and by the date of the Battle of Clontarf all England had submitted to the rule of Cnut king of Denmark.

[1] F.F. 139, iii.

[2] Joyce S.H. 518, i.

[3] Book of Rights.

Ireland : elements of her early story, from the coming of Ceasair to the Anglo-Norman invasion (1921)

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