

## On Atlantic Voyages

### *The Irish in America one thousand years before Columbus*

Martin John Mulroy

1906

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#### *Further Adventures of Celtic Explorers.*

We have it on the authority of the “Book of Leinster” and quoted by O’Curry in his “Lectures,” that Brendan, Mernoc and Machuta were not the only Irishmen who made explorations and voyages upon the Atlantic, during, and previous to the Middle Ages, of which early history, disfigured at a later period by pious legend, has singularly preserved the remembrance. A curious account is preserved in the “Book of Leinster” of one “Conal Deagh” a wealthy resident of the province of Connaught, who had three sons that followed the profitable occupation of pirates, which in those days was viewed in a different light to what it is to-day, for it combined the defence of the neighboring coasts with that of trade, and unlike the modern one, was considered a highly useful and respected occupation. Tired of trading along their own coasts, they resolved to venture further West, among the Atlantic islands, on what they called a pilgrimage. Their curachs were covered with skins, and large enough to contain each nine men, with provisions for a long voyage. They left Galway Bay sometime about the year 540, A. D., (Aois an Tigearna), and after spending considerable time among their countrymen in the West, they were returning home, when they were shipwrecked. A few of the survivors were cast on the shores of Spain. The bishop of the Spanish Community, being of their own race, and speaking their own or a kindred language, received them, and gave them all the assistance within his power. This bishop, Justin by name, afterwards related the occurrence as he had remembered it to the two Celtic or Irish saints, Coman and Mocholmog, the latter of whom was a poet, and to his verses to-day, preserved in the “Book of Leinster” are we indebted for the account of the wanderings of Irishmen on the Atlantic ocean at the period we mention, a thousand years before Columbus or any other European had conceived the daring idea of venturing from their native shores.

Of all these accounts, there is, perhaps, none better known than the voyages of Maelduin, originally met with in *Leabhar Na Huidri*, and published by Joyce in his “Celtic Romances”, while Arbois de Jubainville gives a French version of it in his “Epic Literature of Ireland.” This Maelduin was the son of Oliol Corac Ago, who was assassinated on some pretext by a band of sea rovers. As soon as Maelduin reached the age of manhood, and was installed in his father’s stead among his brethren, his first act was to seek reparation for the blood of his parent. He caused some large curachs to be built, each plated with iron and covered with ox hides, laid on in three layers. Each of those vessels contained sixty men with stores of provisions and with this band of warriors he set out for the Western isles to vindicate the death of his parent. They reached an island where the inhabitants were acquainted with the story of his father’s death, but could or would not give any intelligence of the actors in the tragedy. Along their way they met several islands and Maelduin left on account of his findings.

In one place they found a splendid mansion, after the manner of their own country, which was entirely devoted for the accommodation of strangers, for the tables and chairs were all set, and they found choice delicacies in abundance. Surrounding the mansion was a beautiful orchard of apple and orange trees, laden with fruit of immense size, but what attracted the most attention was a lofty palace which was built entirely in a block of limestone, with no

aperture but a single gate, and here again the hospitality was lavish, which showed from the descriptions they left at that early date, that they were well aware of the existence of a world west of their own country, and that considerable of their own kinsmen lived there, who were imbued with their own national ideas and customs, while their constant references to the marvels of Nature, such as the immense fruit and gigantic trees, large tracts of land and broad rivers, prove that they must have come upon American territory, and from their description of the hospitality of the inhabitants, that they were as humane and generous as themselves, or else were inspired by Celtic or a kindred civilization.

Soon they reach what they called the “ Isle of Tears and Laughter” ; then the “ Isle of the White and Black Sheep,” which change their color when they change their flocks. In the “ Isle of Amazons” they receive a most emphatic reception, but they repulse all matrimonial proposals.

In the “ Isle of Birds”, all the tribe winged with different plumage, speak, sing, and jest. Here a hermit of their own kinsmen, related to them how the island upon which he was cast, by a tempest, grows larger and higher each year. Close by stands a colossal pillar, the base of which disappears below the water, while the summit is lost in the clouds. From this summit, juts out a conical net work of silver meshes, so very large that they are tempted to cut one as a memento which they bring with them to their native country. They finally reach another island, where they find some very high mountains and great plains covered with heather. Here the young women ran to meet them and showed so much regard for them, as if they never wished them to depart, but Maelduin and his companions soon resolved to leave this Transatlantic Elysium and return again to Ireland.

On their homeward journey they met an island where the trees produced an intoxicating, though delicious beverage or milk, and dwelling upon this island were fifteen monks who had resolved to follow Brendan, and make a pilgrimage upon the ocean . Among their possessions was a bag which belonged to the saint, and which they prized very much on account of its associations. In the middle of the island was a large lake which they told their countrymen, had the property of rejuvenation. One of the monks, more curious than the others, plunged himself in the clear waters, but whether this crystal Elixir proved equal to its reputation he does not tell us, but he announces that he had no suffering for the remainder of his life.

The two last landing places of Maelduin were on an island where he met another pilgrim from his native land, a man who had at one time been a cook in one of the monasteries for which Tory Island was famous, in the days when Columba was the column or pillar of Celtic civilization. On another part of this island he was driven upon a rock, where he found hawks resembling those found along the cliffs overhanging Clew and Galway Bays.

Following the example of the hawks as they took wing eastward, Maelduin and his companions prepared to cross the Atlantic again for home, and soon arrived in their own beloved land, where among the national trophies at Cruachan, that great centre of Irish education, they deposited the “ mesh” the latest marvel from the Western World, where it continued to repose until the sacriligious hand of the Norman or the Dane snatched it from its resting place, to make room for the inferior and degrading civilizations of Eastern and Western Europe.

Certain it is, that some of these recitals may appear fantastic, and even some of them, appear as imitations of the legends of Brendan, but some passages, however, merit consideration, as indicating a knowledge of the existence of the American Continent.

The chanting birds singularly enough resemble the parrots of tropical America ; the island that increases from year to year recalls the geological formation of the Bermudas, and some of the Antilles, while the persistence of these voyages in the direction of the West, and the

constant meetings with their countrymen, all tend to show that Maelduin and his companions had not wandered into lands then unknown, but explored and peopled in previous ages by their own kinsmen and co-religionists.

His account of the talking birds was then considered a marvel, yet to-day we know it was possible. The great precision, with which they described islands and lands that have become since realized and material, causes us to wonder why it was, and is still, that those early voyagers got no credit for their just and unselfish discoveries, while those whose purposes were the most sordid, commercial and inhumane were undeservedly crowned by their own people, while we, the kinsmen of Brendan and Maelduin, are commanded, in this the twentieth century, by a usurped and spurious civilization, to pay the stranger that homage and deference which of right belongs to our own nation, and which, to our eternal disgrace, we are doing to bolster up the effete and presumptuous claims of South and Western Europe.

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*Knowledge the English and Spanish Sailors Gained by the Adventure of Celtic Traditions.*

That those sailors who ventured from the Spanish and English shores in the fifteenth century were fully aware of the early voyages of the Irish, we will now show, and then use them to prove the early ones of our countrymen. For this purpose we will take the traditions found among the kindred Celts of Europe. The French Celt had, perhaps, the closest connection and sympathy with the Irish, and though their monasteries were destroyed both before, during and after the Reformation, first by the Italians, then by the pro-English party, of the Reform, still they dung to their ancient convictions with a tenacity that knew of no compromise but death. One writer sums the situation very concisely when he tells us that “ their manuscripts and monuments have been scattered and destroyed, and nothing left or preserved but the sad traditions of their former glory.”

The Welch and Highland Scotch have each contributed their portion to our present theme, and have enabled our antiquaries to arrange those transatlantic legends into four distinct series.

The first relates to the country of the Sidhs, which is placed by the Bards and Druids of Britain to the west of the great ocean. In this respect the Celtic race owes a compliment to Mr. Nash in his treatment of the Bardic Mysteries and learned account of the Druids and Bards of Great Britain. But we must not forget the other noble Celts who have endeavored to place their race and nation in the fore-front of the world's civilizations, such as “ Skeene” who brought into prominence the “ Four Ancient Books of Wales,” and the Scot Campbell who produced the “ Topular Tales of the West Highlands,” while noble and devoted France, gave from the pen of Beauvais the “ Western Eden,” all of which make the fact, that the early Irish had certain knowledge of a great Western land, had their polar star, and did radiate from that point with not the slightest doubt of the contrary.

The second series relates to the disappearance of a certain Gafran, son of Aldan, who with his companions and associates, in the fifth century of this present era, set sail for the “ Great Green Land of Streams,” and of which all trace was lost. The learned and patriotic Jones in his “ Myrvyrian Archæology” gives an elaborate account of this period of Celtic explorations, all of which he authenticates from the Ancient Manuscripts to which he had access.

In the third and fourth series are related all the incidents relating to King Arthur, and the enchanter Merlin, and for the information of our readers we may refer to the able and learned works of Michael and Wright on Merlin and the “ Marvels of the Middle Ages” by Villamarque. From perusing these we find that it is, above all, in this great Western country

where King Arthur shelters himself, and awaits the auspicious moment to attack and chase the vindictive Dane, the treacherous Saxon, and the cruel Italian, who have excited the anger of the Gallic bards and usurped the land and place which was once the cradle of the most humane, if not the greatest civilization that ever appeared upon this earth.

This great Western country was named by them “Avalon” or the “Isle of Apples” from a Celtic word Abhal, an apple ; the ocean entirely surrounded the islands which had no evils. In it there were no thieves, no brigands, no enemies to set their snares for the unwary traveller ; no violence, nor insupportable cold or heat ; there peace, concord and a beautiful bloom was reigning eternally. In it the flowers, lilies, roses, violets, abounded ; the trees bore fruit and flowers on the same branch and man knew neither age, malady nor grief; but with their youths and maidens lived in one grand community, where nothing was private property and no one man or set of men would or could say to another what they should do or accomplish. All were nature’s children, born in the same manner, and for that reason, all must enjoy the fruits of nature’s divinity to its fullest limits. Such, then, was the birthright of the Celt. Alas, what is it to-day?

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*St. Matthew of Finisterre in Search OF Jewish Patriarchs.*

It is in another marvellous country West of the Atlantic, that the Armoric monks of St. Matthew of Finisterre, believed they could find the Jewish patriarchs Enoch and Elija, who, according to the French tradition, were there awaiting the day of final judgment.

These monks explored the ocean, and on one occasion, they were carried so far beyond their course that it took them some three years to return home. It was on this occasion that they were driven on an island where they found their Irish co-religionists enjoying life and happiness in a manner peculiarly Celtic. On another island they met a brass statue ; it was that of a woman with uplifted hand and seemed to point out to them the course which they should follow. They went in that direction and to their great joy they discovered a mountain in the distance, but to their amazement, as they approached it, it emitted a marvellous odor, while its summit vomited forth flame in great volumes, and at a great distance could be seen the burning matter as it rolled down along the sides.

Turning away from here they came to another island where they found neither men nor animals, but they met what seemed to them to be a fort or town, surrounded by a strong, high wall. Within they could see gold, silver and furniture, but no one to guard the treasures. They eventually set sail for France, and arrived home to find that no one knew them, that all the existing order of things as they left them had been changed, and nothing left to them but record the news they had got of what they considered the Transatlantic Eden, and embellish it where necessary with the Celtic idealism so prolific in the race.

Such are the legends, Pagan or Christian, by which the Irish have affirmed their belief in the existence of Transatlantic lands. It is not possible to give here all the episodes, nor is it necessary to give entirely these legends destined for the edification or amusement of those who heard them retold, but as one of our antiquaries, who has done more for their preservation than any other man, has remarked in his “Manners and Customs :” “These facts would be of great value if they had been transmitted to us in their original form ; but in the course of ages, after having passed from narrator to narrator, each full of imagination, these legends have lost considerable of their original simplicity, and have become more and more ornamented so as to make them appear fantastic and extravagant.”

The Frenchman, Beauvais, in his Western Eden, arguing along the same lines says of these early accounts, “It is thus that to-day, lovers of fiction, vulgarize science by placing it in

imaginary and even incredible adventures. If adorned by this romantic garb, their lives came to be remembered only in some work of fiction, some shipwreck of human knowledge as have made the Gaelic or Cymric legends, our great-grandchildren would have no more right to neglect the positive facts contained in these recitals than would we ourselves have to deny the voyages and the transatlantic establishments of the Irish and French Celts, on account of the fiction with which they were adorned, for they constitute a source of information no less precious." This was the age of miracle and mystery and the Irish Celt who had no place for, nor word to express the idea of privilege, could see no reason why, if Jehovah of the Jews had performed certain wonderful acts for their edification and that the world was called upon to believe those things and stake their eternal hopes thereon, that the Baal of the Celt, who never deserted his post during the countless evolutions of nature, should not be credited with at least as much of foresight and protection to his own favored race. If we accept the one, how can we, as rational beings, reject the other." But it is time to pass from legend to history, and to show from very authentic voyages, that we can register as a reality the truth of the voyages of "Oisín," "Brendan" and "Maelduin."

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#### *Culdees of Celtic Priests in the West and Northwest.*

That the Culdees or Celtic priests were the forerunners of the discoverers in the West and Northwest, there is but little doubt. Several motives forced this emigration upon them, the principal of which was the variance with the Italian and English churches in the time of celebrating Easter, baptismal ceremonies, monastic tonsures, etc., which are very fully referred to by "Varin" in his "Causes of Disagreement between the Irish and the Italian Churches." Montelambert in his "Monks of the West" referring to this matter says of the Irish, "Very faithful to the rites of their beloved teacher, several of them conformed to the decisions of the Conference of Wilby, quitted England, and returned with their chief, Bishop Colman, to the monastery of Iona in 664, A.D., while Bede in his "Ecclesiastical History of the Angles" tells us that they left England on account of the plague that broke out there, and from which the people died in swarms. He says that during this period several of the then native English or Saxons left England and migrated to Ireland, where they were accommodated gratis, with food, shelter, clothes, learning and books, and Alfred, King of the Northumbrians, who was amongst those exiles, when about to return home, wrote a Gaelic poem of some sixty lines, in Bardic metre. This poem was intended as a compliment to the high state of civilization, learning, fraternity and hospitality of the Irish, and as the only remuneration he could offer for all the courtesies and favors he and his people received from the then flourishing and independent Irish nation. This poem is still extant. Hardiman had a vellum copy of it, in which he says the character was ancient and obscure, Mangan made a poetical translation for Montgomery, which is worth recording as a testimony of the high standing of our people at an age when Europe was just emerging from the Cimmerian darkness of the barbaric ages, although we are told by would be reformers, and pious frauds that our ancestors were in a very deluded state until the light of the Italio-Jewish civilization was brought in by a man who was able to take no higher place in a Celtic Community than to attend to the swine on the slopes of Slieve Mis.

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The Celt of those early days, unlike his descendant of to-day, refused to be dictated to by either Italian or Saxon, and knowing the real nature of both those races stoutly refused to purchase salvation from their hands, but maintained that he himself had received his revelations from a higher and a purer source than any of those Salvationists was capable of producing ; in fact that he received it not second-hand, but directly from the East, and practised then what his Eastern forefathers had done centuries upon centuries before ; that lately he had kept a festival upon whose anniversary every cottage and hamlet was lighted by a bonfire, a

custom preserved to this day, while the memory of lesser dignitaries passed by unnoticed. When however, it was decided by the king of Northumbria, that only one system of computing Easter should be held in his dominions, and preference was given to the Italian over the Irish system, the Celtic monks withdrew to Iona and Ireland from a field where they had labored for centuries, and from a people they had raised from the most barbarous depths to members in a civilized religious society.

Fifty years after this period, when Neachtan, King of the Picts, ordered his people to be guided by Italian customs and belief, the Culdees voluntarily exiled themselves from Scotland, and later, when at one fell stroke, Ireland was brought under Italian and English domination, there was nothing left to them but emigration to the Western and Northwestern Archipelagoes, and there they retired one after another, but they were always viewed with jealousy by the followers of the Italio-Jewish Cult, then becoming fashionable in Western Europe.

In a paper read before the American Congress at Copenhagen, the Frenchman, Beauvais, gives a very vivid account of this important period in the history of Irish development in the Western world and especially in Mexico.

He says, "that no sooner had the new Italio-Jewish faith located itself than its followers began to demand the control if not the expulsion of the native Irish civilization, and being disgusted with the lack of patriotism in their countrymen, and the gradual elimination of every national characteristic, the Papae renounced their native land with some misgivings, for its future welfare, which alas, was too well founded, and explored the Northern seas, whose mysterious regions always exercised an invincible attraction over them."

Cambrensis says in his "Hibernian Topography," "The Lord has made whatever he wished both in heaven and in earth, and in the deep abysses, but it is at the remote extremity of the earth that emancipated nature enjoys itself with the most astounding prodigies." The Irish were no doubt his ideal of those prodigies. They believed that beyond the countries inhabited by men, were others extending to lands unknown, perhaps the remnants of former continents now disappeared, and into those strange lands the Irish saints and scholars loved to wander, where they enjoyed themselves in educating and elevating the less enlightened members of the human race.

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#### *Barton and his Voyage.*

Adamnan in his "Life of Columbcille," cites the voyage of Barton, the next successor in Iona, and another voyage of his cotemporary, Cormac, who was drifted for forty days by a violent south wind, on the Atlantic Ocean, when having gone beyond all previous and known limits, was forced into a region of the ocean, where he was assailed by black little insects, that threatened to pierce with their fangs the skins, with which the vessel was sheathed. This very detail proves the authenticity of the recital, for it is now well known that there is a species of Crustacea in the Northern seas that attacks the ships in bands or swarms. However, when the wind fell, Cormac was able to retrace his steps southward to home and give an account of his experiences in the frozen waters of the Arctic Ocean.

Later in the seventh century, we have, upon the authority of O'Curry, who quotes the incident in his "Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish," a more authentic testimony of the knowledge of a Western World by the Irish Celts. Two chieftains, monks of Iona, Snedgus and MacRiagla, with some of their followers, undertook a maritime pilgrimage. They wandered for many months on the Atlantic, and discovered the existence of several islands unknown before, some of which were deserted, while others were thickly inhabited. On

one occasion, they were surprised to hear the mournful dirge of a native funeral, and immediately recognized the Irish Bean Caointe or Female Mourner of their native land, who chanted those doleful strains at the last obsequies of a dear, departed relative, ages before other European peoples could realize that nothing more was needed than allow their aged or infirm to die by the wayside, and permit the wild beasts to arrange for their interment. Indeed we may safely claim without any fear of contradiction, that the burial services now so popular and remunerative, first originated among the Irish Celts, and that the soprano of the modern day is only the lineal successor of the Irish Bean Caointe.

However, they landed and were most hospitably received by a number of ladies who addressed them in the mellifluous tones of their own native tongue. It sounded to them like heavenly music for they imagined themselves again on their native shores, and only recovered from their trance to find out that they were on one of the islands far away, beyond the Atlantic Ocean. Those ladies conducted them before the chief who received them with all the hospitality of an Irish chieftain, and that deference which it was the custom of his people to pay to strangers. This chief and his followers were exiles of the tribe of Fer Roy, who having transgressed the laws of hospitality in some manner, undertook as penance a voluntary exile, beyond the Atlantic waves.

After a long sojourn in this Western land, Snedgus and MacRiagla returned again to Iona. They brought with them, however, a proof of their discovery. It was a large leaf from one of the tropical trees, no doubt, for we are told it was almost as large as an ox hide, and was carefully deposited at Iona until the Culdees transferred their headquarters to Ireland, where they brought the leaf and it was carefully preserved in Kells. When McFirbis and his brother Giolla Iosa were adding to the Book of Leacain in 1390, A.D., their account of the "Adventures of the Clerics of the Order of Columbcille" this leaf was in a good state of preservation, but unfortunately it, like other monuments of our people's greatness, has been ruthlessly destroyed, and nothing left us to-day but the sad mementoes as fruits of a barbarous Italian-English civilization.

Beauvais, in his essay on the "Great Land of the West" quotes these voyages from the Book of the Maelconroys, a manuscript still inedited, and shows from a work of Magnus O'Donnell, in the year 1647, that in that age those voyages and discoveries were well known and taught.

The famous leaf of which we write was called the Duilleabar Baithe, and from its immense size, all the eminent men who have mentioned it, agree that it could only be found in tropical America. Then who can say that the Irish with their currachs ? did not land upon the American shores. We can only mention some of the voyages of the Culdees in the Northwestern Atlantic, because the manuscripts which contain those voyages and several other matters relating to that period are still unpublished and accessible only to a few select Gaelic scholars.

Although we may speak reservedly of several voyages, undertaken at this early period by the monks of Columba or Culdees, the certainty of those voyages does not admit of doubt. The Orcades or Western Isles of Scotland, the Shetland Isles and all that group were first known and settled by them. Their colonies were so acceptable to the Aboriginal inhabitants that they not only took the name, but adopted the costume of those that came to civilize them, and preserved their manners, customs, and language until the ninth century, when the king or Norway, Harold, invaded these archipelagoes and resettled it with his own savage Norwegians. But the name Papae still lingers in the Orcades, for we find to-day the Isles of Papawertra and Papastronsa; and in several localities such as Paplay. In Shetland it is still significant in the three Isles of Papastone, Papalittle and Papa, close to the territory of Papil.

The Swedish geographer Münch, in his "Geography of the Shetland and Orkney

Islands” quotes a number of localities which are derived from those teachers of Celtic Civilization, the Papae or Pupae. In another work of his published at Christiana in 1850, entitled “ Symbols relating to Ancient History,” he quotes a peculiar and interesting passage from Norwegian History which he had discovered and bearing upon the subject under our consideration. He says : “ The Papae or Pupae are so called on account of the white garments which they were accustomed to wear; and in all the Teutonic languages the clerics and teachers were called Papae.” But it is in our own manuscripts we must look for the meaning of this custom. In the Irish language the word Papa or Pupa means a teacher or cleric, and the Book of Ballymote furnishes the remainder where it describes how only certain colors were allowed for certain ranks of society, not for the purpose of comparison but to mark distinctly what the profession or calling of each one was, thus :

..... Blue to women  
Crimson to kings of every host,  
Green and black to noble laymen,  
White to clerics .....

According to O’Curry this distinction was made at a period long anterior to the dawn of Italo-Jewish civilization in Western Europe, hence these men could not have copied it from any of those two peoples who did not themselves possess or know of the custom for ages afterwards.

From the Orcades and the Shetland Islands, the Papae or Culdees passed easily into the Faroe Islands. One of them, Diciul, who composed a geographical tract, called “ The Extent of the Earth’s Surface” in the year 825, A.D., speaks of this discovery, thus : “ There are a great number of other islands in the ocean to the north of Bretagne. The vessels sailing there and driven by a wind always favorable, require two days and two nights to reach those North-western isles.”

“ A missionary, worthy of belief, has told me that after having sailed for two days and one night in Summer time, he landed in one of the islands. These islands are small, for the most part they are all separated, the one from the other by passes or straits very difficult of navigation. They were perhaps, some hundred years established and inhabited by monks who departed from Scotia, But just as if they had been deserted since the creation of the world, the monks and religieuse being driven out by the savage Northmen, these beautiful isles are now (825) inhabited by flocks of wild beast and every known species of seabird.”

Scotia, here means Ireland, for it was so called all through the Middle Ages, and meant in the works and writings of Alcuin, Alfred the Great, Bede and Eginhard. It was only in the middle of the ninth century, when the king of the Picts died, without leaving any direct heir to the kingdom, that Kenneth, king of Dalriada, the country of the Ancient Scots, possessed himself of the country of the Picts, and united the two territories into one kingdom in 843, A.D., although the name Scotland was not applied to Alban until the eleventh century.

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