

## Primeval Ireland.

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“ It seems to be certain,” says the Abbé McGeoghegan, “ that Ireland continued uninhabited from the Creation to the Deluge.” With this assurance to help us on our onward way I may venture to supplement it by saying that little is known about the first, or even about the second, third, and fourth succession of settlers in Ireland. At what precise period what is known as the Scoto-Celtic branch of the great Aryan stock broke away from its parent tree, by what route its migrants travelled, in what degree of consanguinity it stood to the equally Celtic race or races of Britain, what sort of people inhabited Ireland previous to the first Aryan invasion—all this is in the last degree uncertain, though that it was inhabited by some race or races outside the limits of that greatest of human groups seems from ethnological evidence to be perfectly clear.

When first it dawns upon us through that thick darkness which hangs about the birth of all countries—whatever their destiny—it was a densely wooded and scantily peopled island “ lying a-loose,” as old Campion, the Elizabethan historian, tells us, “ upon the West Ocean,” though his further assertion that “ in shape it resembleth an egg, plain on the sides, and not reaching forth to the sea in nooks and elbows of Land as Brittain doeth”—cannot be said to be quite geographically accurate—the last part of the description referring evidently to the east coast, the only one with which, like most of his countrymen, he was at that time familiar.

Geographically, then, and topographically it was no doubt in much the same state as the greater part of it remained up to the middle or end of the sixteenth century, a wild, tangled, all but roadless land shaggy with forests, abounding in streams, abounding too, in lakes—far more, doubtless than at present, drainage and other causes having greatly reduced their number—with rivers bearing the never-failing tribute of the skies to the sea, yet not so thoroughly as to hinder enormous districts from remaining in a swamped and saturated condition, given up to bogs, which even at the present time are said to cover nearly one-sixth of its surface.

This superfluity of bogs seems always in earlier times to have been expeditiously set down by all historians and agriculturists as part of the general depravity of the Irish native, who had allowed his good lands,—doubtless for his own mischievous pleasure—to run to waste ; bogs being then supposed to differ from other lands only so far as they were made “ waste and barren by superfluous moisture.” About the middle of the 18th century it began to be perceived that this view of the matter was somewhat inadequate ; the theory then prevailing being that bogs owed their origin not to water alone, but to the destruction of woods, whose remains are found imbedded in them—a view which held good for another fifty or sixty years, until it was in its turn effectually disposed of by the report of the Bogs Commission in 1810, when it was proved once for all that it was to the growth of sphagnums and other peat-producing mosses they were in the main due—a view which has never since been called in question.

A great deal, however, had happened to Ireland before the bogs began to grow on it at all. It had—to speak only of some of its later vicissitudes—been twice at least united to England, and through it with what we now know as the continent of Europe, and twice severed from it again. It had been exposed to a cold so intense as to bleach off all life from its surface, utterly depriving it of vegetation, and grinding the mountains down to that scraped bun-like outline which so many of them still retain ; had covered the whole country, highlands and lowlands alike, with a dense overtopping cap of snow, towering often thousands of feet above the

present height of the mountains, from which “central silence” the glaciers crept sleepily down the ravines and valleys, eating their way steadily seaward, and leaving behind them moraines to mark their passage, leaving also longitudinal scratches, cut, as a diamond cuts glass, upon the rocks, as may be seen by any one who takes the trouble of looking for them ; finally reaching the sea in a vast sloping plateau which pushed its course steadily onward until its further advance was overborne by the buoyancy of the salt water, the ends breaking off, as the Greenland glaciers do today, into huge floating icebergs, which butted against one another, jammed up all the smaller bays and fiords ; were carried in again and again on the rising tide ; rolled hither and thither like so many colossal ninepins ; played, in short, all the old rough-and-tumble Arctic games through many a cold and dismal century, finally melting away as the milder weather began slowly to return, leaving Ireland a very lamentable-looking island indeed, not unlike one of those deplorable islands scattered along the shores of Greenland and upon the edges of Baffin’s Bay—treeless, grassless, brown and scalded, wearing everywhere over its surface the marks of that great ice-plough which had lacerated its sides so long.

There seems to be good geological evidence that the land connection between Ireland and Scotland continued to a considerably later period than between it and England, to which, and as far as can be seen to no other possible cause is to be attributed two very striking characteristics of its fauna, namely, its excessive meagreness and its strikingly northern character. Not only does it come far short of the already meagre English fauna, but all the distinctively southern species are the ones missing, though there is nothing in the climate to account for the fact. The Irish hare, for instance, is not the ordinary brown hare of England, but the “blue” or Arctic hare of Scotch mountains, the same which still further to the north becomes white in winter, a habit which, owing to the milder Irish winters, it has apparently shaken off.

It would be pleasant to linger here a little over this point of distribution—so fruitful of suggestion as to the early history of the planet we occupy. To speculate as to the curious contradictions, or apparent contradictions, to be found even within so narrow an area as that of Ireland. What, for instance, has brought a group of South European plants to the shores of Kerry and Connemara, plants not to be found anywhere in England, even in Cornwall, which one would have thought must surely have arrested them first ? Why, when neither the common toad or frog are indigenous in Ireland (for the latter, though common now, was only introduced at the beginning of the 18th century) a comparatively rare little toad, the Natterjack, should be found in one corner of Kerry to all appearances indigenously? All these questions, however, belong to quite another sort of book, and to a much larger survey of the field than there is time here to embark upon, so there is nothing for it but to turn one’s back resolutely upon the tempting sin of discursiveness, or we shall find ourselves belated before our real journey is even begun.

The first people, then, of whose existence in Ireland we can be said to know anything are commonly asserted to have been of Turanian origin, and are known as “Fomorians.” As far as we can gather, they were a dark, low-browed, stunted race, although, oddly enough, the word Fomorion in early Irish legend is always used as synonymous with the word giant. They were, at any rate, a race of utterly savage hunters and fishermen, ignorant of metal, of pottery, possibly even of the use of fire ; using the stone hammers or hatchets of which vast numbers remain in Ireland to this day, and specimens of which may be seen in every museum. How long they held possession no one can tell, although Irish philologists believe several local Irish names to date from this almost inconceivably remote epoch. Perhaps if we think of the Lapps of the present day, and picture them wandering about the country, catching the hares and rabbits in nooses, burrowing in the earth or amongst rocks, and being, not impossibly,

looked down on with scorn by the great Irish elk which still stalked majestically over the hills ; rearing ugly little altars to dim, formless gods ; trembling at every sudden gust, and seeing demon faces in every bush and brake, it will give us a fairly good notion of what these very earliest inhabitants of Ireland were probably like.

Next followed a Belgic colony, known as the Firbolgs, who overran the country, and appear to have been of a somewhat higher ethnological grade, although, like the Fomorians, short, dark, and swarthy. Doubtless the latter were not entirely exterminated to make way for the Firbolgs, any more than the Firbolgs to make way for the Danaans, Milesians, and other successive races ; such wholesale exterminations being, in fact, very rare, especially in a country which like Ireland seems specially laid out by kindly nature for the protection of a weaker race struggling in the grip of a stronger one.

After the Firbolgs, though I should be sorry to be obliged to say how long after, fresh and more important tribes of invaders began to appear. The first of these were the Tuatha-da-Danaans, who arrived under the leadership of their king Nuad, and took possession of the east of the country. These Tuatha-da-Danaans are believed to have been large, blue-eyed people of Scandinavian origin, kinsmen and possibly ancestors of those Norsemen or “ Danes ” who in years to come were destined to work such woe and havoc upon the island.

Many battles took place between these Danaans and the earlier Firbolgic settlers —the native owners as no doubt they felt themselves of the country. One of the best substantiated of these, not, indeed, by history or even tradition, but by a more solid testimony, that of the stone remains left on the spot, prove, at any rate, that *some* long-sustained battle was at some remote period fought on the spot.

This is the famous pre-historic battle of Moytura, rather the Southern Moytura, for there were two ; the other, situated not far from the present town of Sligo, retaining “ the largest collection of pre-historic remains,” says Dr. Petrie, “ in any region in the world with the exception of Carnac.” This second battle of Moytura was fought upon the plain of Cong, which is washed by the waters of Lough Mask and Lough Corrib, close to where the long monotonous midland plain of Ireland becomes broken, changes into that region of high mountains and low-lying valleys, now called Connemara, but which in earlier days was always known as Iar Connaught.

It is a wild scene even now, not very much less so than it must have been when this old and half-mythical Battle of the West was fought and won. A grey plain, “ stone-roughened like the graveyard of dead hosts,” broken into grassy ridges, and starred at intervals with pools, repeating the larger glitter of the lake hard by. Over the whole surface of this tumbled plain rise, at intervals, great masses of rock, some natural, but others artificially up-tilted—cromlechs and dolmens, menhirs and cairns—whitened by lichen scrawls, giving them often in uncertain light the effect of so many undecipherable inscriptions, written in a long-forgotten tongue.

From the position of the battle-field it has been made out to their own satisfaction by those who have studied it on the spot, that the Firbolgs must have taken up a fortified position upon the hill called Benlevi ; a good strategic position unquestionably, having behind it the whole of the Mayo mountains into which to retreat in case of defeat. The Danaans, on the other hand, advancing from the plains of Meath, took up their station upon the hill known as Knockmaa, [1] standing by itself about five miles from the present town of Tuam, on the top

of which stands a great cairn, believed to have been in existence even then—a legacy of some yet earlier and more primitive race which inhabited the country, and, therefore, possibly the oldest record of humanity to-day extant in Ireland.

Three days the battle is said to have raged with varying fortunes, in the course of which the Danaan king Nuad lost his arm, a loss which was repaired, we are told, by the famous artificer Credue or Cerd, who made him a silver one, and as “Nuad of the Silver Hand” he figures conspicuously in early Irish legend. In spite of this, and of the death of a number of their fighting-men, the stars fought for the Tuatha-da-Danaans, who were strong men and cunning, workers in metal, and great fighters, so that at last they utterly made an end of their antagonists, occupying the whole country, and holding it, say the annalists for a hundred and ninety and six years—building earth and stone forts, many of which exist to this day, but what their end was no man can tell you, save that they, too, were, in their turn, conquered by the Milesians or “Scoti,” who next overran the country, giving to it their own name of Scotia, by which name it was known down to the end of the twelfth century, and driving the earlier settlers before them, who thereupon fled to the hills, and took refuge in the forests, whence they emerged, doubtless, with unpleasant effect upon their conquerors, as another defeated race did upon *their* conquerors in later days.

As regards the early doings of these Scoti, although nearer to us in point of time, their history is, if anything, rather more vague than that of their predecessors. The source for the greater part of it is in a work known as the “Annals of the Four Masters,” a compilation put together in the sixteenth century, from documents no longer existing. Were names, indeed, all that were wanting to give substantiality there are enough and to spare, the beginning of every Irish history positively bristling with them. Leland, for instance, who published his three sturdy tomes in the year 1773, and who is still one of our chief authorities on the subject, speaks of Ireland as having “engendered one hundred and seventy one monarchs, all of the same house and lineage ; with sixty-eight kings, and two queens of Great Britain and Ireland all sprung equally from her loins.” We read in his pages of the famous brethren Heber and Heremon, sons of Milesius, who divided the island between them ; of Ollamh Fodla, celebrated as a healer of feuds and protector of learning, who drew the priests and bards together into a triennial assembly at Tara, in Meath ; of Cimbalth, who is praised by the annalists for having advanced learning and kept the peace. The times of peace had not absolutely arrived however, for he was not long after murdered, and wild confusion and wholesale slaughter ensued. Another Milesian prince, Thuathal, shortly afterwards returned from North Britain, and, assisted by a body of Pictish soldiers, defeated the rebels, restored order, and re-established the seat of his monarchy in Meath.

As a specimen of the sort of stories current in history of this kind, Leland relates at considerable length the account of the insult offered to this Thuathal by the provincial king of Leinster. “The king,” he tells us, “had married the daughter of Thuathal, but conceiving a violent passion for her sister, pretended that his wife had died, and demanded and obtained her sister in marriage. The two ladies met in the royal house of Leinster. Astonishment and sorrow put an end to their lives !” The offender not long afterwards was invaded by his justly indignant father-in-law, and his province only preserved from desolation on condition of paying a heavy tribute, “as a perpetual memorial of the resentment of Thuathal and of the offence committed by the king of Leinster.”

Another special favourite of the annalists is Cormac O’Conn, whose reign they place about the year 250, and over whose doings they wax eloquent, dwelling upon the splendour of his

court, the heroism of his warlike sons, the beauty of his ten fair daughters, the doings of his famous militia, the Fenni or Fenians, and especially of his illustrious general Finn, or Fingal, the hero of the legends, and father of the poet Ossian—a warrior whom we shall meet with again in the next chapter.

And now, it will perhaps be asked, what is one in sober seriousness to say to all this ? All that one can say is that these tales are not to be taken as history in any rigid sense of the word, but must for the most part be regarded as mere hints, caught from chaos, and coming down through a hundred broken mediums ; scraps of adventures told around camp fires ; oral traditions ; rude songs handed from father to son, and altering more or less with each new teller. The early history of Ireland is in this respect much like the early history of all other countries. We have the same semi-mythical aggregations, grown up around some small kernel of reality, but so changed, swollen, distorted, that it is difficult to distinguish the true from the false ; becoming vaguer and vaguer too as the mists of time and sentiment gather more and more thickly around them, until at last we seem to be swimming dimly in a “ moony vapour,” which allows no dull peaks of reality to pierce through it at all. “ There were giants in those days,” is a continually recurring assertion, characteristic of all ancient annals, and of these with the rest.

#### THE LEGENDS AND THE LEGEND MAKERS.

Better far than such historic shams—cardboard castles with little or no substance behind them—are the real legends. These put forward no obtrusive pretensions to accuracy, and for that very reason are far truer in that larger sense in which all the genuine and spontaneous out-growth of a country form part and parcel of its history. Some of the best of these have been excellently translated by Mr. Joyce, whose “ Celtic Romances” ought to be in the hands of every one, from the boy of twelve upwards, who aspires to know anything of the inner history of Ireland ; to understand, that is to say, that curiously recurrent note of poetry and pathos which breaks continually through all the dull hard prose of the surface. A note often lost in unmitigated din and discord, yet none the less re-emerging, age after age, and century after century, and always when it does so lending its own charm to a record, which, without some such alleviations, would be almost too grim and disheartening in its unrelieved and un-resulting misery to be voluntarily approached at all.

Although as they now stand none appear to be of earlier date than the ninth or tenth century, these stories all breathe the very breath of a primitive world. An air of remote pagan antiquity hangs over them, and as we read we seem gradually to realize an Ireland as unlike the one we know now as if, like the magic island of Buz, it had sunk under the waves and been lost. Take, for instance—for space will not allow of more than a sample—the story of “ The Pursuit of Gilla Backer and his Horse,” not by any means one of the best, yet characteristic enough. In it we learn that from Beltane, the 1st of May—the great Celtic festival of the sun—to Sanim, the 1st of November, the chiefs and Fenni hunted each day with their hounds through the forests and over the plains, while from Sanhain to Beltane they lived in the “ Betas,” or houses of hospitality, or feasted high with Finn MacCool, grandson of Trenmore O’Baskin, whose palace stood upon the summit of the hill of Allen, a hill now crowned with a meaningless modern obelisk, covering the site of the old historic rath, a familiar object to thousands who have looked up at it from the Curragh of Kildare, certainly with no thought in their minds of Finn MacCool or his vanished warriors.

The tale tells how one day, after hunting on the Plains of Cliach, the Fenni sat down to rest upon the hill of Colkilla, their hunting tents being pitched upon a level spot near the summit.

How presently, afar off over the plain at their feet, they saw one of the conquered race of earlier inhabitants, a “Fomorian” of huge size and repulsive ugliness coming towards them, leading his horse by the halter, an animal larger, it seems, than six ordinary horses, but broken down and knock-kneed, with jaws that stuck out far in advance of its head. How the heroes, idling pleasantly about in the sunshine, laughed aloud at the uncouth “foreigner” and his ugly raw-boned beast, “covered with tangled scraggy hair of a sooty black.” How he came before the king and, having made obeisance, told him that his name was the Gilla Dacker, and then and there took service with him for a year, desiring at the same time that special care should be paid to his horse, and the best food given it, and care taken that it did not stray, whereat the heroes laughed again, the horse standing like a thing carved in wood and unable apparently to move a leg.

No sooner, however, was it loosed, and the halter cast off, than it rushed amongst the other horses, kicking and lashing, and seizing them with its teeth till not one escaped. Seeing which, the Fenni rose up in high wrath, and one of them seized the Gilla Dacker’s horse by the halter and tried to draw it away, but again it became like a rock, and refused to stir. Then he mounted its back and flogged it, but still it remained like a stone. Then, one after the other, thirteen more of the heroes mounted, but still it stirred not. The very instant, however, that its master, the Gilla Dacker rose up angrily to depart, the old horse went too, with the fourteen heroes still upon his back, whereat the Fenni raised fresh shouts of laughter. But the Gilla Dacker, after he had walked a little way, looked back, and seeing that his horse was follow-ing, stood for a moment to tuck up his skirts. “Then, all at once changing his pace, he set out with long strides ; and if you know what the speed of a swallow is, flying across a mountain-side, or the fairy wind of a March day sweeping over the plains, then you can understand Gilla Dacker, as he ran down the hillside towards the south-west. Neither was the horse behindhand in the race, for, though he carried a heavy load, he galloped like the wind after his master, plunging and bounding forward with as much freedom as if he had nothing at all on his back.”

Finn and his warriors left behind on the hill stared awhile, and then resolved to go to Ben Edar, now Howth, there to seek for a ship to follow after Gilla Backer and his horse, and the fourteen heroes. And on their way they met two bright-faced youths wearing mantles of scarlet silk, fastened by brooches of gold, who, saluting the king, told him their names were Foltlebar and Feradach, and that they were the sons of the king of Innia, and each possessed an art, and that as they walked they had disputed whose art was the greater. “And my art,” said Feradach, “is this. If at any time a company of warriors need a ship, give me only my joiner’s axe and my crann-tavall, [2] and I am able to provide a ship without delay. The only thing I ask them to do is this—to cover their heads close and keep them covered, while I give the crann-tavall three blows of my axe. Then I tell them to uncover their heads, and lo, there lies the ship in harbour, ready to sail !”

The Foltlebar spoke and said, “This, O king, is the art I profess : On land I can track the wild duck over nine ridges and nine glens, and follow her without being once thrown out, till I drop upon her in her nest. And I can follow up a track on sea quite as well as on land, if I have a good ship and crew.”

And Finn replied, “You are the very men I want ; and now I take you both into my service. Though our own trackmen, the Clan Naim, are good, yet we now need some one still more skilful to follow the Gilla Backer through unknown seas.”

To these unknown seas they went, starting from Ben Edar, and sailed away west for many days over the Atlantic, seeing many strange sights and passing many unknown islands. But at last the ship stopped short in front of an island with vast rocky cliffs towering high above their heads as steep as a sheet of glass, at which the heroes gazed amazed and baffled, not knowing what to do next. But Dermot O'Dynor—called also Dermot of the Bright-face—undertook to climb it, for of all the Fenni he was the most learned in Druidical enchantments, having been early taught the secret of fairy lore by Mananan Mac Lir, who ruled over the Inis Manan or Land of Promise.

Dermot accordingly took leave of his friends and climbed the great cliff, and when he reached the top he found that it was flat and covered with tall green grass, as is often the case in these desolate wind-blown Atlantic islets. And in the very centre he found a well with a tall pillar stone beside it, and beside the pillar stone a drinking-horn chased with gold. And he took up the drinking-horn to drink, being thirsty, but the instant he touched the brim with his lips, lo ! a great Wizard Champion armed to the teeth, sprang up out of the earth, whereupon he and Dermot O'Dynor fought together beside the well the livelong day until the dusk fell. But the moment the dusk fell, the wizard champion sprang with a great bound into the middle of the well, and so disappeared, leaving Dermot standing there much astonished at what had befallen him.

And the next day the same thing happened, and the next, and the next. But on the fourth day, Dermot watched his foe narrowly, and when the dusk came on, and he saw that he was about to spring into the well, he flung his arms tightly about him, and the wizard champion struggled to get free, but Dermot held him, and at length they both fell together into the well, deeper and deeper to the very bottom of the earth, and there was nothing to be seen but dim shadows, and nothing to be heard but vague confused sounds like the roaring of waves. At length there came a glimmering of light, and all at once bright day broke suddenly around them, and they came out at the other side of the earth, and found themselves in Tir-fa-ton, the land under the sea, where the flowers bloom all the year round, and no man has ever so much as heard the word Death.

What happened there ; how Dermot O'Dynor met the other heroes, and how the fourteen Fenni who had been carried off were at last recaptured, would be too long to tell. Unlike most of these legends all comes right in the end ; Gilla Dacker and his ugly horse disappear suddenly into space, and neither Finn himself nor any of his warriors ever see them again.

It is impossible, I think, to read this, and to an even greater degree some of the other stories, which have been translated by Mr. Joyce and others, without perceiving how thoroughly impregnated with old-world and mythological sentiment they are. An air of all but fabulous antiquity pervades them, greater perhaps than pervades the legends of any other north European people. We seem transplanted to a world of the most primitive type conceivable ; a world of myth and of fable, of direct Nature interpretations, of mythology, in short, pure and simple. Even those stories which are known to be of later origin exhibit to a greater or less degree the same character ; one which has come down to them doubtless from earlier half forgotten tales, of which they are merely the final and most modern outcome.

When, too, we turn from the legends themselves to the legend-makers, everything that we know of the position of the bards (*Ollamhs* or *Sennachies*) carries out the same idea. In the earliest times they were not merely the singers and story-tellers of their race, but to a great degree they bore a religious or semi-religious character. Like the Brehons or judges they

were the directors and guides of the others, but they possessed in addition a peculiarly Druidical character of sanctity, as the inheritors and interpreters of a revelation confided to them alone. A power the more formidable because no one, probably, had ever ventured to define its exact character.

The Head bard or Ollamh, in the estimation of his tribesmen, stood next in importance to the chieftain or king—higher, indeed, in some respects ; for whereas to slay a king might, or might not be criminal, to slay an Ollamh entailed both outlawing in this life and a vaguer, but not the less terrible, supernatural penalty in another. Occasionally, as in the case of the Ollamh Fodhla, by whom the halls of Tara are reputed to have been built, the king was himself the bard, and so combined both offices, but this appears to have been rare. Even as late as the sixteenth century, refusal of praise from a bard was held to confer a far deeper and more abiding stigma upon a man than blame from any other lips. If they, “ the bards,” says an Elizabethan writer, “ say ought in dispraise, the gentleman, especially the meere Irish, stand in great awe.”

It is easy, I think, to see this is merely the survival of some far more potent power wielded in earlier times. In pre-Christian days especially, the penalty attaching to the curse of a Bard was understood to carry with it a sort of natural anathema, not unlike the priestly anathema of later times. Indeed there was one singular, and, as far as I am aware, unique power possessed by the Irish Bards, which goes beyond any priestly or papal anathema, and which was known as the *Clann Dichin*, a truly awful malediction, by means of which the Ollamh, if offended or injured, could pronounce a spell against the very land of his injurer, a spell once pronounced that land would produce no crop of any kind, neither could living creature graze upon it, neither was it possible even to walk over it without peril, and so it continued until the wrong, whatever it was had been repented, and the curse of the Ollamh was lifted off from the land again.

Is it to be wondered at that men, endowed with such powers of blessing or banning, possessed of such mystic communion with the then well-nigh unknown powers of nature, should have exercised an all but unlimited influence over the minds of their countrymen, especially at a time when the powers of evil were still supposed to stalk the earth in all their native malignity, and no light of any revelation had broken through the thick dim roof overhead ?

Few races of which the world has ever heard are as imaginative as that of the Celt, and at this time the imagination of every Celt must have been largely exercised in the direction of the malevolent and the terrible. Even now, after fourteen hundred years of Christianity, the Kerry or Connemara peasant still hears the shriek of his early gods in the sob of the waves or the howling of the autumn storms. Fish demons gleam out of the sides of the mountains, and the black bog-holes have hardly ceased to be the haunts of monsters of inconceivable horror. Even the less directly baneful spirits such as Finvarragh, king of the fairies, who haunts the stony slopes of Knockmaa, and all the endless variety of *diiminores*, the cluricans, banshees, fetches who peopled the primitive forests, and still hop and mow about their ruined homes, were far more likely to injure than to benefit unless approached in the right manner, and with the properly uttered conjurations. The Unknown is always the Terrible ; and the more vivid an untaught imagination is, the more certain it is to conjure up exactly the things which alarm it most, and which it leastlikes to have to believe in.

## PRE-CHRISTIAN IRELAND.

Getting out of this earliest and foggiest period, whose only memorials are the stones which still cumber the ground, or those subtler traces of occupation of which philology keeps the key, and pushing aside a long and uncounted crowd of kings, with names as uncertain as their deeds, pushing aside, too, the legends and coming to hard fact, we must picture Ireland still covered for the most part with pathless forests, but here and there cleared and settled after a rude fashion by rough cattle-owning tribes, who herded their own cattle and “lifted” their neighbour’s quite in the approved fashion of the Scotch Highlanders up to a century and a half ago.

Upon the whole, we may fairly conclude that matters were ameliorating more or less ; that the wolves were being killed, the woods cleared — not as yet in the ferocious wholesale fashion of later days—that a little rudimentary agriculture showed perhaps here and there in sheltered places. Sheep and goats grazed then as now over the hills, and herds of cattle began to cover the Lowlands. The men, too, were possibly beginning to grow a trifle less like two-legged beasts of prey though still rough as the very wolves they hunted ; bare-legged, wild-eyed hunter-herdsmen with—who can doubt it ?—flocks of children trooping vociferously at their heels.

Of the daily life, habits, dress, religion of these people—the direct ancestors of four-fifths of the present inhabitants of Ireland—we know unfortunately exceedingly little. It is not even certain, whether human sacrifices did or did not form—as they certainly did in Celtic Britain—part of that religion, though there is some evidence that it did, in which case prisoners taken in battle, or slaves, were probably the victims.

That a considerable amount of slavery existed in early Celtic Ireland is certain, though as to the rules by which it was regulated, as of almost every other detail of the life, we know little or nothing. At the time of the Anglo-Norman conquest Ireland was said to be full of English slaves carried off in raids along the coast, and these filibustering expeditions undoubtedly began in very early times. St. Patrick himself was thus carried off, and the annalists tell us that in the third century Cormac Mac Art ravaged the whole western coast of Britain, and brought away “great stores of slaves and treasures.” To how late a period, too, the earlier conquered races of Ireland, such as the Fomorians, continued as a distinct race from their Milesian conquerors, and whether they existed as a slave class, or, as seems more probable, as mere outcasts and vagabonds out of the pale of humanity, liable like the “Tory” of many centuries later, to be killed whenever caught ; all these are matters on which we have unfortunately only the vaguest hints to guide us.

The whole texture of society must have been loose and irregular to a degree that it is difficult for us now to conceive, with hardly a trace of central organization or any form of social cement. In one respect—that of the treatment of his women—the Irish Celt seems to have always stood in favourable contrast to most of the other rude races which then covered the north of Europe, but as regards the rest there was probably little difference. Fighting was the one aim of life. Not to have washed his spear in an adversary’s gore, was a reproach which would have been felt by a full-grown tribesman to have carried with it the deepest and most lasting ignominy. The very women were not in early times exempt from war service, nay, probably would have scorned to be so. They fought beside their husbands, and slew or got slain with as reckless a courage as the men, and it was not until the time of St. Columba, late in the sixth century, that a law was passed ordering them to remain in their homes—a fact which alone speaks volumes both for the vigour and the undying pugnacity of the race.

While, on the one hand, we can hardly thus exaggerate the rudeness of this life, we must be careful, on the other, of concluding that these people were simple barbarians, incapable of discriminating right from wrong. Men, even the wildest, rarely live entirely without some law to guide them, and certainly it was not so in Ireland, A rule was growing up and becoming theoretically at any rate, established, many of the provisions of which startle us by the curious modernness of their tone, so oddly do they contrast with what we know of the condition of civilization or non-civilization then existing.

Although this ancient Irish law was not drawn up until long after the introduction of Christianity, it seems best to speak of it here, as, though modified by the stricter Christian rule, it in the main depended for such authority as it possessed upon traditions existing long before ; traditions regarded indeed by Celtic scholars as tracing their origin beyond the arrival of the first Celt in Ireland, outcomes and survivals, that is to say, of yet earlier Aryan rule, showing points of resemblance with the equally Aryan laws of India, a matter of great interest, carrying our thoughts back along the history of humanity to a time when those differences which seem now the most inherent and vital were as yet undreamt of, and not one of the great nations of the modern world were as much as born.

The two chief books in which this law is contained, the “ Book of Aicill” and the “ Senchus-Mor,” have only comparatively recently been translated and made available for English readers. The law as there laid down was drawn up and administered by the Brehons, who were the judges and the law-makers of the people, and whose decision was appealed to in all matters of dispute. The most serious flaw of the system—a very serious one it will be seen—was that, owing to the scattered and tribal existence prevailing, there was no strong central rule *behind* the Brehon, as there is behind the modern judge, ready and able to enforce his decrees. At bottom, force, it must not be forgotten, is the sanction of all law, and there was little or no available force then, nor for many a long day afterwards, in Ireland.

It was, no doubt, owing chiefly to this defective weakness that a system of fines rather than punishments grew up, one which in later times caused much scandal to English legal writers. In such a society crime in fact was hardly recognizable except in the form of an injury inflicted upon some person or persons. An offence against the State there could not be, simply because there was no State to be offended. Everything, from murder down to the smallest and most accidental injury, was compensated for by “ erics” or fines. The amount of these fines was decided upon by the Brehon, who kept an extraordinary number of imaginary rulings, descending into the most minute particulars, such as what fine was to be paid in the case of one person’s cat stealing milk from another person’s house, what fine in the case of one woman’s bees stinging another woman, a careful distinction being preserved in this case between the case in which the sting did or did not draw blood ! Even in the matter of fines it does not seem clear how the penalty was to be enforced where the person on whom it was inflicted refused to submit and where there was no one at hand to coerce him successfully.

As regards ownership of land early Irish law is very peculiar, and requires to be carefully studied. Primogeniture, regarded by all English lawyers trained under the feudal system as the very basis of inheritance, was simply unknown. Even in the case of the chieftain his rights belonged only to himself, and before his death a re-election took place, when some other of the same blood, not necessarily his eldest son, or even his son at all, but a brother, first cousin, uncle, or whoever stood highest in the estimation of the clan, was nominated as “ Tanist” or successor, and received promises of support from the rest.

Elizabethan writers mention a stone which was placed upon a hill or mound having the shape of a foot cut on it, supposed to be that of the first chief or ancestor of the race, “upon which stone the Tanist placing his foot, took oath to maintain all ancient customs inviolably, and to give up the succession peaceably to his Tanist in due time.”

The object of securing a Tanist during the lifetime of the chief was to hinder its falling to a minor, or some one unfit to take up the chieftainship, and this continued to prevail for centuries after the Norman invasion of Ireland, and was even adopted by many owners of English descent who had become “meere Irish,” as the phrase ran, or “degenerate English.”

“The childe being oftentimes left in nonage,” says Campion, “could never defend his patrimony, but by the time he grow to a competent age and have buried an uncle or two, he also taketh his turn,” a custom which, as he adds, “breedeth among them continual warres.”

The entire land belonged to the clan, and was held theoretically in common, and a redistribution made on the death of each owner, though it seems doubtful whether so very inconvenient an arrangement could practically have been adhered to. All sons, illegitimate as well as legitimate, shared and shared alike, holding the property between them in undivided ownership. It was less the actual land than the amount of grazing it afforded which constituted its value. Even to this day a man, especially in the West of Ireland, will tell you that he has “the grass of three cows,” or “the grass of six cows,” as the case may be.

It is curious that the most distinct ancient rules concerning the excessive extortion of rent are, as has been shown by Sir Henry Maine, to be found in the “*Senchus Mor*.” Under its regulations three rents are enumerated—namely, the *rack rent* to be extorted from one of a strange tribe; the *fair rent* from one of the same tribe; and the *stipulated rent* to be paid equally to either. The Irish clan or sept was a very loose, and in many cases irregular, structure, embracing even those who were practically undistinguishable from slaves, yet from none of these could any but a *fair* or customary rent be demanded. It was only when those who by no fiction could be supposed to belong to the clan sought for land that the best price attainable might be extorted and insisted upon.

In so primitive a state of society such persons were almost sure to be outcasts, thrown upon the world either by the breaking up of other clans or by their own misdoings. A man of this class was generally what was known as a “Fuidhar” or “broken man,” and answered in some respects to the slave or the serf of the early English village community. Like him he seems to have been his lord’s or chiefs chattel, and if killed or injured the fine or “eric” was paid not to his own family, but to his master. Such men were usually settled by the chief upon the unappropriated tribal lands over which his own authority tended to increase. This Fuidhar class from the first seem to have been very numerous, and depending as they did absolutely upon the chief, there grew up by degrees that class of armed retainers—kerns and galloglasses, they were called in later times—who surrounded every important chief, whether of English or Irish descent, and were by them quartered forcibly in war time upon others, and so there grew up that system of “coyne and livery,” or forced entertainment for horse and men, which is to be met with again and again throughout all Irish history and was undoubtedly one of the greatest curses of the country, tending more perhaps than any other single cause to keep its people at the lowest possible condition of starvation and misery.

No system of representation seems ever to have prevailed in Ireland. That idea is, in fact, almost purely Teutonic, and seems never to have sprung up spontaneously amongst any Celtic people. The family was the real root. Every head of a family ruled his own household, and

submitted in his turn to the rule of his chief Blood-relationship, including fosterage, was the only real and binding union ; that larger connection known as the clan or sept, having the smaller one of the family for its basis, as was the case also amongst the clans of the Scotch highlands. Theoretically, all members of a clan, high and low alike, were held to be the descendants of a common ancestor, and in this way to have a real and direct claim upon one another. If a man was not in some degree akin to another he was no better than a beast, and might be killed like one without compunction whenever occasion arose.

Everything thus began and centred around the tribe or sept. The whole theory of life was purely local. The bare right of existence extended only a few miles from your own door, to the men who bore the same name as yourself. Beyond that nothing was sacred ; neither age nor sex, neither life nor goods, not even in later times the churches themselves. Like his cousin of the Scotch Highlands, the Irish tribesman's life was one perpetual carnival of fighting, burning, raiding, plundering, and he who plundered oftenest was the finest hero.

All this must be steadily borne in mind as it enables us to understand, as nothing else will, that almost insane joy in and lust for fighting, that marked inability to settle down to orderly life which runs through all early Irish history from the beginning to the end.

Patriotism, too, it must be remembered, is in the first instance only an idea, and the narrowest of local jealousies may be, and often are, forms merely of the same impulse. To men living in one of these small isolated communities, each under the rule of its own petty chieftain, it was natural and perhaps inevitable that the sense of connection with those outside their own community should have been remarkably slight, and of nationality, as we understand the word, quite non-existent. Their own little circle of hills and valleys, their own forests and pasturage was their world, the only one practically of which they had any cognizance. To its scattered inhabitants of that day little Ireland must have seemed a region of in-calculable extent, filled with enemies to kill or to be killed by ; a region in which a man might wander from sunrise to sunset yet never reach the end, nay, for days together without coming to a second sea. As Greece to a Greek of one of its smaller states it seemed vast simply because he had never in his own person explored its limits.

[1] Now Castle Hacket Hill.

[2] A sling for projecting stones, strung like a cross-bow.

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