

History of Ireland

From The Earliest Times to The Present Day.

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Introductory

THE Phoenicians at an early age, perhaps as early as the foundation of Carthage (the middle of the ninth century B.C.), had planted colonies on the shores of Spain. These colonists, filled with the adventurous spirit of their ancestors, had passed beyond the Pillars of Hercules, reached Britain, and discovered the tin mines at its southern extremity. To supply from these newly discovered mines the ports of the Mediterranean with tin, they found to be a lucrative employment, especially as long as they enjoyed a monopoly of the trade. To preserve that monopoly they kept the position of Britain a secret, and all that other nations knew either of Britain or Ireland was that in some far distant part of the Western sea were the Cassiterides or Tin Islands, so distant and difficult of access that only Phoenician energy and skill in navigation could reach them. At a later date, Herodotus had heard that towards the north-west of Europe there was a river called Eridanus, which emptied itself into the sea and from which amber was said to come ; but he did not seem to believe that there was any sea on that side of Europe, and as to the Cassiterides or Tin Islands, he had heard of them, and knew they supplied the south of Europe with tin, but of their position he had no knowledge. Both Britain and Ireland were shrouded in impenetrable gloom, and on the map of the world as known to him they found no place. [1] The Carthaginians were as daring, as skilful in navigation, and as keenly anxious to acquire wealth by commerce as their kinsmen of Spain or Phoenicia, and in an expedition under Hamilco they discovered those famous Tin Islands which they had long sought for in vain. And as a result Festus Avienus wrote a description of the maritime coasts of the Atlantic (350 B.C.), and declared that at a distance of two days' sail from Britain was the sacred Isle of the Hibernians. [2] The Greek colonists of Marseilles followed in the wake of the Carthaginians, and the Romans followed the Greeks, but what the Romans knew of Ireland was little. Pliny maintained [3] that it was part of Britain and not a distinct island, and that in length it was 600 miles and that its breadth was just half its length. The statement of Strabo, who wrote in Greek, is that there are some islands round Britain, one of great extent called Ierna, lying parallel to it towards the north, but that he had nothing certain to relate about it except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, feeding on human flesh,

and enormous eaters, deeming it commendable to devour their deceased fathers, and having intercourse with their sisters and even with their mothers. [4] How little worthy of credence this statement is, can be gathered from his own words, for he relates it “ perhaps without any very competent authority” and because “ to eat human flesh is said to be a Scythian custom.” Caesar came nearer to Ireland than either of these writers, yet he knew but little of it, and all he could say was that it was an island situated to the west of Britain and about half its size. [5] Of its coast-line, of its harbours and bays, of its climate and soil, of its productions, of its inhabitants and of their cannibalism and immorality, of which Strabo writes—of all these he knew nothing, on all these subjects he is silent.

The scattered rays of light which had been cast on Western Europe by his predecessors enabled Ptolemy to repeat the information given us by Caesar. But he does little more than this, and on his map the position of Ireland is inaccurately given. He places it too far north, so that its extreme south is farther north than the northernmost point of Wales. The Cassiterides or Tin Islands, meant perhaps for the Scilly Isles, are placed hard by the north coast of Spain, and far distant from the south coast of Britain ; and North Britain, or Scotland, is bent east, and no part of it is as far north as the northernmost part of Ireland. And the coast-line of Ireland is very inaccurately defined. That portion of the south-west which advances into the Atlantic is wanting ; there is no trace of Galway Bay or the mouth of the Shannon ; Donegal Bay is but imperfectly apparent ; nor is there any part of Ireland which corresponds to Ptolemy’s northern promontory, which juts out into the Atlantic, sharp and narrow. [6]

Agricola marched farther north than any who went before him ; the Caledonian coast looking towards Ireland was lined with his troops ; and he entertained thoughts of conquering Ireland itself, believing that it would contribute to the tranquillity of Britain. For the Britons, he thought, would lose courage and cease to fight, when they saw the last refuge of liberty in the West invaded, and Ireland having been reduced to the position of a Roman province, the last spark of liberty would be extinguished round their coasts. He had parleyed with an Irish chief, who, like MacMurrough (MacMurchadha) at a later age, had been expelled from his own country and sought in his difficulties for aid from foreign arms. From the information supplied by this exiled chief, added to what the Romans already knew, Tacitus was able to say that Ireland was less in size than Britain, but larger than any island in the Mediterranean, that its coasts and harbours were well known to foreign merchants and traders, and that in soil and climate, in the manners and genius of its inhabitants, it differed little from Britain. But his placing it between Britain and Spain shows how inaccurate was his knowledge of its true position and how little the Romans had explored these western islands and seas. [7]

Among ancient writers Festus Avienus alone speaks of the Sacred Isle of the Hibernians, but in what the isle was sacred does not appear. Diodorus Siculus gave it the name of Irin, and a modern historian (Lingard) suggests that the word *irin* may be confounded with *ieran*, signifying sacred in the Greek language. By Strabo, and long after him by Claudian, Ireland was called Ierna, by Ptolemy Iouerna, by Solinus Juverna, and by Orpheus of Cortona Iernia, all of which names are plainly deducible from a common source. The transition from these words to Hibernia is easy and natural, though the form used by St. Patrick, viz. Hiberione, is peculiar and rarely used. It was the opinion of Camden that Ierna, or Hibernia, signifies a western country, and there is undoubtedly an Irish word—Iar—which means west ; others derive the name from Heber, one of the sons of Milesius ; others still affirm that the word is of Phoenician origin and signifies the remotest habitation. With sound sense. Ware has observed [8] that these observations on the etymology of the word are so much guesswork, that to give a true account of the name is difficult, and that, for himself, he would affirm nothing positive, but leave the matter undetermined.

For ages, down to the eleventh century, Ireland bore the name of Scotia, a name which is often derived from a Scythian source, the opinion being that if the Scythians were not the first of its inhabitants, they were at least among the first, and have thus left their impress on its name. But there are others who think the name Scotia comes from Scota, the wife of Gadelius, a lady who is reputed to have been the daughter of Pharaoh, while there are yet others who hold the opinion that the word comes from the Greek word σκοτος, which signifies darkness, possibly, says Harris, because of its dark aspect, being anciently overgrown with woods. Another name which it bore, and which still survives in a slightly altered form, was Irlandia, which is taken to mean the land of Ir, the first of the sons of Milesius, who was buried in the island. It was also called Fidh-Inis, or woody island, and Inis-Elga, from the name borne by the wife of Parthalon. By Plutarch, and after him by O'Flaherty, the island was called Ogygia, a word which signifies very ancient ; and if, says Camden, what the Irish writers relate be credited, Ireland was not without good reason called Ogygia by Plutarch, for the Irish begin their histories from the earliest accounts of time, so that, in comparison, the antiquity of all other countries is in its infancy. [9]

The last name that need be mentioned is Inisfail, a name which, in poetry especially, has survived. This name it got from a fatal stone called Liafail, which was carried to Ireland by the Tuatha-De-Danann. It was called the stone of destiny and upon it kings of the Scythian race were always crowned. Long preserved in Ireland with the greatest care, it was taken to Scotland at a date not known. At Scone, in that country, it long continued, and each Scottish king was crowned upon it, until finally it was carried (1296) to Westminster, where it was made part of the coronation chair, and has been so used since then. The Liafail was the stone of destiny, and the island in which it was first preserved and venerated was the Isle of Destiny, or Inisfail. [10]

The Earliest Inhabitants of Ireland

The story that Ireland was peopled before the Deluge may be set down as a fiction, and the story that it was peopled in the time of Abraham as almost equally improbable. This colony, it is said, came from Migdonia, or Macedonia, in Greece, numbered 1000, and was under the leadership of Parthalon. For three centuries they occupied Ireland, and then the whole colony, numbering 2000, perished of a plague. In the pathetic words of one historian, “ not one was left alive” ; and this is all the chroniclers have to say of Parthalon and his people.

For thirty years the land was uninhabited and then a fresh colony came. Keating says [11] that the new-comers were related to their predecessors, the Migdonians, and spoke the same tongue, that they came by sea, starting from the Euxine in thirty-four vessels, each vessel manned by thirty persons, the whole expedition being under Nemedius, who was eleventh in descent from Noah. They landed at Inverscene, in the west of Munster, about 1900 B.C. While they occupied the country they cut down and cleared several forests, built several forts, and fought several battles. If such a people existed at all, all this may be readily believed, but when we are furthermore gravely assured that in their time several lakes burst forth, it is natural that scepticism should begin to assert itself. There is indeed an old tradition that at some remote period Lough Neagh was thus formed, and this tradition may have some foundation in fact, but as to any other lake in Ireland being at any time so formed, both history and tradition are mute. That several places were cleared of the trees with which they were covered is not unlikely, for Ireland abounded in forests, and if these Nemedians lived by agriculture the land should necessarily be cleared before it was tilled. If they were shepherds the same necessity existed, for they should have a free passage from one district to another so as to have the desired change of pasture for their flocks and herds. And they should also erect forts or strong places. In a primitive society, where law is not respected and force is the rule

of human justice, it becomes necessary that men should combine for mutual protection and defence. The savage, as well as the civilized, have their women and children to guard, and must have a place of strength and safety which they can easily defend against external assault, and from the shelter of which they can issue forth and attack their foes. And certain it is that wars were among them. The passions from which conflicts spring are not peculiar to primitive man, and amongst all nations there have been wars. Yet, if these Nemedians fought among themselves and wasted their strength in internal discord, it suited them ill, for their united energies were required against a formidable foe.

These enemies, who incessantly attacked them, were a people called the Fomorians. It is the opinion of O'Flaherty [12] that they were from Norway and Denmark ; Keating [13] is sure they were from Africa ; both agree that they were pirates whose constant business was war and whose invariable object was plunder. " They lived," says the *Annals of Clonviacnoise*, " by piracy and plunder of other nations, and were very troublesome to the whole world." [13] The testimony of Cambrensis is worth little, but it is that they were giants who were continually making devastations in Ireland. [14] As early as the days of Parthalon they are said to have fought with his people near Lough Swilly, in Donegal. At Roscommon, at Camross, in Carlow, at Dalriada in Antrim, they fought with the Nemedians, who each time were the victors. But when Nemedius was dead and his people without a capable leader, the Fomorians renewed the attack. The battle between the rival armies was so obstinate and bloody that they almost annihilated each other. Victory remained with the Fomorians, and now, says the indignant historian (Keating), these vagabond Africans entirely subdued the old inhabitants and made them tributaries.

The small number of the Nemedians who remained were treated so harshly by their Fomorian masters, that the greater part of them finally left Ireland and went back to Greece. But hard as their lot in Ireland was, in Greece it was worse still. Their Grecian masters compelled them—so runs the tale—to dig clay in the fertile valleys, to fill it in leathern bags—whence their new name of Firbolg—and to carry these bags of clay up the mountains, so that the sides and summits of these mountains might be turned from barrenness to fertility. [15] After 200 years of miserable servitude, they escaped from their hard taskmasters, fitted out a number of vessels, and arrived in Ireland about 1300 B.C. The whole country fell into their hands, but they were not destined to possess it long in peace, for another race, more powerful still, soon came to conquer and to rule.

These were the Tuatha-De-Danann, [16] a branch of the ancient Nemedian colony, who left Ireland about the same time as the Firbolg. They went first to Denmark, thence to the north of Scotland, and finally landed in Ireland, about thirty years after their Firbolg kin. It was at Moytura, in Mayo, that the issue was decided between these rival races. The Firbolg were defeated but not annihilated. Some mingled their blood with the Tuatha-De-Danann, some were left in a position of suffragan authority ; others crossed over the sea to the Isles of Arran, where for long after they ruled. Tradition still points to the old stone fort of Dun-Angus as the work of their hands, a building rudely but strongly built, which after the lapse of so many centuries still stands.

Should any one assert that the accounts of these various invaders—their voyages, their wanderings, and their battles—are nothing more than fables, he might easily be accused of temerity ; but, on the other hand, should any one accept all these stories in full and write them down as history, he might as easily be accused of being over-credulous. In regard to the Fomorians, their very existence is at least doubtful, and may even be denied. The tendency of a people is to advance in knowledge with the advance of time, and if these Northmen (assuming that they were from Denmark) knew enough of navigation and war to fight and

conquer in Ireland as they are said to have done, and this fifteen centuries before the Christian era, they should have been in the ninth century of the Christian era comparatively civilized. Yet at that date we find them, *i.e.* the Danes, the most brutal of savages, living upon piracy and plunder, and having the utmost contempt for the civilized institutions of more southern lands. As to Africa—Egypt especially—it is unquestioned that even in the most ancient times that country had attained a high degree of culture, and no doubt among the sciences she knew navigation was one. But it is very doubtful if her ships sailed outside of the Mediterranean, and there is very slender probability that at any time her sons made the acquaintance of Ireland, either in commerce or in war. And whatever be the birthplace of the Fomorians, if they lived in Ireland as undisputed rulers for over two centuries, they ought to have left some lasting monument of their existence. Yet, except some vague and shadowy traditions, and the perpetuation of their name in connection with the Giant's Causeway, they have left nothing as an inheritance to after-times. And the Nemedians, if regarded in the same light as the Fomorians, will suffer little injustice. Their wanderings and battles are sustained by no probability, and may be classed with the expedition of Jason in search of the Golden Fleece, or the wanderings of Aeneas over land and sea.

The origin of the Firbolg is lost in darkness impervious to the light of history, but we may regard their peculiar labours in Greece and their journey to Ireland as nothing more than the embellishments of fiction. They ought not, however, to be classed with the Fomorians or Nemedians, as their claim to existence rests upon more solid grounds. Much more than the Tuatha-De-Danann, they have always been regarded as a real people, and in parts of Ireland there are still existing monuments which tradition has persistently associated with their name.

Efforts have been made to ascertain what the race was to which these Firbolg belonged, and for this purpose Dr. Wilde had recourse to ethnology. Skeletons long buried in the earth were dug up, and also implements of a very ancient and very primitive kind. With the zeal of an antiquarian and the skill of an anatomist, Wilde examined these ancient remains. Comparing in particular the conformation of the skulls, he concluded that the Firbolg were Teutonic, small, lively, with aquiline noses, dark complexions, and heads of great length from front to back. He also concludes that they used stone and flint hatchets, shell ornaments, stone mills, and clay urns ; that they came from Norway and Sweden ; and that the Tuatha-De-Danann were Celts, who used bronze in their weapons and instruments. [17] His industry and research were considerable, but his data were insufficient, his arguments are inconclusive, he takes too much for granted, and his conclusions are therefore unreliable. In the living subject, apart from peculiarities of dress or language, men of different races may easily be distinguished, and in the dead subject the flat-nosed negro of the African desert will scarcely be confounded with the dweller on the Yang-tse-Kiang. But the difficulty is great when we have nothing but the skeletons of men belonging to kindred types of the human family, and the difficulty is greater still when these skeletons have been buried in the earth for centuries, for in much less time the original peculiarities of these human bones would become so blurred and indistinct as to baffle the best efforts of comparative anatomy.

With at least equal plausibility, it may be conjectured that these Firbolg were Celts. They were frequently spoken of as Belgae, and it is significant that in the time of Caesar a Celtic people bearing the same name were to be found both in Britain and Gaul. In Britain they dwelt on the south and south-eastern coast. In Gaul they dwelt on the shores of the English Channel, between the Seine and Rhine, [18] forming a most effective barrier against the encroachments of the German barbarians. It would not be surprising that this adventurous and daring people, who crossed over to Britain and settled there, should penetrate farther north and pass across to Ireland. This much might be expected from a people whose prowess was

respected and feared throughout Gaul, and whose desperate valour all but overwhelmed the legions of Caesar on the banks of the Axona. [19]

If it is impossible to fix with exactitude the race to which the Firbolg belonged, it is equally so with the Tuatha-De-Danann. Assuming that they were a real people, they may have been Teutonic or Celtic ; it is impossible to say. That they came to Ireland after the Firbolg and before the Christian era, and that they lived and ruled there, and that the sepulchral monuments of Dowth and New Grange [20] are the work of their hands, may perhaps be admitted, but more safely denied. By the Firbolg they were regarded as magicians, but this goes to show not that they were magicians, but that their knowledge was superior to that of the Firbolg themselves. It is the peculiar tribute which ignorance pays to superior knowledge.

All else about them is wrapped in obscurity—the country from which they came, the manner of their coming, the battles they fought, the kings who ruled over them, the chieftains who led them to battle. In later times they are more usually regarded as spirits or fairies, sometimes interfering in human affairs and miniling with men, but living in the recesses of the green hills, where their palaces were built and their fairy revels held. [21]

It is matter for regret that Caesar, when in Britain, did not cross over to Ireland, or that Agricola did not attempt to carry out his boastful threat that he would conquer the whole island with a single legion. [22] We should then have valuable information about the country and its inhabitants from the pen of Caesar or Tacitus, historical truth would have gained, and we should have light to see our way, instead of having to grope in the dark with conjecture as our deceptive guide.

The Milesians

WE may conjecture but cannot determine what were the boundaries of Ancient Scythia, and what was the great branch of the human family from which the Scythians sprang. Perhaps these different tribes, scattered over such an extent of territory, belonged to a common parent stock, or perhaps they were nothing more than a confederation of barbaric tribes, similar in habits and occupations, but bound together more by the bonds of common interests and common dangers than by the memory of a common origin. If they had a common origin, it is purely a matter of speculation whether they belonged to the Mongolian or Aryan family, but it is worth noting that Gibbon [23] speaks of them as Scythians, or Tartars, as if he would trace their descent to a Mongolian source. It is probable that in very ancient times these tribes were scattered over the steppes of Central Asia ; it is certain that, before the time of Herodotus, they were to be found in Europe, where their homes were spread along the Euxine, from the Danube to the Caucasus ; whilst in Asia they had occupied the vast districts, northward from the 40th degree of latitude, and east and west from the Caspian to the Sea of Japan. These Scythians were a pastoral people. By day they attended to their flocks and herds, and when night came, they retired within the shelter of temporary encampments, where men and animals were huddled together promiscuously. Their bravery in battle was often tried and as often proved, and few enemies could withstand the impetuous charge of the Scythian cavalry ; but it must have been the expression of their enemies' fears rather than the sober statement of truth, that they ate, drank, and even slept on the backs of their hardy steeds.

It is amid this people of uncertain origin, and in their country of vaguely defined limits, that the ancient chroniclers of Ireland fix the home of the Milesians. They do not, however, undertake to give the exact geographical limits of Scythia. But when they pass from the geography of the country and come to speak of its inhabitants, their imaginations cease to be inactive. History speaks of these Scythians, even after the dawn of the Christian era, as the

veriest savages, but in the glowing pages of these ancient chroniclers they appear as a highly civilized people, who, in their habits and manners, in the laws which they enacted and administered, in the state of education amongst them, were a model to the nations which surrounded them. They quote with eagerness the boastful language of Justin that these Scythians conquered other nations but were never conquered themselves, and that, indeed, they had heard of but never felt the Roman arms. [24] They assume with Josephus [25] that the Scythians were descended from Magog, the son of Japhet, and from Magog to Milesius they follow the fortunes of these Scythian leaders in laborious detail.

But even the fertile fancy of imaginative writers cannot invest with interest the personality or achievements of most of these leaders ; and those who deserve even a passing notice are but few. Niall, son of Feniursa, is one. His father is said to have known *all languages*, and Niall's attainments were little if at all inferior. He settled in Egypt, married Scota, the daughter of Pharaoh, and obtained a principality by the shores of the Red Sea. Here he tried to assist Moses and the persecuted Israelites. In return for this kindness to God's chosen people, his son Gadelius, when bitten by a serpent, was miraculously cured. But the friendship of Moses involved the enmity of Pharaoh. Niall and his followers were driven from their possessions, and had to seek for new homes in distant lands. Like Aeneas, *per varios casus per tot discrimina rerum*, they wandered over many lands and many seas. From Egypt to Greece, from Greece to Crete, from Crete to Gothland, and finally from Gothland to Spain, where for generations they lived and ruled. In that country one of their chiefs, Milesius, maintained the ancient reputation of his race for military renown. Animated with a spirit of adventure, he fitted up a fleet and sailed over the Mediterranean, visited Scythia, and finally came to Egypt, where he was warmly welcomed by the reigning king. Appointed leader of the Egyptian forces, he reorganized the army, enforced military discipline, humbled the pride of the Ethiopians, taught the enemies of Egypt that Egypt was to be feared, and diffused a feeling of security and repose from the confines of Ethiopia to the Mediterranean. On his return to Spain, he found his countrymen much harassed by their neighbours the Goths. But he soon taught the Goths the same lesson he had taught the Ethiopians—the humiliating lesson of defeat. The Goths, however, continued troublesome, a famine came upon the land, and the Scythians, or Milesians, as they are henceforth to be known, resolved to leave Spain, where their condition had become miserable, and to seek for some new country which they might possess in peace.

An old Druid [26] had long since foretold that the Milesians would one day possess a far-off Western isle. This prophecy they now recalled, and consulting together, they concluded that Ireland was the island mentioned in the old Druid's prophecy, and to Ireland with all their forces they resolved to go. Keating says they landed in Ireland 1300 B.C., McGeoghegan gives the day and the year 17th May 1029, while O'Flaherty puts it about 1000 B.C. The number of their ships was thirty ; in each ship was thirty of the most courageous of their troops, their wives also were on board, and many others followed them, allured by the prospect of obtaining possessions in this new plantation. They first attempted to land at Wexford, but the “ Tuatha-De-Danann, alarmed at the number of their ships, immediately flocked towards the shore, and by the power of their enchantments and diabolical arts, they cast such a cloud over the whole island that the Milesians were confounded, and thought they saw nothing but the resemblance of a hog. The inhabitants by these delusions hindered the Milesians from landing their forces, so that they were obliged to sail about the island, till at last, with great difficulty, they came on shore at Inverscene in the west of Munster.” [27] At Sliieve (Sliabh) Mis, in Kerry, they first encountered the Tuatha-De-Danann, and here Scota, the widow of Milesius, fell. A more decisive battle was fought at Tailteann. On that fatal field the three Danann kings and their wives were killed, and the sceptre finally passed from Danann to Milesian hands. As Milesius was dead before his followers arrived in Ireland, the

sovereignty of the island was divided between his two sons, Heber and Heremon. Two years later, these two sovereigns quarrelled ; a battle was fought at Geashill, in the King's County, Heber was defeated and slain, and Heremon became sole monarch of Ireland, and the first in that long line of kings which ended with Roderick O'Connor.

It may be asked how much of all this is true—how much is fact and how much is fiction ?—nor can a satisfactory reply be given. To ask the question is much easier than to answer it. Those who are engaged in mining speak of refractory ore, and complain of the difficulty they experience in extracting from it the pure gold ; and similarly, in these legends of a long-past age, the difficulty is to extract what truth they contain from the mass of error which surrounds it. It is certainly true that such a people as the Scythians existed, and that mention is made of them in histories of a very ancient date. That they were savages pure and simple in the time of Herodotus, and that, even in the fifth century of the Christian era, they had not advanced beyond the manners portrayed in the court and camp of Attila—all this is equally true. The conclusion is, therefore, obvious and necessary that they could not be numbered among civilized nations two thousand years before the Christian era ; and the most credulous will smile at the suggestion that their culture was equal and coeval with that of Assyria and Egypt. Their wanderings over the Mediterranean, the learning of Niall, and the military exploits of Milesius rest upon no solid foundation ; and the most partial will scarcely claim that the Milesians established themselves in Ireland long before Rome was built or the Commonwealths of Greece arose.

When authentic history first speaks of Ireland, the country was inhabited by a Celtic people, called Scots or Milesians ; Britain and Gaul, at the same time, being inhabited by a kindred race. It is not probable that they were the first inhabitants of the country, but before the introduction of Christianity they had certainly become the dominant race, the former inhabitants having been either absorbed or exterminated, or, perhaps more correctly, having a distinct but subordinate position. Keating, who seems to accept without question the whole story of the Milesian wanderings, has no manner of doubt that they came from Spain to Ireland, and grows angry with Camden for suggesting that they came from Britain ; he chooses to be directed by the “ ancient records of the kingdom rather than by the ill-grounded supposition of any modern whatsoever.” [28] Yet Camden's supposition, supported by O'Flaherty, does not appear unreasonable. It could scarcely be expected that these Milesians knew much of navigation, or that their rude vessels could stand the full shock of the Atlantic, or the treacherous currents of the Bay of Biscay. [29] It is easier and more natural to believe that they came from Gaul to Britain, and from Britain to Ireland, than to suppose that they came direct by sea from Spain. Buchanan [30] is anxious to show that they came direct from Gaul to Ireland, but his arguments are inconclusive and carry no conviction. But whether they came directly from Spain, or whether they passed over from Gaul to Britain and thence to Ireland, cannot with certainty be ascertained. These are questions which will always remain doubtful, and in striving to arrive at the truth it must be admitted that we derive but little assistance either from the arguments of Buchanan or the credulity of Keating.

For obvious reasons, the long list of Milesian kings coming down in unbroken succession from the tenth century before the Christian era must be taken as legendary, and deserves none of that consideration which is due to historic truth. To be able to claim that a settled form of government existed in Ireland long before such a government was established at Greece or Rome would be indeed flattering to the national vanity. But such a claim has not the least amount of probability on its behalf, and one of the oldest and—accepting O'Donovan's estimate of him [31]—the most accurate of our chroniclers, Tighernach, has the good sense to point out that events recorded previous to the time of Cimbaeth, 300 B.C., are altogether legendary. Nor indeed does posterity lose much by consigning to oblivion the vast majority

of these Irish kings, for even fiction itself can say nothing of them except that they were born and that they died. There are, however, a few who may be excepted, and of these Ollamh Fodhla is first in order of time.

In the first list of kings given by O'Flaherty, [32] Ollamh is put down as fortieth, but the author does not give the year of his accession nor the length of his reign. The name he bore—Ollamh, which signifies professor—testifies that he was a learned man, and he did everything that even a king could do to encourage learning. Anxious to have good laws passed, and to have besides the records of the kingdom accurate and trustworthy, he assembled, every third year at his palace at Tara, an assembly of the princes, druids, bards, and other learned men of the kingdom; public affairs were then discussed, new laws enacted, old laws, if useless or injurious, repealed. The records of the kingdom were carefully examined and criticized, whatever was deemed inaccurate was expunged, due corrections were made, and, thus corrected, these records were handed down to posterity as authentic history. The book in which the facts of history were thus carefully transmitted was called the Psalter of Tara, and the assembly itself was called the Feis.

In the joint reign of Cimbaeth and his wife, Macha, the palace of Emania, near Armagh, was built. [33] The next sovereign—the 78th king—was called Ugaine, the first of these ancient monarchs whom the chroniclers call Great. [34] Not content with the sovereignty of Ireland, he went over the sea to France, where his arms were ever victorious, until at length he ruled over all Western Europe. He married a French princess and left twenty-five children, among whom he divided Ireland into as many parts. This division was abolished by a subsequent king, Eochaidh, who divided Ireland into five divisions—Ulster, Leinster, Connaught, and two Munsters. Over each province there ruled a pentarch or provincial king. [35]

Tuathal, who lived in the second century of the Christian era, was the first king, it is said, who imposed the Boru tribute on the kings of Leinster. He was a warlike king, and had much fighting with the various tributary princes, all of whom he vanquished. To punish them he took from each a portion of his territory, which he erected into a vast royal demesne corresponding to the present counties of Mcath and Westmeath. But against the King of Leinster he was specially enraged. It appears that this prince had married a daughter of Tuathal's, and after some time, pretending that his wife was dead, he demanded and received her sister in marriage. The sisters were kept apart at the palace of the King of Leinster, but on an occasion they met and were so heart-broken at the wrong done to them that they both sickened and died. [36] In revenge for this outrage Tuathal decreed that henceforth Leinster should pay the Ardri a yearly tribute of 150 cows, 150 hogs, 150 pieces of cloth, 150 cauldrons, 150 couples of men and women in servitude, and 150 maidens, with the King of Leinster's daughter among them. [37] Whether this tribute was imposed by Tuathal or not, it is certain that such a tribute was imposed by some Ardri, and that it led to most disastrous results. Successive Ardris enforced payment, the Leinster kings, whenever strong enough, repudiated the imposition, ill-will was thus engendered, disputes arose, wars and bloodshed followed, and these rival princes in fighting among themselves prepared the way for the yoke of the stranger.

The exploits of Conn of the Hundred Battles have furnished much matter to poets and bards, but when we come to the reign of Cormac Mac Art, we arrive at a period where the facts recorded may be considered facts and not mere fiction, though these facts are often embellished and exaggerated, and not always easy to recognize. Cormac, who reigned in the third century, is described as the best king that Ireland ever had up to his time. He held regular meetings of the Feis at Tara, enacted many wise laws, carefully corrected the Psalter

of Tara, and even wrote a book called *Princely Institutions*. [38] It is said that he became a Christian, and thereby much embittered the Druids. [39] But his fame is altogether eclipsed by that of his son-in-law, Finn, son of Cumhal, the leader of the Fenian Militia, or standing army of Ireland. The exploits of Finn and his Fenians have been illustrated by the genius of Ossian, the son of Finn, who was a poet as well as a warrior. There are probably many things ascribed to Ossian which he never wrote, and perhaps also in the translations of his poetry that have come down to us there are many interpolations and errors ; but that Ossian lived and wrote, and that he is the great central figure in the literature of ancient Erin, need not be regarded as a matter of doubt. The impudent claim of MacPherson to make him a Scotchman, [40] and to transfer the exploits of Finn and his Fenians to Caledonia, has long since been rejected. It could not survive the discovery of the forgeries which gave it birth.

Nobody would receive as historic facts the tale of Finn and his Fenians as described by Ossian and his contemporaries. Even Keating rejects many of them as fabulous, and grows angry with Boetius for suggesting that Finn himself was a giant and was fifteen cubits high. [41] Yet, strip these tales of obvious exaggeration and mere poetic adornment, leave out the gods and goddesses, the giants and the fairies, and there is no reason why they should not have a basis of historic truth. Cormac is reputed to have been a monarch of great prudence. He saw that Britain was already in Roman bondage, and he had only too much reason to fear that the Romans would cross the Irish Sea, and that the fate of Britain would soon be the fate of Ireland. In such circumstances prudence would suggest having a trained and disciplined force to guard the coasts against pirates and robbers, to watch for the coming of the invaders, to combat them in the field when they came ; and to none could the command of this force be given with more justice than to his son-in-law, Finn, who, in fighting the Romans, would be defending his family inheritance as well as the liberty of his native land. And if the Romans had come it is not unlikely that their task would be much more difficult than Agricola expected ; they would probably have encountered fierce opposition and met with valour equal to that of Caractacus. [42] These Fenians were not called upon to repel foreign invasion. They became restive, insolent, and rebellious, until finally, after a hard-fought struggle, they were overthrown at the battle of Gavra. [43]

In the last years of the fourth century Ireland was ruled by Niall of the Nine Hostages. Undisputed master at home, he made incursions into Caledonia and Britain, and even into Gaul. The Roman Empire was then tottering to its fall, Britain had none to rely on but native defenders, and Niall, aided by the Picts [44] of Caledonia, broke through the frail defence of the Roman wall and made Britain his tributary province. Nor did he relinquish his conquest till the Roman legions were recalled to Britain, and then the discipline and experience of the Roman soldier and the military genius of the ablest of the Roman generals prevailed. Perhaps even Stilicho himself would have suffered defeat, but that, in the crisis of the battle, the Attacotti, who fought in the army of Niall, deserted to the Romans and turned their weapons against the Irish king. These Attacotti were descendants of the ancient Firbolg, who were subjugated by the Milesians and who submitted with impatience to Milesian rule. Taken into the army of the Ardri and trusted as loyal soldiers, they acted as traitors in the hour of trial.

Whoever will read the history of these islands during the first centuries of the Christian era will note that Ireland was the country of the Scots ; that colonies of these Scots passed from Ireland to Caledonia, where they settled ; that these Caledonian Scots, with their kinsmen from Ireland, and the Picts frequently harassed the Roman province of Britain ; that it was Ireland alone which was called Scotia ; and that if sometimes Caledonia was called Scotia, it was always called Scotia Minor, to distinguish it from Ireland, which was Scotia simply, or Scotia Major. Gibbon is not willing to admit all this, and is ready to assert that

probably Ireland was peopled from Caledonia “ by a colony of hungry Scots.” [45] But the evidence of facts is against him. Claudian, in describing the wars which Stilicho waged against the Picts and Scots, always speaks of the Picts as belonging to Caledonia, and the Scots as belonging to Ireland. In the vivid language of poetry he represents Britain as giving thanks to Stilicho for having defended her, when the Scot stirred up all Ireland, [46] and when the sea foamed beneath his hostile oars ; and writing of the wars of Theodosius, he says, that while Thule grew warm with the blood of the Picts, icy Ireland wept for the numbers of her Scots that were slain. [47] Bede, as well as Camden and Buchanan, state, not as a matter of dispute but of certainty, that Caledonia was peopled by Scots from Ireland ; and Hume, Scotchman though he is, and naturally jealous for the antiquity of his race, has written that from the second to the eleventh century the Scots were the inhabitants of Ireland, and Ireland alone bore the name of Scotia. Before this accumulated mass of testimony even the stubborn scepticism of Gibbon must give way. In a later portion of his great work he admits, grudgingly and ungraciously, it is true, that after all some slight credit may be given to the Irish traditions, and possibly in one of Niall’s excursions into Britain St. Patrick was taken away into captivity.

[1] Herodotus, book iii. chap. 115.

[2] Lingard’s *History of England* (10 vols.), vol. i. p. 17.

[3] Pliny, book iv. chap. 30.

[4] Strabo, *Geography*, book iv. chap. 5.

[5] Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, book v.

[6] Vide *Ancient Classical Atlases*.

[7] Tacitus, *Agricola*, chap. xxiv. Perhaps his thus placing Ireland accounts for the following words—“ melius aditus portusque per commercia et negotiatores cogniti.”

[8] Harris’s *Ware*, vol. ii. p. 3.

[9] Harris’s *Ware*, vol. ii. p. 9.

[10] *Ibid*, vol ii p. 10.

[11] *History of Ireland* (O’Connor’s Trans.), p. 73.

[11] *Ogygia*, part iii. chap.

[12] *History*, p. 77.

[13] P. 15

[14] *Topography*, Distinction iii. chap. 3.

[15] Keating, p. 82.

[16] *Ogygia*, part iii. chap. 10 ; *Annals of the Four Masters*.

[17] Davis’s *Essays*, p. 84. Dr. Wilde, afterwards Sir W. Wilde, wrote “ Lough Corrib” and “ The Beauties of the Boyne and Blackwater.”

[18] Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, lib. i. cap. i.

[19] *Ibid*. lib. ii cap. 5 to 9. The ambassadors of the Remi declared to Caesar (*De Bello Gallico*, lib. ii. cap. 4) that the Belgae had sprung from the Germans, but they had then been absorbed by the Celts. Perhaps they might best be described as Celts, but not Gauls.

[20] These monuments are on the Boyne in Meath, are manifestly sepulchral, and have interior chambers such as the Egyptian Pyramids.

[21] Vide D’Arbois de Jubainville’s *Irish Mythological Cycle*.

[22] Tacitus, *Agricola*, cap. 24. “ Saepe ex eo audivi,” says Tacitus, “ legione una et modicis auxiliis debellari obtinerique Hiberniam posse.” Apparently Agricola had a poor opinion of what resistance the Irish could offer, or a very extravagant opinion of what a Roman legion could do.

[23] Gibbons *Roman Empire*, (4 vols.), vol. ii. pp. 140, 164-8 ; Keating, p. 96.

[24] Keating (O’Connor’s Translation), p. 97. He seems to have had access to many MSS. and Annals not known now, and he seems to have accepted everything contained in them as true.

- [25] Whiston's *Josephus*, p. 36.
- [26] Keating, p. 114.
- [27] Keating, p. 134.
- [28] Keating, p. 131.
- [29] Unless we suppose they were Phoenicians, and even Keating does not suppose this.
- [30] Quoted by Keating and refuted by him, pp. 126-8.
- [31] *Four Masters*, vol. i. p. 72.
- [32] *Ogygia*, part iii. chap. 29.
- [33] *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, p. 41.
- [34] O'Flaherty's *Ogygia*, part iii. chap. 38.
- [35] *Ibid*, part iii. chap. 43.
- [36] Keating, p. 237.
- [37] *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, p. 54 ; *Four Masters*, vol. i. p. 100, note.
- [38] *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, vol. v. p. 198.
- [39] Lady Ferguson, *The Irish before the Conquest*, p. 120.
- [40] *Ossianic Society*, vol. v. p. 179. Dr. Johnson's opinion of MacPherson is well known.
- [41] Pp. 281-4.
- [42] *Student's Hume*, p. 9.
- [43] The Ardri, Cairbre, was slain in the battle, and very many of his troops, but the Fenians were almost totally destroyed (Miss Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, p. 147).
- [44] The Picts, according to Bede (*Ecclesiastical History*, Bohn's ed. pp. 6, 7), came from Scythia to Ireland, but the Scots who dwelt there would give them no settlements, and directed them to proceed to Caledonia, which they did. They then asked *wives* of the Scots, as they had none themselves. The Scots acceded to their request, but only on condition that they should choose a king from the female royal race rather than from the male, "a custom which has been observed among the Picts to this day."
- [45] Vol. ii. p. 141.
- [46] Me quoque vicinis pereuntem gentibus, inquit,
Munivit Stilicho, totam cum Scotus Iernam
Movit et infesto spumavit remige Tethys.
De Laudibus Stiliconis, lib. ii.
- [47] Incaluit Pictorium sanguine Thule,
Scotorum cumulos flevit gijacialis lerne.
Honorii Augusti de 4° Consulatu.

Theodosius did not march as far as Thule, nor did he go even near it ; but some allowance must be made for poetic imagination.

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