

## Early Ireland Story Elements

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

Seán Ua Ceallaigh

1921

KEATING, the Anglo-Irish historian, in his day, like the more earnest writers of our own, felt called upon to refute with mingled vehemence and scorn the studied disparagement of Ireland presented by English writers who had preceded him for a period of four hundred years. He singled out for special censure and discredit Cambrensis, Camden, Spenser, Hanmer, Berckley, Moryson, Campion, Davies “ and every other new alien who has written on Ireland, inasmuch as it is almost after the manner of the beetle every one of them acts when treating of the Irish,” that is, “ they alight not on any delicate flower that may be in the field or any blossom in the garden, but bustle until they meet with ordure and proceed to roll themselves therein.” He continues, in a tone of unaffected resentment : “ There is not a historian of all those who have written on Ireland from that epoch to this, but has persistently sought to cast reproach and blame on the naturalised foreign settlers as on the native race.” They write not of their valour, their virtues or their piety, he goes on to complain, their literary assemblies unique in Europe, the privileges they granted the learned, the numberless abbeys they founded, the worship they liberally endowed, the reverence they evinced for churchmen and prelates, the maintenance they provided for orphans and the poor, the hospitality they extended to guests, “ so that no people in Europe surpassed them in generosity.” No, relatively little is recorded of them that is not derogatory.

Still resenting the strange perversion of human taste that seeks out and lingers over scattered cesspools while choosing to remain blind to all that adorned “ an island abounding in milk and honey”—as testified by Bede—the historian-priest, with the force and authority of a scholar of travel, indirectly vindicates by a telling contrast even the least worthy among our race. “ There is no country without its lower order,” he writes. “ Consider the rough folk of Scotland, the rabble-rout of Great Britain, the plebeians of Flanders, the insignificant fellows of France, the poor wretches of Spain, the ignoble caste of Italy, the unfree tribes of every country—and a multitude of ill-conditioned evil ways will be found in them.” Nor is he quite content with this retort. “ Fynes Moryson has omitted to record anything good of the Irish,” he adds, and “ the dignity of history cannot be allowed to his composition.” Others are similarly disposed of, including some of the early Continental writers. Stanihurst he likens, for his ignorance of Irish, to a blind man trying to discriminate between two colours— “ incapable of reading either the laws of the land or its mediaeval lore, and therefore incompetent to express an opinion.” He had, in fact, three defects : he was, in addition to being ignorant of the language, “ too young and too ambitious to be a competent historian.” So he would pursue them no further. “ They have no authority for thus writing in disparagement of Ireland, and are but repeating the tales of false witnesses hostile to the country.” In his own personal ardour for the truth he quotes the rules of Polydorus for the writing of history : in the first place the author should not dare to assert anything false, in the second he should not dare to omit setting down every truth. But, with all respect to the great historian and the authority he quotes, our native canons in this regard might have sufficed for the national guidance : they most manifestly make provision for the truth, the ample truth, and nothing deviating from the truth ; and to this no one has borne more ardent testimony than has Keating himself.

“ In Pagan times in Ireland,” he says, “ no professor of seanchus could rank as an ollamh or author in seanchus, who had been known once to falsify historical truth.” The *Foras Feasa*

gives a list of twenty such authors, before the time of Patrick, and one authoress Bridhe of the precepts. Similarly no one who had given a partial judgment could hold the kindred rank of breitheamh or judge. Connla, for example, never delivered an unjust judgment, for “ he was a virtuous, truly upright man according to the light of nature.” Seancha “ never gave judgment without having fasted the previous night.” Sean, Fachtna and Morann are among the others whose exemplary judgments are referred to. Living in pre-Christian times, they were subject to *geasa* to ensure where necessary their judicial probity. Later, the offending judge was mulcted for his offence, not, as now, remunerated beyond the intrinsic value of his services to render him impervious to bribery.

After the coming of Patrick it was agreed to have the seanchus approved and purified by three kings, three bishops and three ollamhs. When revised in this way, the nobles decreed that it be entrusted to the prelates, the prelates in turn ordering that it be copied in their own chief churches. In the old books thus compiled, [1] or copies made from them, the seanchus was preserved “ without doing injustice to any one Irish noble as against another.” A summary of the records in the various volumes, being approved every third year at the Tara Feis, was kept in the Psalter of Tara. “ The ard-ollamhs inscribed all that were approved of the laws and customs and all that were confirmed of the annals and records in the Roll of the Kings called the Psalter of Tara.” [2] And “ no custom or record that did not agree with that book was regarded as genuine.” Hence, in the words of the *Foras Feasa* again, “ the Irish records are reliable as the records of any other country, considering that they are borne witness to by the writings of old Pagan authors, and by their having been approved by the clerics and prelates of the Irish church.” It is put in another way in the Tripartite Life of the National Apostle : Until Patrick came, the right to speak in public was given but to three—a historian with a good memory, a poet, a judge. Since Patrick came, these are under subjection to the men of the Lasting Language, to wit, of the Holy Canon.

These assurances notwithstanding, there seems a disposition among modern writers to attribute to our early chroniclers and annalists a tendency to tamper with historical truth in the interest of their royal patrons. The compilation of “ the Book of Rights” has been suggested as a case in point. To us it would seem as reasonable to contend that the Life of St. Patrick, whose activities were confined in the main within the sphere of influence of Laoghaire and his relatives, was written with a view to the aggrandisement of Laoghaire’s line as that the Book of Rights aimed at unfairly enhancing the dynastic claims of Brian Boirmhe. Casting about for motives is as reprehensible in the one case as in the other and would be as justifiable.

There is the further tendency to attribute a mythical origin to early Irish leaders, because somewhat similar characters are met with in classical mythology. As logical would it be to question the existence of the saintly founder of Cluain mic Nois because he is referred to as the Son of the Carpenter and, like Alexander the Great, died at the significant age of thirty-three, or to doubt the main facts of the Battle of Clontarf because the *bean sidhe* Aoibhill na Carrage Leithe is recorded as having appeared there to Brian and, by fore-shadowing his imminent death, inspired his historic will and testament.

The fact is, our historical literature is marked from the earliest times by a manifest regard for truth and, while recording the virtues of the race in generous measure, does not lack details of traits which, were an ideal world feasible, we would fain have eliminated from our Annals. Students with the mind will find examples of such undesirable traits in the early lapse of the wife of Partolan, the wayward characters of Macha Mongruadh and Meadhbh, the antecedents of Lugaidh Riabh nDearg who ruled at the dawn of the Christian era ; in the later lapse of Lupeta sister of Patrick, the chequered stories of the two Gormflaiths, the licentiousness of Maghnus Mac Donnsluibhe Ui Eochadha on the eve of the Normans’ coming. Interspersed are records of discords, bloody battles, confiscations, cattle preys,

violation of sanctuary, profanation of churches, as well as phenomena of peculiar range, embracing the appearance of comets and uncommon signs in the heavens, frequent snowfalls and strange showers sometimes, it would seem, recorded symbolically, novel piscatorial gifts from the trackless sea, varying yields of fruit, now scant, now abundant, plagues affecting man and beast. [3]

The elements that give its tone to the crowded story, however, are the innate modesty, intellectual energy, artistic eminence, evangelistic ardour, instinctive truthfulness, self-respect, idealism and practical patriotism of the people throughout the ages. Fial daughter of Mileadh died of shame because she and her husband Lugaidh unexpectedly met on emerging together from their respective bathing places—he from Loch Luighdeach, she from the river flowing out of it. Emer when wooed by Cuchulainn was remarkable for her chastity and sweet speech, and Cuchulainn's own modesty is attested by the story of the approaching women who, by awakening his sense of shame at Eamhain Macha, the day on which he took arms, diverted his gaze towards his chariot, and thus helped to assuage his fury.

“ Noblest face is his, I see ;  
He respects all womankind — ”

even when in the grip of a very whirlpool of burning rage. And why should we expect otherwise from the idol of the Red Branch Knights, first Order of Chivalry in Europe, heroes of an ancient epic which is acknowledged to be one of the most precious monuments of the world's literature. Their worthy successors, the Fiana Fail or national militia, were bound never to accept a dowry with a wife, never to deceive a woman. The grand motto of these early heroes of our race was strength in our hands, virtue in our hearts, truth ever on our lips. Nor does the evidence of their valour and their virtue rest solely on a motto which has survived for nigh two thousand years. “ The sea between Ireland and Britain being so billowy and restless during the whole year, it is navigable only a very few days,” wrote Solinus early in the third century in obvious palliation of the failure of the conquering Romans to invade our shores. “ They had heard of the power of the Romans, but they never had felt it.” The Britons, on the other hand, wrote Constantius Chlorus at the close of the third century, “ readily yielded to the arms and standards of the Romans.” Nor is this all. “ Ireland,” wrote Zimmer in our own day, “ was the only land in western Europe that escaped the Germanic invasions.” While affording asylum to Gaulish refugees from Gothic aggression, and sending its own sons and daughters with spiritual balm to ravaged Europe, Ireland regarded Germanic ambitions and Roman designs with supreme indifference, and eventually routed the Norse invader from her sacred shores. And it is a fitting testimony to the abiding chivalry of her warrior race that in the days of our latest native ruler, as in the days of our greatest, a lone lady might make the circuit of Erin with the certainty of being received everywhere with characteristic homage and hospitality.

As the six greatest women of ancient times after the Mother of God were held to be almost entirely Irish, so “ the four principal languages,” in the words of the *Seanchus Mor*, “ were Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Irish.” The people had a wholesome conceit of native institutions, and in every activity of the national life demanded a high standard of merit. If a bishop conferred orders on one not competent, for instance, he was compelled to give seven cumhals in gold for the honour of the Creator. Similarly the offending physician, like the unworthy judge, was subject to penalties commensurate with his offence. Virtue and integrity were universally enjoined : industry and excellence eventuated. The evidence is for all the world to see in our illuminated manuscripts, exquisite literature, peerless sculpture, enchanting metal-work, all executed with a devotion so constant and so passionate as to seem beyond the conception of the average mind. Thus have fructified the ambition and skill of our early artists, thus have come the just fame of our early teachers, the impartiality of our numberless historians, the proverbial respect for our comprehensive code of laws. Notwithstanding pillage and destruct-

ion by Dane and Norman it is admitted that no museum in the world save that of Athens is richer than ours in artistic memorials of a great past, the chief of them stamped in imperishable letters of bewildering ingenuity with the names of the devoted artists who have left us such priceless treasures. When an itinerant unbeliever enters the strong room of our National Museum and, confronted with the Ardagh Chalice and the Tara Brooch, suggests “these surely cannot be the work of Irishmen,” he is simply referred to the elegant epigraphs which in appropriate but unobtrusive settings establish their Irish craftsmanship. When his brother moves among the more venerable of the libraries of Europe, the illuminated manuscripts and the ancient glosses left there by our missionaries confirm for him the lesson of early Ireland’s eminence in the domain of art and intellect. Through these scattered manuscripts we can visualise the industry of generations of Irish pilgrims, the artistry of numberless Irish scribes who “carried their brains on the points of their pens” and dowered us with memorials like the Book of Kells, “one of the most interesting and beautiful manuscripts which has ever come from the hand of man.”

While leading authorities admit that “this ancient Irish volume” occupies “a position of abiding permanence amongst the illuminated manuscripts of the world,” unwitting vandals periodically recommend, on the groundless plea of utility so alien to the immemorial instincts of our race, that we abandon the ornate letters used by all our scribes from Colm Cille to Michael O’Clery and from Michael O’Clery to “Aonghus Draoi,” and thus substitute assured orthographical chaos for our peerless phonetic system. These unthinking reformers urge in the guise of a gratuitous plea for Europeanism that we discard, for the literary symbols of our oppressors, the most elegant and legible caligraphy ever known to the world, the characters which constitute the great distinguishing mark of our national language, which have regulated its swelling harmony for fifteen hundred years, and are alone capable of accurately and adequately conveying the elusive sounds and the deep melody of our uncontaminated speech. Not only would these reformers treat with disdain the unique orthography evolved, through long centuries of unremitting attention and observation, by the great masters of our literature, they would anglicise our native accents by clothing them in alien letters which, to the Irish eye and ear, will always bear their English phonetic values. But no more now than in the days of Sean the Proud will the Gael corrupt his ancient speech by divorcing it from the characters which have moulded and preserved it. In them are enshrined and mirrored the mental and manual strivings of fifty generations of our artists and sages. They are the key to the unreckoned volumes of our native literature lying unpublished in the older libraries of the world. Failing the general use of them by the masses our literary heritage would soon become the vanishing perquisite of the book-worm and our ancient art lose half its meaning for the multitude entitled to a common share in its inheritance. For be it not forgotten that in the patterns of the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow are found the models for the ornamentation of the Tara Brooch, while the designs of the Tara Brooch and the High Cross at Ahenny, Kilkispeen, Co. Tipperary, are held by no mean judges to have a common origin. Further, the famous Maghera doorway has been likened to a page of illuminated manuscript, all tending to justify the conclusion that the matchless pages of Ireland’s sacred writings were “the precursors of her decorated churches,” and that the designs thus sketched by the pencil were also carved by the chisel on our stone monuments. Thus are our exquisite sculpture, unique metal work and illuminated manuscripts shown to be interdependent, flesh of each other’s flesh and bone of each other’s bone, though reformers who would have themselves regarded as mere utilitarians refuse to see it—even seek to consign our unique caligraphy to some Chamber of Sighs in the Museum while all the peoples of Christendom zealously lead less respectable evidences of their own past forward to positions of respect and influence and light. But Ireland will not heed such “reformers.” Ireland will not turn its back on the creators and custodians and carriers of her literature, will not prove unappreciative of their untiring labours in face of the difficulties, the privations and the native jealousies that ever beset them in every land :

“ We even hear of bitter enmities between the rival scholars of different nationalities in the court of Charlemagne,” writes Zimmer, “ and we read complaints of the Irish monk Dubwin in the eleventh century, who accuses the Frankish monks of looking down upon his fellow-labourers.” “ Another at Soissons, benumbed with cold,” writes Gougaud, “ envies a monk in the same town, viz., Carloman, son of Charles the Bald, the good fire at which he warms himself.” And, “ ’twere pleasant for us to-day, O Maelbhrighde,” wrote an Irish pilgrim at Mayence in 1072, in the Chronicle of Marianus Scotus, “ if the farm workers of the monastery of St. Martin had not made a trap for me on the platform of the common house.” Centuries earlier the jealousy of Wilfrid and Egbert had manifested itself in England and Scotland, that of their countryman Boniface in Germany. But the characteristic earnestness of the Irish monks remained unaffected. A story in point is found in *Silva Gadelica* : “ Three penitents resolved to quit the world for the aesthetic life, and so sought the wilderness. After exactly a year’s silence one of them whispered, ‘ It is a good life we lead.’ At the next year’s end the second answered, ‘ It is so.’ Another year having expired, the third exclaimed, ‘ If I cannot have peace and quiet here I must go back to the world.’ ”

Out of this spirit of constancy sprang the efficiency of our schools until the seat of learning attached to our Primatial See came to be regarded as the metropolis of Christendom and our sea-girt land as the acknowledged Island of Saints and Scholars. Tradition said her sacred soil was borne to the East to be there spread as a trusted remedy against snakes and reptiles ; the Venerable Bede records that the hallowed leaves of her earliest manuscripts were used as a remedy against disease, while Giraldus Cambrensis, who came with the incredulous Normans, regarded her writings as the work of angelic hands. The potency of her soil as of her writings was appreciated oversea. Waves of her evangelists literally swept and irrigated less favoured lands. Crowning all, the obligation of allegiance to the motherland was ne’er lost sight of, save by traitors :

“ What Maolruain of Tamhlacht heard from learned men concerning the desertion of the land was that Patrick and the faithful . . . will be repulsive in Heaven to any man who deserts his land except so far as to remove from the east of it to the west, and from the north to the south.” They loved their country and everything worthy of it ; cherished culture, harmony, justice, truth, the physical and moral well-being of the race. “ Three periods at which the world is worthless,” says the *Seanchus Mor*, are “ the time of a plague, the time of a general war, the time of a dissolution of express contracts.” Further, “ he who fails to fulfil his contract is more odious than plague or war.” And so, after four centuries and more of the turmoil provoked by the Anglo-Normans since their advent, native Irish respect for the law remained so marked that Sir John Davies, solicitor-general to James I, declared in his Discovery : “ There is no nation of people under the sun that doth love equal and indifferent justice better than the Irish . . . the truth is that in the time of peace the Irish are more fearful to offend the law than the English or any other nation whatsoever.”

The high ideals of scribe and smith and sculptor, the sincerity of saint and seer and scholar, even the charm of the very soil being thus palpably established, the spirit of the sean-chaidhe and his devotion to the truth must not alone remain open to question. We must not, in our day, follow the example of the ingrates who dubbed Herodotus “ the father of liars.” Rather let us credit our annalists and historians with the love of truth characteristic of the race they have adorned and done much to immortalise, let us award them without grudge the meed of gratitude their monumental labours have earned them. If we find their ancient dates and their geography somewhat at variance with the theories of modern experts on such matters, let us at least admit that, like ourselves, they interpreted to the best of their ability the material to which they gained access by infinite effort, and duly appreciate the mine of information they have bequeathed us for the elucidation of the long story of our country’s colonisation and development. Their conceptions may have been far-fetched in some instances ; but their intentions, manifestly for the best, were always meritorious, and the

obstacles between them and the historian's eternal objective so colossal that impartial students can but marvel at the relative success which attended their laborious quest for the prime sources of our Gaelic stock and the true courses of their devious wanderings.

The investigations of modern scholarship, like those of the ancient school, lead to two theories regarding the movements of our remote ancestors : one of a movement from West to East, the other of a movement from East to West. The age-long tradition of the eastern origin of the Gael constitutes in brief outline the burthen of the opening chapter of this volume and is a subject of growing criticism. The other theory is of an Aryan movement from West to East. Though found in germ in the first, it is given a visionary origin in the submerged Atlantis, [4] described in his Dialogue by Plato the Greek philosopher who flourished about 400 B.C. Atlantis, lying off Gibraltar, [5] is said to have disappeared in "one day and one fatal night" through a devastating convulsion of nature, a few of its highest mountains alone surviving. Plato is held to imply that this fatherland of nations exercised an imperial sway on both sides of the Mediterranean seaboard ; [6] and recent studies suggest that Atlantis, while colonising Europe from its westernmost shores even to the very banks of the Indus, peopled America, north and south, gave its religion of sun-worship alike to Persia and Peru, its knowledge of letters to the Mayans of Central America as to the Phoenicians of the Mediterranean." [7] "The gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Hindus, and the Scandinavians are simply as the kings and queens and heroes of Atlantis." Pursuing this line of argument, it is held that the first landing at Dun na mBarc on the south-west coast of Ireland by Ceasair and her company to escape the Flood represented a survival from Atlantis ; [8] that Muir Caisp, so much mentioned in the story of the earlier occupations of Ireland, is not the Caspian in the East but the Casperian Sea named from the island of Casperia off the Portuguese coast ; that Scithia was a settlement of Scots in Alpine Gaul, and marked a stage in the movement eastward, not the territory four hundred miles square, bounded on the west by the Ister or Danube and on the south by the Euxine as described by Herodotus and Pomponius Mela, still less as extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The landings of the Fomoraigh, as well as the wanderings from Spain to Egypt of ancestors of Mileadh and their association with linguistic development, give further colour to this view. A concurrent and corroborative though independent theory is that "whereas the earlier philologists took it for granted that the original population before its division into linguistic groups was located in Western Asia, the later philologists are strongly inclined to place its home in Europe in the region to the south-east of the Baltic Sea." [9]

What is beyond controversy is that the Celts are found established in the heart of Europe at an early period and expanding almost simultaneously East, South and West. It is to be inferred from Livy, the Latin historian of Rome, who flourished at the dawn of the Christian era, that as early as the seventh century B.C. Celtic domination extended from the Rhine to the Loire ; while other Latin and Greek writers generally admit its spread over Central Europe between 650 B.C. and 250 B.C. The Celt occupied the upper valleys of the Danube, Rhine, Rhone, Elbe ; and these waterways were the main avenues for transcontinental commerce in metal, amber, salt and other products of the time. While the Elder Tarquin reigned in Rome, from 619 B.C. to 579 B.C., Livy tells us further, the supremacy among the Celts belonged to the Bituriges of south-eastern France. To the Celtic land they gave King Ambigatus, a man remarkable alike for war-like prowess and private resources. Under his rule Gaul so abounded in people and agricultural wealth that the government of so vast a population seemed almost impossible. The valley of the Po in northern Italy was also held by them. About 390 B.C. the Senones, a powerful section of these Gauls, in reprisal for a breach of faith, marched down through Etruria and defeated the Roman army some nine miles from Rome, which they laid in ashes.

A century or so later the same enterprising Celts appear in Macedonia, overrun the Balkan Peninsula as far as Delphi, even attempt to plunder the temple of the famous oracle. They

assailed the frontiers of Alexander's Empire, as chiefs of the Fian are said to have done in a later age, and swept "the region whence our early records bring the Fir Bolg." Their leader, Bolgios, as recorded by the Greek historian Pausanias who flourished in the middle of the second century, A.D. invaded Macedonia, 282 A.D., defeated, and slew in battle the Macedonian king. From Macedonia they proceeded further east and settled in Galatia, a little below the southern shores of the Euxine. Two centuries later we hear for the first time of the Belgic Gauls and their country Belgium, indicating a simultaneous westerly expansion. Caesar regarded these Belgae as a Germano-Celtic people, as did Tacitus; and St. Jerome in his day found the Volcae in Galatia and in Treves speaking "languages that differed but as dialects of the same speech." Ptolemy found the same stock represented in Ireland: he names three colonies that succeeded each other along the Leinster coast from south to north as Brigantes, Couci and Menapii. The Couci, believed to be of noble German extraction, are held to have come from the vicinity of the Elbe; the Menapii, from Belgic Gaul, whence may be said to have come also the Flemings who, on a later and more fateful occasion, responded to the traitorous appeal of Diarmuid MacMurchadha. It is worthy of note that the Brigantes were of the same stock as the Meldi, who, as will be seen later, are found as far north as Meaux.

The general expansion to the south-west is regarded as not incompatible, except in the matter of dates, with the movements that led to the successive occupations of Ireland as set out in the *Leabhar Gabhala*. Recent investigation identifies Sicil Greag of Ard Bhearin, whence Partolan came, as Sicil of the Graians on the river Sicola—now the Sieule, tributary of the Allier—on the Auvergne. [10] Partolan's course, occupying a month in its first stage, led to Aladacia, now Aquitaine, lying between Toulouse and the Bay of Biscay. The Aquitanians were called Iacetania by Caesar and thus probably gave name to Muir nIocht. Aquitania itself seems to have received the name Aladacia from Alaric, king of the Visigoths, who, wresting Dacia from Aurelian in 272 A.D., lived there till 410, when they plundered Rome. Among the names given the Visigoths, on account of their stay in Dacia, are Scythians. Subsequently Alaric and his Dacians settled in south-western Gaul which thus took the name Aladacia and retained it for the three centuries following 415. From Aladacia Partolan went in three tratha or stages to Gothia, apparently down the Garonne from Toulouse to the Visigoth territory beyond the Pyrenees. A month was occupied in the next journey, from Gothia to Spain—probably to Galicia—and nine stages thence to Inbhear Sceine in Ireland. Inbhear Sceine, which is indicated incidentally in *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, was long regarded as the mouth of the Kenmare river; but, though vivid traditions of landings survive along the neighbouring Derrynane sea-board, the accuracy of the old location is now seriously doubted and a claim made for the estuary of the Shannon. A curious legend still surviving in Kenmare connects the two estuaries. It is to the effect that one of the islands in Kenmare Bay suddenly appeared in its present position and, soon after, a native of Limerick arrived to claim ownership, alleging it was his property which had mysteriously disappeared from the Shannon shore.

Neimheadh came westward from Scythia, which is interpreted to mean, not Scythia west of the Caspian, but the country of the Scuitighe referred to by Latin writers as Montes Cottie and generally known as the Cottian Alps, south of the Graian Alps. The proximity of Lyons, originally named Lugdunum, after Lugh, to whom our earliest national athletic carnivals during Lughnasa are dedicated, is significant, as is the fact that Belinus or Bel, worshipped in Tolosa, had his festival in Ireland *la Bealtaine*. In due course Neimheadh and his company are found on Muir Caisp which, as already stated, is held to connote the Casperian Sea, deriving its name from the island of Casperia—now Gomera, one of the Azores—and retaining it to the time of Ptolemy in the second century. For a year and a half they voyaged before reaching southern Ireland where, at Ard Neimheadh in Cork harbour, the leader died of the plague.

After desperate conflicts at Tur Conaing and elsewhere with the Fomoraigh, who were expelled, to return reinforced, three companies of the followers of Neimheadh—under the

leadership of Conang, Simeon and Iobath respectively—went to Moin Chonaing, now Anglesey in Wales, to the lands of the “Greeks,” believed to be islands on the Swiss lakes, noted, like certain Irish islets, for *crannoga* or lake dwellings and connected by the Rhone with the Mediterranean. Certain fundamental features of early Irish art are traced to this neighbourhood also.

To the descendants of Simeon was allotted the strenuous labour of carrying sacks of earth on their backs to clothe the rocky Alpine slopes with vegetation. Of this, which gave them the name of Fir Bolg or bagmen, they naturally grew tired, and returned to Ireland. There is abundant evidence from Roman writers that earthworks on an extensive scale were carried out by Celts in this Alpine country, particularly under kings Donnus and Cottius. The tomb of Cottius, who brought his people into alliance with the Roman State and procured them “an everlasting era of tranquillity,” is at Susa; and it is to be noted that on the Kerry coast where our remote ancestors so often landed, places named Susa, Baisleacan, Valencia and the like are still quite common. The name Valencia was also given the area between the Roman walls in north Britain, as well as the historic city and province in Spain, just as we find the island of Gothia in the Baltic, another island of Gothia “beside Crete and Sicily,” and Gothia seemingly applied further to some portion of north-eastern Spain during its occupation by the Visigoths. With the spread of knowledge we now find certain place-names common to all the countries of the world. “The Mahanadi in India, the Guadalquivir in Spain, the Rio Grande in Mexico and South America and the Owenmore in Ireland, all mean simply Big River,” writes “Conall Cearnach” in an exquisite paper on “the origin of place-names.” “There is a plethora of Newtowns, from the various Neustadts of Germany and Austria to Nijni Novgorod, or Lower Newtown in Russia and Navanagar in India. . . In France we find Lyons and in Holland Leyden, both representing the Celtic Lugu dunum or town of the god Lugu.” The principal saints, Peter, James, John, Francis, as well as the Cross—symbol of man’s redemption—have given names to places throughout the modern world, as Patrick and Brigid have given their names to churches innumerable.

The descendants of Simeon and Iobath, expelled sons of Neimheadh, returned respectively as Fir Bolg from the south of Europe and Tuatha de Danan from the north. They are said to have given eight kings to Ireland, the last of them Eochaidh a great lawgiver, whose queen was Tailte, daughter of Maghmor of Spain. It is noteworthy that the Fir Bolg, held to have come from the Cottian Alps and the Swiss lake-islands, are recorded as having been again driven from Ireland to the Scottish islands by their kindred the Tuatha de Danan. Returning on the eve of the Christian era, they settled eventually in the west of Ireland, and have many lakes and fortresses named after them, including Dun Aonghusa on Aran Island, where gardens have still to be made and maintained by periodically covering the rocks with sand and clay. It is significant, too, that the Tuatha de Danan are first found at Sliabh an Iarainn, indicating a tendency on their part towards craftsmanship. They are also credited with skill in healing and in poetry, with magic and with satire. Of them was Lugh, founder of the national games, and trained, it is claimed, by Tailte, thus bringing them, too, into contact with Gaul and Spain, even with Holland.

The movements of the Milesians, as traced in the *Leabhar Gabhala*, are said to represent two versions of the same legend. They are brought, through Magog’s grandson Feineas Farsaidh and his son Niul, ancestor of the Clanna Neill, into association with biblical history and Greek literature, and their wanderings are made to appear even more comprehensive than those of their predecessors. Feineas is first found in the country of Babylon after the confusion of the Tower of Babel and subsequently presiding over a famous school for twenty years, founding others, and sending his seventy-two students abroad to acquire the languages of the world. His son Niul goes to Egypt where he meets and is treated with marked favour by Moses, and is given the daughter of the king in marriage. Niul’s great grandson, however, and his followers are expelled from Egypt. Under Eibhear Scuit they proceed to Scithia



Greagdha, where, like the descendants of Neimheadh, they come into conflict with their kinsmen and are driven, after five generations, to an island on Muir Caisp, generally regarded by annotators as the Caspian Sea. In time they reach Gothia where they sojourn for eight generations ; elsewhere they are said to have reached the Gaothlaighe, not Gothia, and “ three hundred years were the seed of Gaedhal in the Gaothlaighe.”

Thence they get back by Creid and Sicil, regarded as Crete and Sicily, and eventually reach Spain under command of Bratha after whom Braganza in Portugal is named, as the Brigantes whom we have already met in the south-east of Ireland in conjunction with the Belgic Gauls are named after his son Brigus or Breoghan. Bile, one of the ten sons of Breoghan, was father of Mileadh, better known as Milesius. Mileadh, educated and ambitious on reaching man's estate, set sail for the East—passing by Cadiz, the Pillars of Hercules, Sicil, and from port to port till he reached Scithia. Thence, after a period, he proceeded to Egypt where, like Niul, he got the king's daughter Scotia in marriage. After seven eventful years he again set out for home and landed in Irena, an island near Thrace. Eventually he reached Gothia, presumably following the ancient trade route between the East and the Baltic and making alliance with the Picts in Germany before passing into the North Sea ; thence southward by the European sea-board and the Bay of Biscay to Spain—southern Spain, northern Spain, triangular Spain. Subsequently his uncle Ioth and, still later, his sons come to Ireland.

Regarding Mileadh's voyage to the East it has been observed that Meldi, equated with Milesians, have been traced not in Spain alone, but in France as far north as Meaux, in Malta, even in Bulgaria. Whatever some may think of our early ancestors' sway in Egypt and their enterprise over the wide expanse that separates the Caspian from the Baltic, or of the continental exploits attributed in our epic literature to Cuchulainn and Ferdiadh, Labhradh Leingseach and Criomhthann, Oscar and Goll, Niall and Daithi, over a military theatre fluctuating between Galicia and Galatia, it is safe to say that even in pre-Christian times their activities extended beyond the confines of the vast area later sanctified by the labours of Columbanus and the evangelists who followed in his footsteps through five centuries of glory. Under the stimulus of our new national university we may confidently hope earnest scholars will familiarly people that expansive nursery of our race and identify persons and places now obscure over the ground hallowed anew by the exiled scholars driven by Elizabeth and her successors to found Irish Colleges from Seville to Prague on the one hand, and re-baptised on the other by “ the Wild Geese” whose blood crimsoned the most historic battlefields “ from Dunkirk to Belgrade”—

When, exiled in the penal days.  
Their banners over Europe blaze.

But this is invading ground beyond the bounds which unforeseen circumstances have set for this volume. And here may appropriately be offered a word of explanation of the enforced limitation alluded to.

Some years ago the publishers of this work requested me to prepare a popular History of Ireland, suitable for secondary schools. Though somewhat interrupted by illness the work was practically ready for the press, to the period of the Reformation, when, in the spring of 1917. the British Government, by including me in a group of close on forty persons deported to England on a bogus charge, rendered it impossible for me to proceed further with my undertaking. Offered the option to choose between certain suggested places of detention, I—in common with a number of others—selected Oxford as a retreat where it might be feasible to pursue the subject uppermost in my mind, particularly as there seemed a prospect of access to the *Annals of Innisfallen*, held in the Bodleian Library there. I had no sooner obtained permission to consult our historic manuscript, however, than we were all discovered to be

undesirable visitors, and unexpectedly snatched away to the foot of the Cotswolds, to be there secluded under conditions greatly calculated to induce mental torpor. Meanwhile I had written to Dublin for my unfinished historical materials, to learn that but a remnant of them had survived two wanton raids on my home : even of that remnant, only portion reached me in England. The new loss was the more distressing inasmuch as it included notes, laboriously collected, in reference to ancient Ireland—geological data and records of atmospheric phenomena, early maritime activities and the labours of Irishwomen in other lands—which, summarised, would considerably enhance the interest of my work. Much of the information, moreover, had been gathered during casual hours of leisure in scattered libraries in Brussels, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, in the recently burned library in Cork, as in those of the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College, Dublin. In acknowledging my obligations to all these institutions for the facilities uniformly afforded me, it is in no sense a gratification to have to record the churlishness experienced in so far famed a centre of study as Oxford.

Owing to the confiscation of my papers and the enforced inactivity referred to, I was obliged, on my release, to approach my task anew, basing the resumed work mainly on rough notes, in Irish, previously made for prize essays on such subjects as the Influence of the Irish on European civilisation, Land Tenure in Ancient Ireland, the Irish Social System to the Time of the Reformation. The latter essay, representing much effort and earnest study on my part, has, I regret to say, been lost in manuscript ; though I hope some day to piece it together again, at least in its main outlines, from rough material that has survived. The present volume, based almost entirely on notes originally made in Irish, can hardly fail to show frequent traces of Irish idiom. Writing thus under existing conditions it is impossible to avoid the reflection that those so far chosen to preside over the destinies of the Gaelic League, of whom I happen to be the third, have each written a volume of Irish history in English—paradoxically, manifestly without premeditation, and, broadly speaking, under the peculiar difficulties that, somehow, always beset Irish historians. My home and office, for example, have been the scenes of four fresh military raids for documents even during the progress of this volume through the press, and in the course of the final raid, which eventuated in my arrest and detention in three different prisons, much useful matter which I had arranged in the form of an Appendix, disappeared and has not been restored to me. So distracting and pre-occupied have recent times steadily proved, indeed, that it now becomes necessary for me to modify my original intention of bringing the work down to the present day, and stop short at the Anglo-Norman invasion, hoping for the leisure another day to complete a corresponding volume on the whole dark era of the Anglo-Norman usurpation.

It will be obvious to readers that the architecture of this work is on somewhat uncommon lines, each essential department of national activity being independently traced from its source, and so treated chronologically as to present a fairly complete outline of its development until arrested by the devouring greed of the Anglo-Normans. Repetition, to a greater or less degree, is probably inseparable from such treatment. On the other hand, for reasons already indicated, ordered notes on geological speculations are absent, that under more favourable circumstances might have appeared. In this domain, the picture of Cuchulainn fighting chin-deep in the snow and similar atmospheric clues will probably inspire, in good time, as fruitful trains of thought towards the elucidation of primeval conditions here as the elk-bones which are held to have emerged in such profusion from Ireland's ancient ice-cap. Such speculation fortunately does not come within the scope of this volume, and may be left to minds specially equipped in that direction. The records of the fruitful labours of the early women of our race, though grouped to some extent under the different countries in which they moved—in other words, under all the countries traversed by their brothers—have yet to be sought over a wide field ; but an attempt is made in the Index—under Women—so to co-ordinate the references as to bring the reader into easy touch with their whole story in-so-far as it has been feasible to unfold it. Details of the maritime activities of our early ancestors are

met with more casually ; and the references to them, also, are grouped, though inadequately, in the Index. For the rest, although the work is based in the main on our native records, the testimony of sober historians from other lands—notably from Germany, France, England, Scotland, America and, less so, early Greece, Italy and Spain—is freely employed to supplement or confirm the evidence of our own historians. Thus it is hoped the object of the publishers and the author is attained, namely, a faithful presentation of the popular features of the motherland that through long centuries of oppression has commanded the growing devotion of her children to a degree for which the world's history affords not a parallel.

Glasnevin, *July* 4, 192 1.

### Alternative Spellings

In a work like this, in which quotation has to be frequently resorted to, alternative spellings, to a certain degree, are practically unavoidable, owing to the different forms in which personal and place names have been used by authors and editors in the past. Examples are afforded by such words as Adhamhnan, frequently spelled Eunan ; Ard Macha, Armagh ; Brian Boirmhe, Brian Borumha, Brian Boru ; Colm Cille, Columcille, Columbkille ; Cluain mic Nois, Clonmacnoise ; Fursa, Fursey ; Gleann da Loch, Glendaloch, Glendalough ; Milidh, Mileadh, Milesius ; O Lochlainn, O Loughlin, Ua Lochlainn ; Lorcan Ua Tuathail, Lorcan O Toole, Laurence O Toole ; Tir da Ghlas, Terryglass, and so on. Readers will easily identify the alternative forms wherever they occur.

### Contractions

F.F. 31, ii. = *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn*, page 31, vol. II.  
300, ii. Man. & Cust. = page 300, vol. II. *Manners and Customs of Ancient Ireland*, O'Curry.  
M. and C. = *Manners and Customs*, O'Curry.  
Moran = *Irish Saints in Britain*, Card. Moran.  
Tripartite Life—*Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick*.  
Stokes—*Lives of the Irish Saints*, Whitley Stokes.  
Healy's St. Patrick = *Life of St. Patrick*, Dr. Healy.  
S.M. 47, ui. — *Seanchus Mor*, page 47, vol. III.  
A. U.— *Annals of Ulster*.  
Alzog. = *Alzog's Church History*.  
S. H.— *Social History of Ireland*, Dr. Joyce,  
Tain Bo (Dunn) = *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, Dunn.  
Brenan — *Brenan's Ecclesiastical History of Ireland*.  
F. M. — *Four Masters*.  
I. A. S. S., Healy = *Ireland's Ancient Schools and Scholars*.  
Montalembert = *Monks of the West*.  
Zimmer Irish Med. Cult. = *Irish Medieval Culture*.

[1] They included the Books of Ard Macha, Gleann da Loch, Ui Chongmhala, Cluain mic Nois, Cluain Eidneach ; the Yellow Book of Moling, Black Book of Molaga, Psalter of Cashel, and the rest of the chief books of Ireland.

[2] F.F. ii. 251.

[3] According to the Annals of Ulster, the moon was turned into blood Good Friday night 673 ; the nativity of St. Martin, 691 ; the twelfth of the Kalends of March, 787 ; the sky was blood red on the night of St. Stephen's Festival ; in 683, Loch Neagh was turned into blood ; in 865 Loch Leibhinn in Westmeath was turned into blood which became lumps of gore like " lights " around its border ; in 877 a shower which fell was found in lumps of gore and blood upon the plains, twenty years later a shower of blood was shed in Ard

Cianachta. The showers were not always so awe-inspiring : in 717, for instance, it rained a shower of honey and a shower of blood, and there was an eclipse of the full moon ; in 763 three showers fell in Inis Eoghain—of white silver, wheat and honey.

In 676 a bright comet was seen in September and October ; in 744 and again in 764 a terrible and wonderful sign was observed in the stars ; in 748 ships with their crews were seen in the air over Cluain mic Nois ; in 785 a terrible vision in Cluain mic Nois and great repentance throughout all Ireland ; in 910 two suns were seen together the day before the Month of May ; in 911 a comet made its appearance ; in 916 ; the heavens seemed to glow with comets ; in 1018 “ the hairy star ” appeared for the space of a fortnight in autumn time ; in 1023 there were eclipses of the sun and moon.

In 752 a whale was cast ashore at Warrenpoint having three teeth of gold weighing each fifty ounces, and one was taken to the altar of the church of Bangor ; in 758 Beann Muilt poured forth a stream with fishes ; in 826 Foreigners made a great slaughter of sea-hogs on the coast of Ard Cianachta South ; in 867 there was a strange eruption of water from Sliabh Cualann with numbers of little black fishes. In 890 it is recorded that the sea cast ashore in Alba a female whose length was 195 feet, the length of her hair 17 feet, of a finger of her hand 7 feet, of her nose 7 feet also, and she was altogether whiter than a swan. In 1029 a man was cast ashore at Corca Baiscinn who measured eight feet from the head to the small of the back ; and in 1118, following an earthquake, mermaids were taken by fishermen at Lisarglinn in Ossory and at Waterford.

- [4] “ If we admit that it was from Armenia the Aryans stocked Europe and India, there is no reason why the original population of Armenia should not have been themselves colonists from Atlantis. . . the ancient nation that existed before Greek was Greek, Celt was Celt, Hindoo was Hindoo, Goth was Goth.”—*Atlantis*, 457, 461.
- [5] “ The Dolphin’s Ridge,” or submerged island whose three-pronged form, as disclosed by soundings, pointed respectively towards the west of Ireland, north-east coast of South America and West coast of Africa.—*Atlantis*, 468.
- [6] All the civilisations of Europe, Asia and Africa radiated from the Mediterranean : the Hindoo-Aryans radiated from the north-west ; they were kindred to the Persians who are next door neighbours to the Arabians (cousins of the Phoenicians) who lived alongside of the Egyptians who had in turn derived their civilisation from the Phoenicians.”  
—*Atlantis*, 58.
- [7] This theory is learnedly discussed in a new and revised edition of “ The Story of Ireland,” now in the press.
- [8] This people must have sent out colonies to the shores of France, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Denmark and Norway, who bore with them the acts and implements of civilised life.”  
—*Atlantis*, 248-9.
- [9] “ Phases of Irish History.”—MacNeill.
- [10] This theory, too, is elaborated in the scholarly new edition of “ The Story of Ireland,” already referred to.

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

Author : Ua Ceallaigh, Sean, 1872-1957

Publisher : Dublin : M. H. Gill

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Boston College Libraries

Book contributor : Boston College Libraries

Collection : Boston\_College\_Library ; blc ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/irelandelementso00uace>

Edited and uploaded to [www.augty.org](http://www.augty.org)

January 28 2013