

Land of The West

Irish druids and old Irish religions

James Bonwick

1894

•

The Future Life, Or Land of The West.

IRELAND, whether viewed from an antiquarian or an ethnological point of view, is one of the most interesting countries in the world. It is not the less an object of attention from the fact, that in its early history there are traces of nearly every kind of pagan belief.

It is curious that its literary treasures should have been so long neglected. Of late years, thanks to literary and scientific societies, including the new association fostered by Sir C. Gavan Duffy, Irish MSS. have engaged much thoughtful investigation.

The author of this work, conscious of the importance of inquiry into ancient faiths, has collected such information upon Irish religions as a lengthened course of general reading has thrown in his way, since it may benefit those who have less leisure or opportunity for research. He is content to state various views, presented in quotations from writers, rather than to put forth any special conjectures of his own. Examinations of old myths and folklore will often throw light upon current notions of nationalities.

This sketch of the ancient Irish mind might help to confirm the conviction that Religion, in the sense of a reverence for something beyond the individual, has been ever associated with human nature. Anything, however apparently absurd to some of us, that tends to restrain vice, and exalt virtue, is not to be despised in the development of our race. The heathen Irish had a worshipful spirit. As to their morals, they certainly honoured woman more than did the favoured Jews or accomplished Greeks.

James Bonwick.

Norwood

January 1, 1894.

•

No more touching or inspiring belief was there among the ancient Irish, than in the hope of another life beyond the grave. Nature restored the dead forest of winter to the wealth of foliage in spring ; why should not the breathless form of man once more find joy in life ? But this happy thought, with our Islanders, was associated with two things—the sea-wave and the western sunset.

The soul of the Maori, it was said, took its flight to the *Reinga*, the northernmost promontory of New Zealand, and, from the branch of an overhanging tree, dropped into the ocean in search of its subaqueous home. The Irish, in like manner, knew that his next tenement would be beneath the flood.

The dying Egyptian beheld with the eye of faith his spirit following the setting sun. The Irish looked forward to the West as the place to which his ethereal nature would take its flight. The roar of the Atlantic was music to his ears, for it was but the echo of the voices of his forefathers, and departed loved ones, in the western Land of the Blest.

Pindar sang—

“ Where mortals easiest pass the careless hour ;
No lingering winter there, nor snow, nor shower ;
But ocean ever, to refresh mankind,
Breathes the cool spirit of the western wind.”

Penelope’s suitors, slain by her returning lord, were thus led by Mercury to the Shades—

“ So cowering fell the sable heap of ghosts,
And such a scream filled all the dismal coasts.
And now they reach’d the earth’s remotest ends,
And now the gates where evening Sol descends.”

Chronos slept in his palace of glass in Ogygia, Isle of the West. The Hesperides and its apples lay in the happy West. The Teutones went to the glass Isles of the West, as did the Norsemen and Celtiberians. Arthur was rowed to Avalon in the West. The Sacred Isles of the Hindoos were to the West. Christian hymns still speak of crossing the waters to Heaven. How many of us have been delighted with Faber’s beautiful hymn—“ The Land across the sea !” The Gaulish *Cocagne*, the Saxon *Cockaign*, the Lusitanian *Cocana*, or Happy Land, were beyond the seashore. Prof. Rafinesque might well say, “ It is strange, but true, that, throughout the earth, the place of departed souls, the land of spirits, was supposed to be in the West.”

“ To Rhadamanthys of the golden hair.
Beyond the wide world’s end ; Ah ! never there
Come storm or snow ; all grief is left behind,—
And men immortal, in enchanted air.
Breathe the cool current of the Western Wind.”

Procopius had a story of the West. Thither the souls are conveyed by ghostly fishermen to an island for rest ; and tales are told of ears detecting the calling over of names, as the boat touches the mystic strand, and wives and husbands being summoned to their arriving mates.

Erebos was the gloom that fell after sunset. The word in Assyrian was from *eribu*, to descend, as suns then dropped below. Odysseus turned to Erebus when offering his sacrifice to departed hero-gods. Ghosts were there wont to assemble, and might be seen flitting to and fro in the uncertain light. The main entrance of Greek temples was in the East, so that the worshippers might face the Happy West.

Homer’s reputed poems are unlike in their records of the dead. The *Iliad* knows no apotheosis ; the *Odyssey* has it. Coleridge observes, “ In the *Iliad*, Castor and Pollux are mentioned in the ordinary language denoting death and burial, and no more. In the *Odyssey*, we have the account of their ultimate resuscitation, which finally became the popular fable.”

Alluding to the Homeric Hades—Aïdes and Erebus—W. E. Gladstone writes—
“ A particular portion of the unseen world, apparently special in its character, is stated to be situate as far below Aïdes as our earth is below heaven. It bears the name of Tartaros, and it

appears to have been reserved for preter-human offenders." The condition of the departed generally was not very joyous ; Gladstone shows this as follows—" The Hellenic dead are wanderers in the Shades, without fixed doom or occupation." Again—" The Greek personages, recently dead, do not appear to have been either rewarded or punished ; and Achilles bitterly complains of the sheer want of interest in this life."

In Homer's *Nekromanteia*, we have the Intercourse of Ulysses with the dead. He employs necromantic arts in his descent into Hades, which were strictly of a Babylonian character, and the whole description reminds us of the fabled descent of the Assyrian goddess to the Sheol. The ghosts gather round Ulysses at the smell of the blood of his offerings, and, inspired thereby, " expressed dark things to come." Tiresias then says—

" Know to the spectres that thy beverage taste,
The scenes of life recur, and actions past."

We are assured that when the hero sought to embrace a friend—

" Thrice in my arms I strove her shade to bind,
Thrice through my arms she slipp'd like empty wind."

Coleridge exclaims, " The whole of the *Nekromanteia* is remarkable for the dreary and even terrible revelations which it makes of the conditions of the future life. All is cold and dark ; hunger and thirst and discontent prevail." The ghost of Achilles was made to say—

" Rather I'd choose laboriously to bear
A weight of woes, and breathe the vital air,
A slave to some poor hind that toils for bread,
Than reign the sceptred monarch of the dead."

Ulysses, horrified at the sight of the *Underworld*, exclaims—

" No more my heart the dismal din sustains.
And my cold blood hangs shiv'ring in my veins."

Horace writes more cheerfully of the locality—the land of plenty and of peace—

" No bear grins round the fold, no lambs he shakes ;
No field dwells there with pois'nous snakes.
No heat annoys ; the ruler of the gods
From plagues secures these blest abodes."

Renouf, in his translation of the *Book of the Dead*, has this Egyptian prayer—" Let me have my heart, that it may rest within me. I shall feed on the food of Osiris. Hail to you, O ye Lords of everlasting Time and Eternity ! Let not my heart be torn from me. I shall not surrender to thee this heart of the Living. Come forth to the bliss towards which we are bound."

Prof. Whitney thus speaks of the Hindoo faith—" There is no attempt made, in any Vedic hymn, to assign employments to the departed in their changed state, nor, for the most part, to describe their condition, excepting in general terms as one of happiness."

How far these old pagan views of the Future Life reached the shores of Erin may be seen in what follows in this chapter. A perusal of Ossianic songs, as elsewhere noted, will give the popular conception of the Unseen World just before the reception of Christianity. The *Purgatory of St. Patrick* might be, also, consulted for information upon the same subject. As to what opinions were cherished on the reception of Christian truths, we may perhaps discover some in the writings of Eastern Fathers, upon the supposition of some that the earliest teachers of Erin came from the Levantine regions.

The following passages from their writings may exhibit some notions about the *Hereafter* prevalent in the early Oriental Church.

Gregory of Nyssa tells us—“After due curative treatment, and when the fire shall have destroyed all foreign matter, then the nature even of these shall improve.” St. Gregory writes—“It is not just that they should perish eternally who are sustained by His breath and Spirit. The fallen angel will begin to be that which he was created, and man, who had been expelled from Paradise, will be once more restored to the tilling of Paradise.” St. Basil trusted that “everything of wickedness in man shall cease.” Gregory of Nazianzus, 370 AD. declares that “all will be loosed who groan under Tartarine chains.” Origen affirms—“God will be all, seeing evil nowhere exists.” Clement, 190 A.D., hopefully says, “He, by the Father, will direct the salvation of all.” Only Tertullian, from unfriendliness to the theatre, exults in seeing “the tragedians more tuneful under their own sufferings.”

The story of the Purgatory of St. Patrick declares another order of teaching, introduced later on into Erin, one more in consistency with the Babylonian “doctrine of devils,” and which still survives with its lurid light. A recognition of *Our Father* is more elevating, helpful, and comforting.

The heathen Irish did certainly dwell upon a *Land Beyond*. In Dr. Maiden’s *Ossian and the Clyde* we read, “When the warrior, who was also a hunter, reposed, his dog was laid beside him on the left, as if waiting his summons to attend his master on fields of air beyond the verge of earth—like Oscar’s at Glenree, and like Cuthullin’s by Lake Lego.” And, yet, in the *Songs of Selma*, one mourns forth—“No more shall he hear thy voice, no more awake at thy call. When shall it be morn in the grave to bid the slumberer awake? In the Chapter on “Superstitions” are references to the ghost belief of other days.

In the account of the *Land of Youth*, given by the heathen Fenian Oisín to St. Patrick—when the hero was carried off from the field of battle by the golden-haired fairy Niamh—the region was divided into states under sovereigns, as in the *Land of the Living*. It lay beneath the waves in the West, in a lovely climate.

How easy it was in so blessed a place to lose ideas of time! When Oisín obtained leave from his beautiful captor to revisit earth, he alluded to the rapidity of time passed in this retreat by his three months’ imprisonment—

“ ‘ Three months ! ’ replied the Fair, ‘ three months alone ;
Know that three hundred years have roll’d away
Since at my feet my lovely phœnix lay. ’ ”

In Dodsley’s fairy collection, one King Porsuma was carried off by a Zephyr—the princess taking him for a phœnix, and conveying him, as in the case of Oisín, to Thierna-na-Oge, the paradise of eternal youth.

Oisín had a fanciful description of his happy home—

“ You shall obtain the diadem of the King of the Land of Youth,
Which he never gave to any person beneath the sun ;
It shall shield you both by night and day,
In battle, conflict, and hard struggle.
You shall get one hundred satin’ shirts,
One hundred cows, one hundred calves ;
One hundred sheep with fleeces of gold,
And one hundred precious stones not found in the world.
You shall have one hundred merry young maidens,
Bright and shining like the sun ;
Who excel in shape, form, and features,
And whose voices are sweeter than the melody of birds.” &c.

Then there was *Flath-innis*, the *Island of the Good*, which word is still the Irish for Heaven. An old Gaelic poem had this description of it—

“ The Isle spread large before him like a pleasing dream of the soul, where distance fades not on the sight, where nearness fatigues not the eye. It had its gently sloping hills of green, nor did they wholly want their clouds. But the clouds were bright and transparent, and each involved in its bosom the source of a stream ; a beautiful stream, which, wandering down the steep, was like the faint notes of the half-touched harp to the distant ears. The valleys were open and free to the ocean ; trees, laden with leaves, which scarcely waved to the slight breeze, were scattered on the green declivities and rising ground. The rude winds walked not on the mountains ; no storm took its course through the sky. All was calm and bright. The pure sun of autumn shone from his blue sky on the fields. He hastened not to the West for repose, nor was he seen to rise from the East. He sits in his middle height, and looks obliquely on the noble Isle. In each valley is its slow, moving stream. The pure waters swell over the banks, yet abstain from the fields. The showers disturb them not, nor are they lessened by the heats of the sun. On the rising hills are the halls of the departed—the high-roofed dwellings of the heroes of old.”

In the tale of the *Voyage of Condlé the Hunchback*, a wise woman sings thus to him, as translated from Irish by a French author—

“ Tu éprouves, à cause de moi, du plaisir.
Sur les vagues, ton chagrin serait oublié.
Si, sur la barque de verre, nous arrivions ;
Si nous avons atteint la cité divine de victorieux.”

Many Celtic legends relate to a voyage in a glass ship. As Sophocles tells us, Orithyia was carried off by Boreas to the ancient garden of Apollo.

A spirited translation of *The Battle of Gabhra*, by N. O’Kearney, affords English readers another picture of the Land of the Blessed.

“ Tíro na n-Og is the most beautiful country that can be found,
The most productive now beneath the sun ;
The trees are bending under fruit and bloom,
While foliage grows to the top of every bramble.
Wine and honey is abundant in it,

And everything the eye ever beheld ;
Consumption shall not waste you during life.
Neither shall you see death nor dissolution.”

The distinguished historian, Lecky, has this allusion to another ancient fancy ; saying, “ Among the many half pagan legends that were connected with Ireland, during the Middle Ages, one of the most beautiful is that of the Islands of Life and of Death. In a certain lake in Munster, it is said there were two islands ; into the first, Death could not enter, but age and sickness, and the weariness of life, and the paroxysms of fearful suffering were all known there, and they did their work, till the inhabitants, tired of their immortality, learned to look upon the opposite island as upon a haven of repose. They launched their barks upon the gloomy waters ; they touched its shore, and they were at rest.”

In Joyce’s translation of *Connla of the Golden Hair*, the hero is tempted by the fairy in these words—

“ I have come from the *Land of the Living*,—a land where there is neither death nor old age, nor any breach of law. The inhabitants of earth call us *Aes-shee*, for we have our dwellings within large, pleasant green hills. We pass our time very pleasantly in feasting and harmless amusements, never growing old ; and we have no quarrels or contentions.”

Beseeking Connla to go with her, his father, Conn of the Hundred Fights, called his Druid Coron to contend with her, and she was shouted off by him. But Connla leaped into her canoe, and was lost.

“ A land of youth, a land of rest,
A land from sorrow free ;
It lies far off in the golden West,
On the verge of the azure sea.
A swift canoe of crystal bright
That never met mortal view—
We shall reach the land ere fall of night,
In that strong and swift Canoe ;
We shall reach the strand
Of that sunny land,
From druids and demons free ;
The land of rest,
In the Golden West,
On the verge of the azure sea.”

Tradition says that one Creidé, the god of goldsmiths, had a magic palace beneath the western sea, where he was drowned, while bringing gold to Ireland from Spain. Earl Desmond descended below Lough Gur, and has since been usually seen once in seven years. He is ultimately to escape as Oisín did. The Grey Sheep’s cave, near Kilkenny, is the outlet. A piper, long confined there, has been heard to play on his pipes upon a May-day morning.

Ireland was associated with the west by the old Welsh, or, as Professor Rhys observed, with Wales. Taliesin, the great Welsh Druid, was stolen by an Irish pirate vessel of the period, but he escaped in a magic coracle before reaching Erin. The *Land beneath the Sea* was beyond Cardigan Bay, the Annwn of the old Sun. The Welsh Avalon, or Island of Apples, the everlasting source of the Elixir of Life, the home of Arthur and other mythological heroes, was in the Irish direction. As Morien writes, “ The district of Hades beneath the earth, and

beyond the river, was the fairy-land of our ancestors, the source of the passive principle of life.”

So with Ireland itself ; it was the western Arran-more Isle of the Bay of Galway, from which the quick-sighted, upon a fine day, could discern *Hy-Bræfailth*, or the Enchanted Isle. Moore alludes to the tradition—

“ And as echo far off, thro’ the vale my sad orison rolls,
I think, O my love, ’tis thy voice from the Kingdom of Souls.”

The Spanish Bay of Souls lies west of Cape Finisterre. Ogygia was thought by Plutarch five days’ sail west of Brittia. The ancient Egyptian ritual spoke of the Happy West. The home of Calypso was in the west. Bailly, writing to Voltaire, in 1778, said, “ The giant Gyges (hundred-handed) inhabited the island of Atlantis, which is the same as Ogygia.” The Bretons had their western *Ifern*, which was the *Flaitheas*, or Isle of Heroes, the Welsh *Gwynvyd*. Vinland the Good was westward, as were the Fortunate Isles. Spanish tales tells of seven cities below the western ocean, where still dwell Christians who fled from the Moors and some of whom return after hundreds of years. America was probably visited by eastern voyagers long before Columbus knew it.

Lalla Rookh of Moore has similar references, as—

“ I know where the Isles of Perfume are,
Many a fathom down in the sea,
To the south of sun-bright Araby.”

Mythical allegory may give meaning to these stories.

In the Transactions of the Ossian Society is the following sketch of the Land of Youth, by Bryan O’Looney—

“ This Elysium is supposed to be divided into different states and provinces, each governed by its own king or ruler. It is all peace, tranquillity, and happiness. The Land of Life is supposed to give perpetual life to the liberated spirits of the just. They are supposed to be located somewhere about the sun’s setting point, and have means of approach, chiefly through the seas, lakes, and rivers of this world, also through raths, duns, and forts. The seas, lakes, and rivers act as cooling atmosphere, while the raths, duns, and forts serve as ingress and egress to and from them.”

Speaking then of the fabled city in Liscannor Bay, he adds—

“ The white breaking waves are said to be caused by the shallowness of the water over this enchanted little city, which is believed to be seen once in seven years, and of which, it is observed, that those who see it shall depart this world before the lapse of seven years to come ; but it is not supposed that these persons die, but change their abode, and transmigrate from this world of toil into the elysium of the just, where they shall, at once, become sportive, young and happy, and continue so for ever. It is also believed that those who see these enchanted spots, are slightly endowed with the gift of prophecy.”

The life is not greatly different from that found here, since Oisín, in his reported dialogue with the Irish saint, admitted—

“ I had, by golden-headed Niamh,
Of children, of surpassing beauty and bloom,
Of best form, shape, and countenance,
Two young sons and a gentle daughter.”

In the story of Cûchulainn’s adventures through this mysterious realm, is a full detail of its palaces and landscapes. The hero went thither in a bronze boat, which awaited his return thence. They who were admitted to a brief visit to the upper regions of earth were duly admonished, that if they once dismounted from their magic steeds, they would never again be able to return.

Bove Derg went to visit the Dagda deity at the Brugh of Mac-an-Og, where dwelt Angus Og, the god’s son, and where Oscar and other Fenian heroes were entertained. Fiachna is recorded to have come to Connaught from the agreeable plain, in order to obtain help in a contest with other deities. He disappeared in a lake, and fifty warriors dived in after him. War was, with the Irish, as with other people of German or Norse descent, a most pleasant way of beguiling time in the world beyond. Even Cûchulainn was induced to undertake his perilous voyage, that he might gain a goddess for a wife, by promising to help her family in a fight.

There they heard noble and melodious music of the gods, travelled from realm to realm, drinking from crystal cups, and entertaining themselves with their beloved. No wonder that a hero returned thence declared to an Irish sovereign that not for his kingdom would he relinquish a single night with the gods.

In Irish so-called history, we read of the emigrations of Nemed, son of Agnomen, from *Mag more*, the great plain, or *Trag mâr*, the great coast, or *Mag meld*, agreeable plain. Nennius supposed this was Spain. It was, however, the country from which all came, and to which at death all must return. In the legend of *Tuán mac Cairill*, says M. Jubainville, Nemed’s four thousand and thirty men, and four thousand and thirty women, voyaged from *The Great Plain*, and all died ; *i.e.* went there again.

The same French writer remarked how the relations which had existed here were continued there, even to the repayment of debts contracted on earth. “ The life of the Dead,” said he, “ in the mysterious region beyond the sea is for each a second edition, so to speak—of the life led by the departed on this side of the ocean.”

O’Beirne Crowe, treating of the *Book of Leinster*, and other MSS., says—“ The point of departure from this world, as well as the entrance to the next, whether for pain, or bliss, or business, was always in the West, and the route westwards. For the ancient Irish beliefs on this point we can appeal to the Vision of Adamnan, which gives the angels of the West the guardianship of the entrance to the regions of punishment, as well as to the cave of Loch Derg, which is most decidedly a pagan relic. This cave of Loch Derg is situated in the west of Ireland, as the corresponding cave Avernus is situated in the west of Italy.”

Again, he remarks—“ Somewhere, far away in the western ocean, there was supposed by the ancient Irish to be a spiritual country, called generally *The Lands of the Living*, and *Traig Mar* (great strand) and *Tir Tairngire* (Land of Promise) of Christian origin, as in the *Dindsenchus*, and *Tir Mar* (great land) as in another legend.” Further—“ The Land of the Living was the happy spirit's home of the Irish pagans until after the purification of all things by fire.”

Parthalon was said in Irish legends to have come from Spain, not from the country of the Dead. Tethra, conquered in the battle of Mag Tured, became King of the Dead beyond the ocean. Chronos, also, reigned over the departed. The plain where these infernal deities dwelt was the Irish *Mag cetne*.

As the son of Manannân-mac-Lir returned to earth again, so did the Ossianic Find-mac-Cumail, and Cailté ; evidencing the Celtic belief in the soul's immortality.

According to some traditions, the Better-land of the Druids floated in Neamhagas, as the Trimurti of the East were said to do in Akass or celestial ether. A bridge as fine as a hair, like Mahometans believe to this day, connects this world with that beyond, which they truly styled the *Greater Island*. The inhabitants were robed in white at *Murthenine*, the flowery plain.

Sepulchral rites were as essential to the comfort of the Irish in their Sheol as to the Greeks in theirs. As burial of the body was required in the latter case, so was the funeral song, feast, or cry over the corpse of the former—more or less performed to this hour by their Christian descendants. There would otherwise be dismal wanderings alone beside the Irish Styx, as with Homeric heroes.

The ghosts are variously described. The Ossianic ones appear indistinct and mystic in cloudland, floating with the wind. Such phantoms were of the worst sort, says O'Kearney ; who adds—" Irish pagans never dreamed of spirits after death having assumed any such forms, either in Tir-na-n-Og, Flaith-innis, or any other happy abode of departed heroes. The spirits from Elysium always appear in their proper shape, and spoke and acted as if they were still in possession of mortal life."

There are many elements regarding ideas of the Dead which are common to both Greeks and Irish, though not direct borrowings. Entrances to the nether world were recognized in portions of the East ; and Joyce tells us —"In my boyhood day, the peasantry believed that the great limestone cavern near Mitchelstown, in the county Cork, was one of the entrances to Tir-no-noge."

Dermat, in company with a wizard, or Knight of the Fountain, descended a well, and came into a country of delightful flowers and trees, palaces and castles. There a lady fair cured Dermot of the wounds he had received in battle, besides entertaining him with music. In the *Fate of the Children of Turem MS.*, we read of the Island of Fincara, which was sunk beneath the waves by a Druidic spell long ago. Then, one Brian, in quite modern times, provided with a magic water dress and crystal helmet, saw most charming-looking ladies. In the *Voyage of Maildun*, also, a privileged person was enabled to behold the *Mog-Mell* plains of pleasure, though these rather belonged to Fairydom.

In Plato, we have an account of banquets in Hades. In Irish MSS. are many references to the good things below.

There was a lesser god, Miders, married to Etain, one of the goddesses. The lady, tired of her situation, or company, came up, and obtained Eochaid-Airem, King of Ireland, for a husband. Miders followed the faithless one ; but she declined any further connection with one " who has no genealogy, and whose ancestors are unknown." The forsaken one engaged the king in a game of chess, in which the loser was to grant the request of the winner. The king, losing, was requested to give up his wife. This he refused to do. The disconsolate one then turned to win over the goddess. He sang to her of the *Pleasant Plain*, and invited her to return

with him to a happier home than Ireland could give. He would give her there more tasteful pork, sweeter milk, and more intoxicating beer. There were rivers warm with hydromel, and even wine. Youth never aged, and love was not forbidden. All this, and more, may be read in the *Lealthair na hllidhre*.

It was to the mysterious realm of Tethra, beyond the sea, that the fabled Fomorian race of Irish retreated, when finally vanquished by the next comers. But the able Editor of the Irish *Battle of Gabhra*, has the following story of the ancient emigrants, or conquerors, of Erin—

“ The Firbolg and Fomorian races, being more or less sea-faring men, placed their Elysium far out in the sea, and called it by various names, such as *Island of the Living*, *Island of Breasal*, *Island of Life*, &c. The Firbolgs are said to have lived under the waters of our lakes. The Tuath de Danans, being devoted to civil and literary pursuits, and their Druids having held their seminaries in caves and other secluded subterranean abodes, fancied their Elysium placed under the earth, while the Milesians steered, as it were, a middle course between both, and made their Elysium in a sort of indescribable locality to which a subterranean passage led. This they called *Tir-na-n’ Og*, i.e. the country of perpetual youth. In this they supposed the virtuous and brave to roam among fields covered with sweet flowers, and groves laden with delicious fruits. Here some, as the taste inclined, promenaded in happy groups, some reclined in pleasant bowers, while others exercised themselves with hunting, wrestling, running races, martial feats, and other manly exercises. No person ever grew old in this happy abode, nor did the inhabitants feel tedious of enjoyment, or know how centuries passed away.”

The early Christian preachers tried hard to dispel these images of the heathen paradise, and that by details of a terrible *Hell*—the *Avernus* of the pagan Orientals. When, however, St. Patrick told Oisín, as is recorded, that the hero Fingal was roasting in hell, the old Fenian cried out—“ If the children of Morni, and the many tribes of the clan Ovi, were alive, we would force brave Fingal out of hell, or the habitation should be our own.”

In the early ecclesiastical writings of Ireland, there is the same strange medley of old pagan superstitions and supposed scriptural ideas, to be found in other lands of the period. But this is also mixed up with the Babylonian horrors that found their way into the Talmud, making the Jewish idea of the Future so different from that of the Prophets in Scripture. We have but to read of the so-called Purgatory of St. Patrick for an apt illustration.

The entrance to this Purgatory was that known to the heathen Irish as leading to the Nether World. But the application came centuries after the usually recognized date of the Saint, and was unknown to such writers as Nennius and Probus. Irish tradition preserved the notion of descent into the lower regions, as with Oisín and others. Ecclesiastics, in like manner, record visits to St. Patrick’s Purgatory, Lough Derg.

Henry of Saltrey, in the twelfth century, spoke of the Saint hearing there the cries of those in Purgatory. The Knight Owain, in King Stephen’s time, went down, and saw the horrors. Some were fastened down by their hair, to be bitten by fiery snakes ; others were in molten metal, rivers of pitch, or lakes of cold. A wall of glass afforded sufferers a view of the joys of Paradise.

One monk, writing in the thirteenth century, affirms that any doubts as to Purgatory would be at once dispelled by going to Lough Derg. Froissart knew one who had been there. William Staunton, 1409, saw “ horrible bastes” tormenting men. Yet the Pope, in 1497, ordered

the cave to be closed up, upon the report of a Dutch monk that there was no truth in the stories circulated concerning the locality.

Notwithstanding the papal authority, the superstition still exists, and vast numbers of pilgrims frequent the scene of St. Patrick's Purgatory. The descent into hell by Istar, Orpheus, Hercules, &c., yet lives in the stories of Irish visitants to the lower regions.

In the ancient *Book of Lisinore* is the following narrative—"Howbeit the devil there revealed the gates of hell to Brenaina. And Brenaina beheld that rough, hot prison, full of stench, full of flame, full of filth, full of the camps of the prisoners' demons, full of wailing, and screaming, and hurt and sad cries, and great lamentations, and moaning and hand-smiting of the sinful folks ; and a gloomy, sorrowful life in cores of pain, in prisons of fire, in streams or the rows of eternal fire, in the cup of eternal sorrow, and death without limit, without end."

The Irish traveller beheld there demons torturing men and women, "monsters yellow, white, great-mouthed ; lions fierce, greedy ; dragons red, black, brown, demoniac—a place wherein there are streams frozen, bitter, ever stinking, swift, of full fire," &c., &c. Altogether, a disagreeable contrast to the happy *Land beyond* of Irish pagans.

They might have had no clearer vision than Homer's Greeks of the fate of the Dead, though their lively fancy pictured a pleasant home. They had some glimmerings of light beyond the deepening shadows, while conceiving the ghosts of the departed as conscious of the past, and not unmindful of beloved ones left behind.

Some wild roamers on the rock-bound shores of Erin had a dim perception of a Better Land. The heart of the purer, the intelligence of the nobler, dreamed, however faintly, of a realm of peace beyond, of a scene of tranquil beauty, of a restful time in the fabled Isles of Happy Ones, where storms would be unknown, where never-withering flowers would greet the grateful eye, and where the Blessed West foretold repose.

We may fancy some white-haired sage of Erin, feeling the sands of life slowly but surely sinking, who would seat himself on the tempest-tossed cliffs beside the Atlantic, watching a sunset in those western waters, where the gradually lessening glow foreshadowed his own departure. There he might recall the friends of his youth, the deeds of manhood, and the lessons of age. There, too, he might weep at the recollection of loved ones gone before, and yet smile at the prospect of re-union in the country of Ever-lasting Youth. Such a man, at such a time, may well have imagination quickened to a perception of the *Onward and Upward* in the Inner Life of poor Humanity.

Irish druids and old Irish religions (1894)

Author : Bonwick, James, 1817-1906

Subject : Druids and Druidism ; Ireland — Antiquities ; Ireland — Religion

Publisher : London : Sampson Low, Marston & co., ltd

Year : 1894

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Princeton Theological Seminary Library

Collection : Princeton ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/irishdruidsoldir00bonw>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

April 2 2013