

Magh-Tura Conga

Pre-Christian Ireland

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The Fate of The Firbolg

Q. 1. Were there not other tribes known as Fir-Domnann [1] and Fir-Gaileonn ?

A. Yes : but these three powerful tribes have, in Irish history, come under one generic name of Fir-bolg, for they were all governed by one supreme monarch ; and in reality, they constituted only one national body. The Fir-Domnann effected a landing at, and subsequently gained possession of, Erris, in the north-west of the present County Mayo. [2] The *Fir-Gaileonn* landed on the coast of Leinster, and hence, according to some, is derived the old Irish name for Leinster, *Gailean*. According to Dr. Keating and Dr. O'Brien, the name is *Laighean* Leinster, from *laighean*, a special kind of spear employed thirteen hundred years later than this date by the soldiers of the Milesian King, *Labhraidh Loingseach*.

The Firbolg proper landed at Wexford, and the name of the river Slaney, rising in Wicklow, and commingling its waters with the sea in Wexford Haven, bears to this day the name of the Fir-bolgian chief who landed there, and became the first monarch of Tara.

Q. 2. Does any authentic record exist giving an account of the Battle of Magh Tura Conga, and the defeat of the Firbolg : any monuments still standing ?

A. Yes : amongst authentic MS. remains, a tract, written over fourteen hundred years ago, tells the history of the battle, its cause, and its consequences. In it we are told, when Eochy, son of Erc, the ninth of the Firbolgian dynasty, was reigning at Tara, that he and his people were surprised to learn that the island contained other inhabitants whom they had not hitherto seen. Those, it seems, soon became known as the *Tuatha De Danann*—the descendants of one of those chieftains of the Nemedians and his followers, who, over two centuries before, fought the Fomorians on the strand at Tory Island, and escaped the destruction which had, from the spears of the sea-robbers and the surging billows of the Atlantic, over-whelmed their companions. This chieftain's name was *Iobath*, *death-healer* (*ioc*, balm, or healing ; *bath*, death, drowning) son of Beathach, (reviver ; root, *beatha*, life). Only a few of his clan came safe from that disastrous fight. Those who survived he determined to save in a foreign land, the home in after times of the Kimri, and of the Dani—modern Jutland. Another chieftain as we know, sailed, after that overwhelming disaster, to Gaul, and made his way to the south-east of Europe. The followers and descendants of the latter were the *Firbolg*, at this time in peaceable possession of the sovereignty of Ireland, the new-comers, the *Tuatha De Danann*, were the posterity of Iobath and his people. Like the Irish race in Canada and in the United States the one known as “ Irish-Canadians,” the other as “ Irish-Americans,” both descendants of the same stock, so the *Tuatha De Danann* and the *Firbolg* were of the same Nemedian race ; both had pretty much the same form of government ; both spoke the same language, the

Belgæ, a modified form somewhat, like the Gaelic spoken to-day by the Highlanders, compared with that spoken by the natives of Ireland.

The Danann tribes had landed on the north-east coast of Eire. Directly, on coming to the shore, they destroyed their boats and ships ; a habit not unusual among the Keltic races, as Cæsar, in his *Commentaria de Bello Gallico*, narrates. From the north they advanced with great caution till they reached the hilly portion of Leitrim, and settled in a place known as Magh Rein. There they erected temporary works of defence. There they watched and waited to see what advance the *Firbolg* would make in their regard, to receive them as friends or to banish them from the country as enemies.

Q. 3. What did the Firbolg do ?

A. Eochy, the King of Tara, wiser than some of his people who thought, it seems, that the invaders had come to the island on the wings of the wind, seeing that he had powerful and skilled tribes to deal with, took counsel with his wise men what was right to be done in the circumstances. All agreed to send one of the best and bravest of their warrior chiefs to reconnoitre the settlement at Magh Réin, and to report what kind of people those strangers were. The name of the chief chosen for this arduous duty was one named SRENG, that is, “ overreacher.” Armed like a warrior champion, he sets out. The Danann sentinels perceive his approach ; and they send directly one of their own chieftains, by name BREAS, to meet him and to talk to him. “ Both warriors approach with great caution until they come within speaking distance of each other. Each of them plants his shield in front to cover his body, and with inquiring eyes views the other over its border. Breas, on the part of the new settlers, was the first to speak, and Sreng, one of the old stock, was delighted to hear himself addressed in his own language, for to each the old Gaelic was mother tongue. They draw nearer, and after some conversation discover each other’s lineage and remote consanguinity.”

Next they examined each other’s spears, swords and shields, and in this examination they discovered a very marked difference in the shape and excellence of the spears ; Sréng, the Fearbolg, was armed with two heavy, thick, pointless, but sharply rounded spears ; while Breas, the Danann hero, carried two beautifully shaped, long, slender sharp-pointed spears. Breas then proposed, on the part of the *Tuatha De Danann*, to divide the island into two parts, between the two great parties, and that they should mutually enjoy and defend it against all future invaders.

Next, they exchange spears for mutual examination, on the part of their respective hosts ; after forming vows of future friendship, each returned. Thus the interview came to a close in the happiest way. Breas returned to his own people on the heights of Leitrim ; Sreng directed his steps to “ Rath na Righ,” or, “ fort of the kings” within the precincts of Tara.

The Tuatha De Danann must, however, have pondered over all that was said and done with greater thought and foresight than appears on the surface. They all came to the resolution of abandoning the settlement which they had made at Leitrim, and to make further to the west, both for greater security, if any encounter with the Firbolg should ensue, and to have larger facilities for making their escape to the western or southern shores, if disaster should be their lot in the final struggle. Accordingly, they abandon Magh Réin, and, pursuing their way westward, take up a strong position in that “ narrow neck” of land, known from its narrow character *Cong* (Ir. Cumang, a strait, or “ Cuing,” a tie, a strait), between Loch Mask and Loch Corrib, on the mearing of the two counties, Galway to the South, and Mayo to the east, west and north.

They form a temporary settlement on and around Mount Belgedan, the modern Benlevi. Their camp extended from the southern shore of Lough Mask to the northern shore of Lough Corrib, and from Benlevi to that mound known to-day as Fair Hill, Thus they are entrenched between two hills and two lakes—Benlevi to the west, and “ Fair Hill” to the north east ;— with Lough Mask to the north, and Corrib flanking them to the south. No better position could be selected by a military commander.

Meantime Eochy, the Firbolg sovereign, assembled a council, and with his wise men deliberated, at Rath na Righ, what course should now be pursued. Should he wage war against the newcomers, or should he not, that was the question. The council was divided :— Sreng was for peace, and a quiet settlement of the matter ;—for war, King Eochy. As is usual, the majority sided with the king : war was decreed. Next the chieftains from all quarters were summoned. The four provincial kings, for the first time, were called to aid the “ Ard-Righ,” or supreme sovereign. Troops from every part of the kingdom began to arrive at Tara. After due preparation, all things are now made ready. King Eochy Mac-Erc, monarch of Eire Uile, brave certainly, and dauntless, even in those days, leads his army forth from Tara, in East Meath, crosses the Shannon, enters the western province, and takes up his position on the eastern side of Knock Ma [3] in the county Galway, some five miles south-west from the town of Tuam,

From Knock Ma the country stretches out to the west one continued level, as far as the eye can behold, to Cong. This flat was known at that time as “ *Magh Nevi,*” or “ plain of Nemhedh,” the former leader of that immigrating band who came to the “ *Isle of the West*” after the death of Partholan’s people. The plain extends from Knock Ma to the fertile fields of Kilmaine in county Mayo, onward to Cong, and to the rising slopes fronting Sliabh Belgedan. On Nevy’s plain, westward from Knock Ma, the monarch’s troops bivouac. They number at least ten thousand fighting men, besides women, and sutlers, and a great army-following that must needs have come to minister to the wants of the myriad warriors. The two Munsters and Leinster, if at the time known by that appellation, and Ulla to the north, had sent forward their due number of warriors lead on by courageous chiefs. That the Firbolg had reached Knock Ma, became soon known to King Nuada of the Danann, through his active and ever watchful scouts.

Surrounded by his sages, his counsellors, and chiefs ; by his druids, bards, poets, and physicians, he is entrenched in safety on the eastern slopes of Benlevi, called Sliav Belgadan.

King Nuada, desirous only of obtaining a place for his people and himself wherein to settle, has from the commencement been opposed to bloodshed. He is still anxious for peace. Accordingly he sends an embassy to Eochy mac Erc, King of the Belgæ, across Nevy’s plain. By this time the order for advance from their position near Knock Ma had been given to the troops, and they were already beyond Kilmaine, and close to that district known at present as the village of Cross, but in the second and third centuries, up to the time of St. Patrick and later, as part of the territory of Conmaicne Culaid Tolad. Here they presented their master's demands to the Firbolg king. Eochy at the head of troops monarch of Eire Uilé—proud, naturally undaunted and brave accustomed to rule, to have no equal—Ard-Righ of four sovereigns who yield to his majesty implicit obedience ; his people devoted to his cause—eleven battalions of soldiers in all their martial glory advancing to fight his battles, could not brook any newcomer to reside in the island, his equal, or in any way independent of his power and jurisdiction. Flushed with the notion of his greatness, and with the idea of success, which, at the time, he regarded as certain, he would listen to no terms. The Danann must leave the land, remain as slaves, or fight to the death. The members of the embassy retire. The challenge is accepted ;—war declared. All prepare for the coming struggle—“ to be, or not to

be,” possessed of the plains, of the fair hills and fertile valleys of this “Noble Island.” A struggle, like that which is now about to begin, has from that time to the present been often renewed.

The Firbolg pitch their camp on that tract of territory which has to the south the north-eastern shore of Lough Comb, stretching fully three miles to the south-east of Cong, and bounded on the north by a line extending from the village of Cross, to the river at Ashford, which forms the mearing line of the counties Mayo and Galway.

The Danann troops advance from Benlevi eastward towards the present Fair Hill, in the direction of Ashford House, the seat of the present Lord Ard-Oilean (lately Sir Arthur Guinness), to the plain of *Nia*, the ancient name of MAGH TURA.

Curious enough, instead of commencing the fight, both armies agree to have first of all a trial of strength. Three times nine warriors on either side are selected.

The game at which they are to try their relative prowess is “hurling.” The valley or glen selected is that to the south-east of Nymphfield, in the direction of Kilmain road and the heights towards Knock Má, extending fully an English mile. The valley is known in history as *Glean-mo-Ailleam*, “glen-of-men-athletes.” The game ended in the defeat and death of the twenty-nine Danann hero-youths ; over them was erected the great cairn or stone monument known as *Carn na Chuithe*, or, the “heap-of-the-game,” to be witnessed to this day. How like in its way the erection on the plain of Marathon, pointing out the spot where the Athenians fell beneath the spears of the Persians !

Q. 4. Why narrate so much of this history ?

A. Because the account of the Battle of Magh Túra has never before, as a matter of history, been put in full before the student ; because the whole record of events that then transpired is true ; because the details throw fresh light on the manners and customs of a race once powerful, and even to this hour, great in their descendants.

Moreover, the Irish tract which presents this account is authentic and, according to O’Curry, of such value, that he says : “ I am bold to assert that I believe there is not in all Europe a tract of equal historical value yet lying in manuscript considering its undoubted antiquity and authenticity ;” and of the battle he says : “ it is the earliest event upon the record of which we may place sure reliance.” O’Curry, Lecture xi. pp. 243-7, *MS. Materials of Irish History*.

In addition, it is time at last to put the history of this battle not only fully, but also *clearly*, before the students of Irish history. The compilers of the *Annals of Ireland*, and even Dr. O’Donovan, did not give the account of the Battle of Magh Tura Conga in full. O’Curry in his lectures proposed to give a full account, yet he succeeded only partially, for he, too, confounds the history of the Battle of MAGH TURA of the *Fomorians*, fought twenty-seven years later in Tír-Erril, the eastern barony of the Six, in the county Sligo, with the Battle of MAGH TURA CONGA ; he makes it appear that King Eochy fled from Cong to Balysadare, on the sea-coast of Sligo. The encounter between the Fomorians and Danann, on the strand at Ballysadare, was in connection with the second battle of Magh Tura, which, to distinguish it from that now about to be described, was called Magh Tura of the Fomorians ; that fought on the isthmus between lakes Mask and Corrib, is known as the Battle of Magh Tura Conga. These are reasons quite sufficient to give in detail the events of that fight, which is no ordinary occurrence, but which forms rather an epoch in the history of Ireland.

Q. 5. Can you give an account of the battle ?

A. Yes : next day, June 11th, the battle commenced. It lasted four days. The warriors on both sides were armed with swords, spears, darts, and shields. It is not stated in the manuscript account that the soldiers made use of bows and arrows, or availed themselves of the sling ; although, in the second battle, that known as Magh Tura of the Fomorians, fought twenty-seven years later, the conquering Danann made use of the sling for firing off stones against their foes in fight. Balor, the Fomorian leader, was laid low by a stone penetrating the eye and piercing the brain with a force which the nerve of the human arm, unaided by mechanical power, could never have imparted. There is no record, that at the Battle of “ Magh Tura Conga ” slings, or bows and arrows, were instruments of warlike attack.

On the other hand, it is worthy of note, that each army had its military physicians, who prepared what in those days was called a “ sanative pool,” or a “ healing bath,” made of the juice of the choicest healing herbs mixed in new milk. In this warm preparation the wounded warrior was bathed, his wounds bound, his wants, as far as was possible, attended to, and many thereby were restored to health and strength. Modern philanthropy, for wounded and dying heroes, cannot claim to itself alone all the glory which such wisdom and intelligent sympathy must certainly win, from all who have a heart to feel for suffering and self-sacrificing brothers.

The trumpet note ordering the attack is heard over the plain. The mountains around take up the terrible call, and in echoes fling it back over the waters of lakes Corrib and Mask. The hearts of the young warriors are moved. Their martial spirit is roused to action. They form into line. The Belgian forces rush to the fight, led by their king Eochy, by Kerb the son of Buan, and by Nearchu. Fathach the poet incites them to battle, and with his fellow-poets recites the Rosg Catha, or Eve of Battle.

On the other side, the Danann come calmly and resolutely to the fight, commanded by King *Nuada*, and the potent and clever *Dagda*, and Adleo. Edana the poetess chants the song of war, accompanied by the poets and songsters of Danann clans.

Their line of battle extends from the right side of the river, at Cong, flowing through Ashford into the Corrib, on to the north-east, towards the district known as Nymphfield, having Lough Mask some two miles or so in the rear. The Firbolg drew up along the line, which the road at present from Cong to the Neale points out, having the Corrib on the left.

Each army had erected a rath intended for a stand for the king, a place of security for the women and for the sutlers of the host, and likely too, in the caves made within its borders, a place for the cattle intended for victualling their respective troops. From the days of the *Firbolg* and the Danann conquerors, these raths are found in Ireland. The royal stand on the Danann side was known as “ Rath Fearainn,” or the “ fort of heroes,” that on the Firbolg side, as “ Rath-Cro-porta,” “ fort-of-fold-like defence.” Each of these raths remains but not identified, that of King Eochy is likely adjacent to Cross ;—Rath Fearainn, near Fair Hill. The note of battle is heard again. Both armies move forward to the attack. Darts are flung ; the air is darkened with the shower of flying lances. Shields are raised. The warlike spirit of the men bounds within them. They rush to the encounter ; shield strikes against shield ; hostile swords cleave the flesh of foes ; limbs of living heroes are strewn on the plain. The ground is red with streams of gore. The air resounds with the moans of the dying, and the cries of the maddened hosts. It is a man to man encounter. Hero slays hero, and chieftain slays chieftain, as in Troy at a later period. The fall of each mighty chief is described, but it is enough for the historic student to know that the Belgæ were victors in the first fight, and at

the close of that eventful day each victor carried with him to present to the king at the rath the head of one of the enemies slain, along with a stone to raise a cairn to commemorate the victory achieved.

An old chronicler, Conall Maceochegan, says of this terrible battle : “ Here was committed the greatest slaughter that was ever heard of in Ireland, at one meeting” of hostile armies.

Second Day’s Encounter.

The warlike spirit of the troops, or their taste for slaughter, had been excited by the terrible carnage of the first day’s fight. The Firbolg were anxious to complete quickly and at once the victory which they had already partially achieved. The troops of Nuada were fighting for their lives, and they were determined to sell them at the cost of the lives of their fighting foes. They were more intelligent too, and depended not so much on mere animal strength, and mere bodily prowess, as on coolness and plan. The Firbolg were victorious until the sixth hour. In the evening, the tide of battle began to turn with the sinking sun. They were driven back to their lines, yet they managed to bring with them for the second time heads of their slain enemies, and each a stone to raise a cairn as a sign of the day’s success.

Third Day’s Fight.

The Firbolgs arose at earliest dawn on the morning of the 13th of June. In crossing the plain of Magh-n-Eithrigh, that to the right side and to the left of the way which at present leads between the villages of the Neale, Caherduff and Cross, the Belgian warriors filed : into squares, and held their shields joined over their heads, making it were a “ Scell” *i.e.* *Scáthall*, a high shade ; (Scáth signifies shade, “al,” huge, prodigious), to protect themselves from the darts. They placed their battle spears, like trees, at intervals between the shields, and thus marched across the field of battle in “ Turtha,” or columns, and hence, says the narrator or the copyist, the plain was called by the Danann the “ Field of Columns,” or “ *Plain of the Shield-shell.*” O’Curry, however, says the field was called Magh Tura, from the *piles* or *towers* of stones erected there after the battle, to commemorate the death of heroes, or chieftains. Besides, the name is not *Magh Turtha*, it is Magh Túra (towers, heaps).

Nuada and Dagda commanded the Danann hosts. They ordered their men to form circles of defence made of large flag stones. The field to this day abounds in circular areas of defence of this kind ; a body of men took their stand within them, covering themselves with their shields against the darts and swords of their enemies. The fighting men received help from those upright flags, standing so high that one could lean against them for support, or take his stand behind them for defence. This practical plan lent great support to the Danann in the third and fourth day’s fight.

King Eochy, Sreng, and Fintan, King of Leinster, were the chief leaders of the Firbolg on the third day : Nuada, and Dagda, and Ogma were the most distinguished among the leaders on the other side. There were several brave personal encounters of heroes and chiefs. The most remarkable, because of the heroes engaged and of the history connected with the event, is that recorded to have occurred between Sreng of the Belgian host, and Nuada of the Danann. Sreng singled out Nuada, and with a blow of his great sword, smote the rim of the king’s shield, and cut off the royal arm. The king was rescued by “ Aengabla,” his northern ally. The wound was soon healed by his physician, Dianceacht (*i.e.* *Dia*, God, *’nceacht*, for “ na iceacht, root ic, balm ; and iceacht means power of healing) : *Credne Cérd*, or Credné, the artificer, made for him a silver hand. Hence, this monarch is known in history as “ Nuada of the Silver-hand”—Nuada Airgid-Lámh. The arm cut off was buried on the plain, and a

monument raised over it, on the spot where the royal blood was shed upon Cró-Ghaile, that is, the “ enclosure of the foreigners.”

The Belgæ moved north-east, fighting fiercely on towards the village of the Neale and Knoc nag-Cuach “ the hill of the cuckoos.” Sreng, the general-in-chief, and King Eochy fought with astounding bravery and valour, and directed and encouraged their men : nevertheless, the skill and cool tact of the Danann prevailed. The Firbolg were forced for the second time to retire at the close of evening to their lines, leaving the Danann victors.

Fourth Day’s Fighting.

On the fourth day, Slainge the son of King Eochy, and Slainge’s four sons with the Ard-Righ, their grandfather, and the general Sreng, gifted with prudence and prowess, determined to recover the loss inflicted on them during the second day and on the third. The fourteenth of June was one of intense heat. The king had been engaged in battle now three days. He had taken a part in two engagements consecutively. And during the early part of the fourth day he fought like a lion let loose in a fold. His lips became parched. His blood was hot and fiery. He was dying of thirst. The fight at the time was where no wells or watercourse even to this day exist. The water known and named as Mean-Uisge (middle-water) was not near at hand. The flower of the Firbolg army was cutoff. Eochy was gasping from thirst. He entrusts the sole command to Sreng, and with a hundred chosen men endeavours to cut his way across the plain from near the Neale, in a north-western direction, towards Lough Mask. The king’s flight and his fainting condition is perceived by the three sons of Nemed Mac-Badhrai. They call around them a band of one hundred and fifty brave clients, and pursue the king and his hundred men. Before the shore of the lake is reached, those are overtaken. Another encounter ensues. The hundred warriors are forced, after a desperate encounter, to yield to the one hundred and fifty Danann troops. Eochy slays his three youthful assailants with his own hand, and now, himself, expires. “ Thus fell,” says the chronicler, “ the mighty Eochy, only a few days ago so proud as not to yield or listen to any man ; now stretched lifeless on the strand, cut down by the invaders, and dying of wounds, and want of water to cool his burning tongue.” A lofty cairn was raised by the victors over his body. It is to this day to be seen, It is called *Carn-Eochaidh* from his name. “ The most extensive and remarkable cairn in the West of Ireland,” says Sir William Wilde in his treatise on Lough Corrib, “ stands to this hour on the grassy Hill of Killower, a carn about a mile distant from Lough Mask.” Sir William is of opinion that this is the carn which, after the battle, was raised by the Danann victors over the remains of King Eochy Mac Erc, the last of the Firbolg Kings of Erin. At the western extremity of the same strand, still exist the monuments of his slayers, called “ *Leaca Mac-Nemedh*,” *the flags of the sons of Nemedh*. In after times the carn was regarded as one of the *mirabilia* or wonders to be seen in Eire ; not unlike the huge pile raised over Absalom, who fought in battle against his own father, King David ; or like that pile raised over Achilles and Patroclus on the Sigeon shore. A rampart, the top of which is 2,500 paces in circumference, crowns the very summit of this singular structure, standing still to strengthen the story of this strange struggle.

“ Both parties withdrew after the fourth day’s fighting : the dispirited Firbolg to their camp along Corrib shore, and the Danann to their mountain fortress. Both parties interred their dead—the Firbolg raised *Dumhas* or *Tumuli* over their nobles ; *Leaca*, or flag-stones over their heroes ; *Ferthas* (graves) over the soldiers, and *Knocks* or hillocks over their champions.”

Three thousand men out of eleven battalions survive. Sreng and his wise men hold a council of war. They agree to send a challenge boldly to the victor host, to fight them in

single combat. According to the rules and practices of chivalry and public warfare in those days, their opponents could not, with honor and safety, decline to accept it. Instances like this narrated are presented by Homer, in the single combat fought between Menelaus and Paris ; in the battles between the Sabines and Romans, and to this time it is the practice in Abyssinia. Such heroic courage on the part of the survivors secured for them, if not all their own, at least a select portion of the kingdom, and the very best terms that the victorious invaders could have offered.

King Nuada and his counsellors were, from the commencement, opposed to bloodshed and battle ; and accordingly, on their side, they now proposed terms of peace, and proffered the undaunted Firbolg chief and his followers their choice of the five great divisions of Eire. Sreng selected that which he and his people knew best—the western province—which from him was known, up to the time of Conn of the “ hundred fights,” as *Cúigeadh Sreing*—Sreng’s Province. To this day their descendants, distinguished from the Milesian and Norman races, by well marked form and features, and their peculiarly defined physical and cranial character, so well described by Duaid Mac Firbis (A.D. 1650), possess in the west a permanent habitat. “ Their descendants, and those of their conquerors, the Tuatha De Danann, constitute to-day the great mass of the peasant people of Connacht.”

Q. 6. Are there not many who will say that accounts such as these are inventions of the ancient bards ?

A. First, in regard to all historic accounts, such as those of battles, handed down to the present time in our national manuscripts and penned generally by Ollamhs or professional teachers in Ireland, it must be remembered, that there existed a most stringent law requiring those *Ollamhs* to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, and if it were found that they had invented, or did tell what were not facts, they were directly deprived of all their privileges for life. Men holding a position in the learned professions were Ollamhs. Every judge or Brehon should have obtained the degree of Ollamh ; all and each were bound by law, by position, by fear of losing caste, to tell nothing but the truth in these narrations regarding battles. “ I beg to assure you,” says O’Curry “ of the historical authority of all the substantial statements respecting these ancient battles.” He states, we are assured of their authenticity on the highest authority. Again, “ these historical tales the Ollamh was bound, unless by hazarding the loss of dignities and privileges, to have for recital to the people.”

Secondly—There is a poem by Columkillé, in the Book of Lecain, in praise of Eochaidh Mac Erc, in which the most of the foregoing account is given.

The tract, from which Dr. O’Donovan and O’Curry translated the history of the battle is, in its present form, over fourteen hundred years old. This fact brings us up at once to the time when St. Patrick was in Ireland. Even then it was a transcript of a tract more ancient still.

Thirdly—From internal evidence the account bears the impress of truth.

(*a*) “ The story is told with singular truthfulness of description ; there is no attempt,” says O’Curry, “ at making a hero, or in ascribing to any individual or party the performance of any incredible deeds of valour.”

(*b*) From the position and course of proceeding of the bards before the battle, and during its action.

(c) From the origin of the name, “Magh Tura” *plain of towers*, which must have had a reason for the term : there must have been some cause of the *leachts*, *cromleacs*, and *mounds* which abound there, and earns and pillar-stones—all matters of such antiquarian importance, and wound up also with the historic records that describe these places and events. It is impossible, therefore, that the substance, at least, of all that has been here narrated, should not be true.

(4) Moreover, the whole account, in a condensed form, has been presented in the Annals of the Four Masters ; in the Book of Leinster, a MS. of the highest authority, published lately by order of the British Government ; in the Books of Lecan and Ballymote ; in the writings of St. Columba, King Cormac, Keating and MacFirbis.

Hence there is no suspicion of the undoubted authenticity of the Irish tract from which this narration has been taken, and of the antiquity of the work itself there is no question. If Homer had never written the Iliad, the mounds of ancient Troy, excavated within the past few years, would tell the tale of the greatness of that ancient city of Asia Minor, the certainty of the triple town built there, and the antiquity of the people who dwelt within its walls, and of the distant period when and before Priain was its king.

Q. 7. Is there any proof like that in favor of Troy at hand in favor of Magh-Tura, showing for certain that a battle was once fought there between the Firbolg and the Tuatha De Danann ?

A. There is : the late Sir William Wilde has furnished such a proof. He told the present writer the following facts. One day in the autumn of the year 1863, Sir William was reading, in Dublin, the Irish tract containing an account of the famous battle of Magh Túra. He noticed in the original, that on the morning of the second day of the fight, King Eochy went, as was his custom, to take a bath, on this occasion, into a well or stream deep down in a ravine, known as “Mean-Uisgé” (or middle water), that flows in those underground channels which convey, at Cong, the waters of Loch Mask to the Corrib ; that while performing his ablutions, three Danann warriors coming suddenly over the spot, beheld the king. He looked up, saw overhead three of the enemy, asked for quarter, and demanded a fair fight. They were determined not to give quarter, nor to accept a fair fight, but were about to descend to seize his person alive, or to have his body dead. At that moment a single but faithful guard came to the rescue of his royal master. He drew his sword, fought the three champions on a mound quite adjacent, slew them, and, from the number of wounds which he had in turn himself received, expired on the spot where he had defended the king and saved his sovereign’s life. The three Danann were interred in the mound, and on the top of it, as emblematic of the victory achieved by the King’s faithful body-guard, a “carn” or huge stone-heap was piled by the hands of his warrior comrades. The mound to commemorate the event was called *Tulach an Triuir*, and the stone-heap on top Carn-an-aon-fir, “the heap of the one man.” The tumulus and the carn received those names to honor the brave soldier who fought the three and conquered. The name of *Tulach an Triuir* kept alive the recollection of his heroic exploit. “This record of so remarkable an event struck me very forcibly,” remarked Sir William. It was a beautiful episode, well worthy of record in the history of any country or any people. But was it true ? “I happened” continued he, “to be proprietor at the time of some of the lands on which the battle had been fought, some three thousand six hundred years ago. I resolved to test the truth of the admirable record, and to search for proof on the spot where the men were said to have fought and fallen, to find the well and the mound and the “carn.” I came with tract in hand to the spot. I saw the well and the mound and the stone-heap. The *tumulus* is to this day known by the peasants as *Tulach an Triuir* (mound of the three), and the “carn,” 176 feet in circumference, crowns its summit. Most of the heap of stones had been some time ago

removed. I conceived the idea of digging the *Tulach* in order to see what was within it. For that purpose, with the permission of the then occupier of the field, I engaged on a suitable day a number of workmen. They delved and dug for some time. I thought the work was somewhat a heavy undertaking ; so I pondered how best to achieve the end in view, with the least amount of labor. The thought struck me that the Druids were in the habit of turning to the east, and of having in that quarter an opening to their *tumuli*. I directed the men to try a certain spot on the eastern slope. There, after removing a few spade-fulls of earth, they soon came upon a large, smooth, horizontally placed, gritstone flag. On raising which another somewhat larger in size was discovered. The latter remains *in situ*, and covers a small square chamber, twenty-eight inches high and thirty-seven wide, the walls of which are formed of small stones. On removing some of these, on the western side, we found embedded in the soft, black, powdery earth, that had fallen in through the apertures and mixed probably with charcoal, or the dried dust of organic remains, an urn which contained the incinerated remains of human bones." It is now to be seen in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy.

Here, no doubt, the body of the loyal Firbolg youth was burned, and his ashes collected and preserved in this urn.

Perhaps a more convincing proof of the authenticity of Irish, or of any other ancient history, has never been afforded.

If the " towns-of-the-dead" the " Nekropoles," are proof of the wonderful civilisation and refinement of the Etrurians, at a period long before Rome was founded—say a thousand years at least ; if the royal remains, with their costly golden ornaments, found at Mykenæ, are proof of early Grecian riches, refinement, and advancement in art ; if the discoveries at Troy are proof of ancient Trojan greatness, then the discovery made by Sir William Wilde at Magh-Tura, is proof of much that the writer contends for in these pages, and new to many of his readers.—See *O'Flaherty's Ogygia*, Part III, *chapters* 10, 50.

The account of this event has been published by Sir William Wilde himself, both in his work on " LOUGH CORRIB," and later still, in the Address read by him, as Chairman of the *Anthropological Department*, before the BRITISH ASSOCIATION at BELFAST, some seven years ago.

" With respect to the authenticity of the early chronicles and legends that relate to the history of these immigrations, so much sneered at by one set of inquirers, and so faithfully believed in by another, let me make two observations, one chronological, and the other topographical, of a portion of Irish chronology there can, however, be little doubt ;—for in recording cosmical phenomena, such as eclipses of the sun or moon, the approach of comets and the like, they scarcely differ by a year from that great astronomical and chronological work, *L'Art de Vérifier les Dates*, computed by the French philosophers, hundreds of years after these annals were last written or transcribed.

The other incident is of equal authenticity, in confirmation of the historical statement of our early records. Long, long before the Christian era, it is there said that a battle took place on a certain plain in Mayo ; and an incident connected with the fight is thus told :—

" A king or chief was surprised in early morning, while performing his ablutions at a deep well, by three warriors of the enemy, who came upon him unawares. By the prowess of one of his attendants he was saved, who killed his three assailants, and then died upon the spot. Hundreds of years passed by, the locality around had been cultivated and grazed upon again and again ; still the valley, the well, the subterranean watercourse with its fairy legends, the

hurling-field, the cairns, circles, pillar-stones, and other surrounding topographical features remained. The gallant soldier who laid down his life for his royal master, was buried where he fell ; and as the army (stated to have been thousands strong) passed by, each man, as was the custom of the day, threw a pebble on his grave, then called, and still known, as the Carn-of-One-Man” (Carn-an-aoin-Fir).

“ Not long ago, with the written story in my hand and possessing a full knowledge of the locality, and accompanied by a few stalwart Connachtmen, I proceeded to the spot, told my incredulous auditory the tale of their ancestors ; dug and lifted stone after stone until we came upon a smaller chamber under a large flag, wherein we found deposited a beautiful cinerary urn, containing some black earth and fragments of burned human bones. The sepulchre, with its surrounding stone circle, still exists on the battle field of Moytura Conga, and the decorated urn is in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy.”

—From the Address by Sir William R. Wilde, M.D., M.R.I.A., &c.

Q. 8. Tighearnach, Abbot of Clonmacnois, who lived in the eleventh century, and whose name stands amongst the first of Irish annalists, states “ that all the records of the Scoti, that is, the Irish, up to the time of Kimbaeth, who flourished four centuries before the Christian period, are uncertain.” Thomas Moore in his “ History of Ireland,” Dr. O’Donovan in his early writings, A. M. Sullivan in the “ Story of Ireland,” the latest historian of Ancient Eire, Standish O’Grady, and Robert Atkinson, author of the introduction to the *facsimiles* of “ The Book of Leinster” Irish MS., speak of the events before Kimbaeth’s time as uncertain and blended with fable : the question is, are these authorities worthy of credit, and if so, how reconcile their statement with that just put forward in these pages ?

A. First—Tighearnach styles the records not “ *falsa*,” or “ *fabulosa*” (fabulous), but “ *incerta*,” uncertain. To him they had been uncertain in date, in consecutive arrangement, in the matter of many of them. But the great features of early Irish history that have left indelible impressions on the national memory, and upon the physical appearances of the country, are not uncertain in their origin, in the record that has transmitted them, in the results that have arisen from them.

Secondly—Owing to the wonderful achievements of Irish archæology, many things uncertain in the eleventh century are in the nineteenth made quite certain. This truth is evident.

Thomas Moore confessed to Dr. Petrie, in presence of O’Curry, that he was himself ignorant of early Irish history ; that he had never seen the ancient manuscripts of Ireland until, in 1839, he opened the leaves of a few in the Royal Irish Academy.

“ Petrie,” cried he, “ these huge tomes could not have been written by fools, or for any foolish purpose. I never knew any thing about them before, and I had no right to have undertaken the History of Ireland.” And O’Curry declares in p. 440 of his *MS. Materials*, that “ it is *in these manuscripts chiefly* that the materials for the ancient history of the country are to be sought.” Sullivan does not profess to write regarding the ancient period of Eire’s story. O’Grady, although very learned in the Gaelic lore of Scotia Major, and fond of her antiquities, does not strengthen his position by availing himself of the great advantages offered (*a*) in the history of pre-Christian Europe, Asia and Africa ; (*b*) in the ancient languages, sciences, arts and civilisation known to the early inhabitants of Asia and Eastern Europe, and in Africa from the mouths of the Nile to Abyssinia ; (*c*) in the laws, manners, customs and religious rites practised in those remote periods. Dr. O’Donovan declared to the present writer that he, too, at the commencement of his career as antiquarian, joined in the

common opinion. Time and reading corrected the false notion. Men with a reputation for learning, scholars from the halls of Cambridge, Oxford, or Trinity, gave expression to that view ; they were ignorant of Irish History. Their presumed knowledge was taken for learning, and their nescience gave the tone to literary thought. Dr. O'Donovan declared that if allowed by the publisher Smith, to revise the second edition of his noble work, the ANNALS OF THE FOUR MASTERS, he would have corrected his early notions on these points, and have given the primary meaning of some Irish ecclesiastical terms, which at times he rendered into English to please his friends, rather than to express fully the faith and practice of the early Irish Church. He told the present writer, that his simplicity and want of courage in early life often gave him pain in his riper years and his hours of thought.

Q. 9. After the Battle of Magh-Tura where did the surviving Firbolg and their descendants make a settlement ?

A. Chiefly in the west of Ireland. They retained possession of the province of Connacht. Some held large possessions between the rivers Suir and Slaney ; others again, probably the warriors and soldiers, immediately after the battle sailed across the Corrib, proceeded to the Islands of Aran in the west, where to this hour are to be seen the work of their hands, those stupendous barbaric monuments, the admiration of antiquaries and historians, the most extensive and the oldest structures of their kind in Europe. Some sailed to Aran in the north, to Rathlin, and to the Isle of Mann ; others proceeded in a course more northerly still, to Caithness, Ross and Sutherland, to the Hebrides and Orkneys. The descendants of some emigrants returned centuries afterwards to the “ old country.”

Q. 10. What certain historic marks of their presence at one time in this island can be pointed out to the eye of an inquiring Irish student ?

A. (a) The Irish Pentarchy ; (b) Tara and its monuments, the history of which is as certain as that of Carthage or Rome of old ; (c) the Battle of Magh-Tura Conga just described ; (d) the cyclopean piles at present in Aran, and others that had been in existence some fifty or eighty years ago for instance, between Cong and the Neale in Mayo where the glebe is now erected there stood eighty years ago a great Caher, built by the Firbolg, “ and which,” says Sir William Wilde, “ was perhaps one of the largest in Ireland, and resembled Dun-Aengus or Dun-Connor, and others in Aran.”—(*Wilde's Lough Corrib*, p. 238) ; (e) the raths and caves so numerous in Ireland are the work of the Firbolg and the Danann ; not a few, however, were erected by the the Fomorians ; Rath-na-Righ within the precincts of Tara was certainly founded, and in part erected, by the Firbolg. That noble work is a proof of their advanced knowledge and early architectural skill. It is not stated that they adored the sun. Like all Keltic and Aryan nations they were acquainted with poetry, rhyme, laws, and certainly with letters. They practised in some instances cremation.

Q. 11. Were the Firbolg an intelligent race ?

A. Yes : judging from what they achieved, they must have been a brave, a civilised, and a cultivated people.

[1] *Fir-Domhna* (pr. Downa), *i.e.* the men of *Domhnann*, were, it is manifest, a sept of those known as *Damnonii*, who resided in Gaul, in Britain, and in Ireland. They are called *Damnii*, and perhaps *Daunii*. In Britain their chief seat was in Devonshire, near Cornwall, a well-known habitat of the early Keltic tribes. *Domhnann* is genitive case of *Domhna*, and in sound or phonetic value is equivalent to *Devon* in modern English.

The *Fir-Galeon*, or *Galenii*, were manifestly a sub-tribe of the Belgæ, or *Firbolg*. The name *Galli*, of ancient Gaul, and of the *Galatians* of mid-Europe ; the *Galatoi* of the Greeks, the Galatians of the East in Asia Minor, and of the West in Spain, is plainly traceable from this noun ; also, *Gwalia*, Wales ; and *Corn-wall* (wall, phonetic for *Gwall*).

The terms *Fir-bolg*, *Fir-Domnann* ; and *Fir-Gaileonn*, *Belgian-men*, or *Gaul-men* is a form of address like that in use by the Greeks, Athenian men.

[2] *Erris* is correctly written *Iar-rus* from *iar*, rear, after, or western ; and *rus*, or *ros*, a portion of land high surrounded by water, either inland as “*Ros-*”common, and “*Ross,*” in England, or, by the sea, as in *Iar-rus*, *Ros-trevor* ; *Ross* in Munster, *Ross* in the Highlands.

[3] “*Ma*” is supposed by some to be a contraction for *magh* (pr. *mawh*, in which the *h* final has an explosive sound, as in *cath* (*kawh*) a battle ; by others “*Ma*” is for *Madbh* (pr. *Mauve* or *Maw*), the name of the famous queen of Connacht in the first century of the Christian era, who reigned long, and with such power and fame, that her name has been by the people identified in Ireland and in England, under the name *Mab*, with the beings of fairy land. Those who derive the name from *magh* a plain,—call “*Knock Ma*” *the hill of the plain* ;—while in the other acceptation, it is “*Mab’s hill*.” There is a third name *Meadh* by which the hill was known before the Milesian Kelts landed in Eire. It is likely a man’s name. The defeated *Tuatha de Danann* to defy and elude their Victors selected for residences the most remarkable hills in Ireland. *Finnbharr* one of their chieftains obtained the *Sidh* or *site* of *Meadh*, within five miles of Tuam. See *Atlantis*, p. 386, Vol. III. The interpretation of “*hill of the plain*” does not convey the idea of any special and peculiar trait, for every hill can be named “*hill of the plain*.” In the tumulus erected on the top of this hill, lady *Kesair*, the grand-daughter of Noah and the guide of an antediluvian colony into this western island, is supposed to be interred ;—antiquity quite sufficient to surround the hill with mythical associations. The present *carn* on the summit is of modern date.

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