

McCarthy's History of Ireland

Ireland and her story

Justin McCarthy

1903

Fountain & Origin

As the child is the father of the man, so the legend is the parent of the history. If we would understand the story of a nation we must begin by a study of its legendary lore. We cannot thoroughly comprehend the character of a people unless we have made ourselves well acquainted with the legendary forms that people has accepted as the pictures of its progenitors. There are severe and scientific expositors of history who insist that every trace of the past should be rejected, unless it has authentic evidence to prove its reality and warrant its place. But no evidence can be of greater importance as to national characteristics than the legends which found common belief in the days when the nation was just beginning to emerge from the realm of shadows. We could not understand the people who created the Parthenon if we did not take account of the Homeric gods and heroes, nor could we comprehend the race which raised the Pyramids if we were to put out of consideration the stories which came to be embodied in "The Thousand and One Nights."

Especially is this true of the Celtic races in Europe, and still more of the race which has created the story of Ireland. The Celtic races are found for the most part in the Highlands of Scotland, in Wales, in the Isle of Man, in Northern France, and in Ireland. Among all these we find a large accumulation of poetic fable, and the same love for this accumulated treasure of ages. One of the most characteristic legends in the earliest history of Ireland is that which tells us the island was originally peopled by some race who came from an Eastern climate to the small island lying to the west of Great Britain. This theory has nothing inherently improbable in it, seeing that mankind in its earliest and most unsettled days was much given to wandering. Some set of enterprising men who found themselves oppressed in an Eastern land may well have crossed the sea to discover a new home, and at last have come upon the Irish shore. The natives of Phoenicia, on the coast of Syria, were amongst the earliest and most famous navigators and traders known to the antique world, and were always wandering in search of new homes and founding new colonies. Between the nineteenth and the thirteenth century before Christ they established many colonies along the shores of the Mediterranean, and are believed to have spread their settlements so far as the British islands. One of the favourite theories of early Irish history is that they alighted upon Ireland and were the first strangers who made a home there.

Other legends describe the settlement in Ireland of a race who came from Greece, and are known to Irish story as the Tuatha de Danaan. Their leader is said among his other triumphs to have given his name to Britain itself. The chosen home of this race is believed to have been Ireland, where the story goes that they led a stormy existence for many centuries. We are not bound to examine closely these various legends of the race which created the Irish people. But we may probably accept the theory that some people from a country far-off to the East, whether Greece or Syria, became the first settlers in Ireland. Certainly there is much in the character and in the ways of the Irish, even in our own times, which favours the belief that they owe the birth of their civilization to settlers coming from a far-off Eastern or Southern home. The most ordinary observer can see in the habits of the Irish people indications of

such an origin. The ways of the Irish peasantry are still such as might belong to a race whose progenitors lived under skies more favourable to out-door life than those usual in the misty and melancholy climate of Ireland. The Irish peasant lives as much as he can in the open air, using his cottage chiefly as a sleeping-place, and thereby suggests the conditions of a people originally accustomed to a very different atmosphere.

The most cherished legends of the Irish people also suggest this theory of Eastern or Southern origin. For the Irish people the kingdom of the ghosts is easily ripped open, to adopt the phrase Schiller applies to a different people, also claiming a far foreign origin. All the ballads and stories popular in Ireland seem to tell of a land where the supernatural and the magical make part of everyday life. The fairies are still a reality in Irish imaginings ; the soil is peopled by goblins and wizards and fantastic creatures of all kinds who have nothing to do with the common laws of existence. Every stream, well, and cavern, every indentation of the sea-shore, every valley and mountain peak, has its own stories and memories of beings who do not belong to this earth. A distinguished Englishman once said that whereas in the inland counties of England he had found many a peasant who neither knew the name of the river within sight of his cottage, nor troubled himself about its early history, he never met with an Irish peasant who was not ready to give him a whole string of legends and stories about the stream which flowed under his eyes every day. Most of these legends tell of early struggles and calamities which do not belong to the domain of history. They form pictures of a race in perpetual contest not only with the fierce troubles of human life, but with the wizardries of magic and the actual interpositions of embodied fatalities. Many of them are very beautiful and poetic, like those cherished in Wales and among the Bretons, and most of them are set to a melancholy and musical tune.

The general effect of all this is of importance when we are following out the history of the Irish race during the periods which come strictly within the domain of authentic record. They bear testimony to the growth of a people essentially imaginative and endowed with qualities not common to the ordinary ways of peoples grown up to civilization. Lord Beaconsfield once, in a famous speech, ascribed most of the troubles of Ireland to the fact that the island is surrounded by a melancholy ocean. Like many of Beaconsfield's sayings, which at first seemed to be merely fantastic, this had in it something of appropriateness. But Beaconsfield might have added that the legends and stories, the poetry and music of early Ireland, played an important part, along with the melancholy ocean, in forming the character which has always belonged to the Celtic inhabitants of Ireland. They help us to understand the story of Ireland. Wherever the Irishman, if he be a genuine Celt, wanders or settles, he never wholly loses his characteristics, and in Lancashire, in Illinois, in France, in South Africa, or in Australasia, he remains an Irishman still, and never quite assimilates himself to the habits of the people with whom he has had to cast in his lot. There was not very long ago a great Spanish Prime Minister whose family, of old descent, had been famous in Ireland, and although many generations had passed since their settlement in Spain, and he himself had never set foot on Irish soil, he still retained so much of ancestral feeling against the State which had forced his people into exile that he positively refused, even for diplomatic purposes, to learn English. I tell the story as it was told to me, and was certainly believed at the time, only as an illustration of my theory, that the genuine Irishman remains at heart an Irishman still.

For the early development of the Celtic Irishman, of the race who, whatever their far foreign origin, settled down in Ireland and made it their home, we have to look to the legends and ballads of the country. Music has always been an accompaniment of the growth of that Celtic nationality. Whenever we read the story of the brave deeds done by the yellow-vested King or Chieftain for the sake of the beautiful woman we read also of the white-robed harper

and his harp. The harp has always been the instrument of Irish song, and even in the memory of men and women not yet old its strains were heard in almost every Irish drawing-room. The songs of Thomas Moore were sung to the harp, as were the ballads of the dim days described in prehistoric legend. "The Three Sorrowful Tales of Erin" are among the most famous of Ireland's poetic legends. To a yet more distant date belongs the Lady Ceasair, who is said to have come to Ireland before the deluge, and settled there with a curious little colony composed of fifty women and only three men. The waters of the deluge swept away this somewhat disproportioned settlement ; and then another race of colonizers occupied the land, according to legendary authority, for some three hundred years. Then came the Firbolgs, who were in their turn dispossessed by the Tuatha de Danaan, who came from Greece, and who are described as profoundly skilled in all manner of wizardry and magic. Their conquest came in due time when the Milesians, a people of Eastern race who had for a time settled in Spain, were inspired to attempt the conquest of the island.

After a fierce struggle the Milesians defeated the Tuatha de Danaan, and drove them out of the country, or compelled them to seek shelter in the natural fastnesses of the mountains, and the two Milesian leaders divided Ireland between them. As the reader of legendary history will easily imagine, the two Milesian leaders soon quarrelled for supremacy. One of them killed the other and made himself King of the whole country, thus becoming, as a modern historian put it, "a Milesian version of Romulus."

The second sorrowful tale of Erin, which describes the fate of the children of Lir, is associated with this phase of Irish development. This Milesian people is now generally regarded as the parent of the Celtic Irish race. One hundred and eighteen Kings of this stock are said to have ruled over Ireland, and one of the Queens of the race is associated with the third of the sorrowful tales of Erin the story of Deirdri, the daughter of a bard renowned in Irish fable. We soon come to the legends which have for their hero Finn, the Fingal of Ossian, with the Feni around him, who, as the writer we have already quoted tells us, "stand in the same relation to him that the twelve peers do to Charlemagne, or the Knights of the Round Table do to Arthur." We need not follow any further this legendary history, but it must be said that for the existence of the legends we have authentic evidence in many ancient books and manuscripts preserved within the reach of students, and translated by modern scholars. It is needless to say that they have a deep and lasting interest for all students of history, not because we must regard them as authentic records of actual lives, but because they illustrate, as well as any established facts could do, the nature and temper of the races which preserved them and believed in them. It would be impossible for modern readers to put entire faith in them, because they are so thoroughly mixed up with the magical and supernatural as to defy the credence even of the most credulous.

Nor is it of the slightest importance to us to know whether the successive kings and chieftains and bards had a real existence. But to deny any historical importance to the fact that such legends were once accepted as history, or to the evidence they give concerning the feelings and habits of the race, would be as unwise as to deny historical value to the Homeric poems because we cannot believe in Zeus or Hera, or to the Arabian Nights because we cannot accept the genii, the winged horses, and the enchanters. Some legendary lore forms the introduction to the authentic history of every people which has risen to civilization, and from that legendary lore we may be guided to an understanding of each people's characteristics. I therefore call attention to the literature on which we have to rely for our knowledge of the races occupying Ireland before the age of what we describe as civilization had set in, and for our guidance to a thorough understanding of Ireland's authenticated history.

An energetic and widespread effort has lately begun, and is now going on, for the revival of early Irish literature and for the restoration of the Irish language to its place in the living speech of man. The movement thus far has been entirely successful, and finds enthusiastic support, not merely in Ireland, but in every part of the world where Irishmen have made a home. One of its results has even already been to make it clear to readers everywhere that there is a vast wealth of genuine Irish literature stored, and until lately one might almost say buried, in public and private libraries, in monasteries and in national museums. Only the scholars who made Ireland's early literature a special study knew, for a long time, the value of these buried treasures, but the recent movement has drawn the attention of all who care about books to these long-neglected interpreters of the past. This volume, therefore, opens with the assurance that Ireland had a great literature of her own legendary, poetic, and historical in days long before the light of Christianity had shone upon the island. The influence of that literature has to be taken into account by any who would understand the history of Ireland.

II

Struggles of the Dawn

THE conditions of life prevailing in Ireland before the Gospel of Christianity had reached her shores were very much what might have been expected from a people whose legendary lore inspired and reflected, as I have briefly described, the national temperament. The population lived for the most part on agricultural produce, although there was a certain exportation of its mineral products gold in some parts to the nearer shores of the Continent. The social condition of the island approached nearly to a form of communism under the direction of a hierarchy of elected Sovereigns or Chieftains. There was a Druid priesthood who had the care of religious teaching, and the guiding principle of that teaching appears to have been the worship of some vague, unknown supreme being whose presence was typified to mortals by the sun. The population of the island was divided into Septs, and each Sept was composed of families who bore the name of the foremost man, the head of the clan. The Chief of each Sept recognised the supreme authority of the chosen head or Sovereign of the whole island. This ruler and all the Chiefs under him were chosen by a form of popular election. The principle of primogeniture was unknown to the islanders, and the successor to each Chief was elected during that Chief's lifetime and bore the title of Tanist, the only condition being that the Tanist must be chosen from the family to which the Chief belonged. The sons were regarded as partners with their father, and after the death of the father his possessions were divided in equal shares among his male children.

The position of woman was very high was indeed equal to that of man, except where actual service in arms and the necessity of tilling and defending imposed duties on men which could not in the ordinary course of nature have become a task for women. The wife was the equal of her husband, the sisters of the brothers, and there was throughout the whole social system a respect and even a romantic reverence for womanhood more appropriate to the age of chivalry than to the days before the Gospel of Christianity had been preached to the world. Whatever Ireland may have derived from the teachings of the East, she had accepted no ideas involving the subjection of women. The Brehons were the official and hereditary judges and promulgators of the laws. The Brehons, like the Chieftains, were elected to their positions in the commonwealth.

The people lived in houses or huts built of wood or made of wattles, and even the palaces, if they may so be called, were only constructions of wood, painted over with coloured and ornamental devices. The wealth of the country consisted in its agricultural productions, its

minerals, its fish, and its cattle, horses, pigs, and sheep. Some of the Irish Septs showed much skill in the erection of fortresses for their defence, and displayed reverence for the dead by raising great monuments to their memory.

Every stranger who has visited Ireland must have been impressed by the Round Towers still to be seen in almost all parts of the island tall, pillar-like erections, which are almost as peculiar to Ireland as the Pyramids are to Egypt. The traveller from Dublin to the south can see more than one of those pillar towers standing, almost unharmed by time, quite near to the rails along which run the steaming and screaming engines of modern locomotion. It is still disputed whether these Round Towers were built long before or soon after the birth of Christianity, and whether they symbolized any form of worship, and, if so, what was the form of worship in whose honour they pointed to the sky.

It is enough for my purpose to say that the Round Towers were certainly built before authentic history had to do with Ireland, and that they testify to the existence, from dim unknown days, of a remarkable degree of artistic development. There are many indications of a love for art and skill in artistic ornament among the people of Ireland even in prehistoric times. Abundant specimens of their skilful workmanship in gold can now be seen by anyone in Irish and other museums, and a dispute has quite lately been going on as to whether the ownership of certain treasures of early Irish art ought to be vested in the British Museum, as the treasure-house of the Empire, or in the Dublin institution which represents exclusively the preservation of Ireland's historic relics. The Irish Chieftains and law-makers and Druids appear to have cultivated from days far beyond the reach of history the art of writing, and to have invented an alphabet of their own, innumerable specimens of which are still preserved and made the subjects of much learned discussion.

With the time when Christianity touched the island to take possession of it, what may be regarded as Ireland's authenticated history began. St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, and is identified with the whole development of the Irish since they became known to the outer world. His name is as much revered now by the great mass of the Irish as it was at any time since he first set foot on the soil as the teacher of Christianity. Patrick had seen something of Ireland before he came there to teach and preach. In his early youth he was carried from Gaul to Ireland as a slave, and even in his days of slavery he formed an affection for the country and its population. He made his escape from servitude, and found his way to France and then to Rome. He devoted himself in Rome to teaching the Gospel, and soon became a conspicuous figure among those who were spreading the doctrines of Christianity. But he never forgot the island he had seen as a slave, and his heart was filled with a passionate desire to convert the Irish to Christianity.

Somewhere about the year 430 A.D. St. Patrick went back to Ireland and began his work of conversion at once. The work had been tried already by other Christian teachers, but without much success ; and it was left for Patrick to accomplish a complete triumph. There is a genius for moral conversion as well as for warlike conquest, and Patrick possessed it in a supreme degree. No conqueror ever overran a fresh soil with more success than that which St. Patrick won for himself and for Ireland as a preacher of the Gospel. Wherever he made his appearance he gained believers and followers. He achieved as if by some magical spell the conversion of Ireland to Christianity, and the work once done was done for ever. He laboured for some sixty years, and when he died his body was laid to rest in Irish soil. He had found in Ireland a people in whose temperament the spirit of veneration had always played a leading part. That gleam of the poetic which belongs to the mind of the Irish peasant in the ordinary ways of his life was of itself an invitation to the principles of a Faith whose kingdom is not of this world. The Irish Celts have been since the days of St. Patrick, as before his time,

peculiarly open to religious teaching, and they had only to learn of Christianity to accept it. The life of St. Patrick is the subject of a great mass of poetic legend of which it is not necessary in this short history to take much account. All that is known for certain of his life and labours is set forth sufficiently in the brief description I have given of him. His work forms a record of his life on which no historical investigation or sceptical analysis can cast any doubt. No such controversy as to the personality and career of St. Patrick has been raised as that which Gibbon brought up concerning the identity and character of St. George. Even Gibbon could hardly have started any serious question as to the identity and work of the saint who conquered Ireland for Christianity. For a long time the island St. Patrick had converted was regarded throughout Europe as the especial home of Christianity, and was called the "Isle of Saints." Many great foreign historians, who had no particular sympathy with Celtic populations, testified to the position Ireland held in the estimation of educated Europe.

But the internal condition of Ireland began to be visited by many disturbing influences. Perhaps the fame which she had won for enlightenment and religion attracted invaders to her shores. The Danish invasion was the first of these great inroads. The Danes were a people especially given to travel, adventure, and conquest, and the mild softness of the Irish climate, the readiness with which the soil repaid its culture, must have been potent allurements to the inhabitants of a colder region with rougher seas and less temperate skies. Ireland was quite near enough to invite expeditions of conquest, and towards the close of the eighth century the hardy Norsemen effected their first landing upon Irish soil. Ireland was not at the time in a position to offer united resistance to the invaders. The constitution of the country had not grown up under circumstances suggesting the necessity of constant defence against incursions from over the seas. On one side lay what was then regarded as the illimitable ocean, and on the other countries from which she had received many friendly visitations, but had no reason to expect conquering inroads.

The island was divided among native Chiefs, who concerned themselves mainly about their local interests, and had, no doubt, their natural rivalries. In the crisis of danger they were not able to form any common league against the invaders. The warlike Danes overran Ireland and held the country for more than a century. Then there came about an event so common in the history of nationalities that any intelligent reader might be able to anticipate it. The native Irish had been conquered and reduced to servitude, not because they were incapable of effective resistance, but because the man had not yet come who was destined to show them how to organize the means and secure the end. At the critical moment the man arose. His name was Brian Boroihme, or Boru, a name ever since familiar to readers in all countries, even to readers who regard it as that of some half-mythical hero, the serio-comic invention of Hibernian imagination.

Brian Boru was brother of the King, or Chief, of Munster, and had already made himself very popular with the people in general. Apparently, he had only been waiting for the opportunity to develop the genius of a warlike commander, and now showed himself capable of turning it to the fullest advantage. He raised and organized an army, attacked the Danes, and inflicted on them some heavy defeats. He brought them to that condition of temporary humiliation which made them willing to remain in the island, provided they consented to live quietly in the seaport towns and make no effort at re-conquest. Then followed what might have been expected in the career of a conqueror. Brian became possessed by the conviction that his country would thrive better and more securely under the reign of a single Sovereign than under the separate rule of the Chiefs, and that he was the man who ought to be supreme ruler. It was the story of Alexander, of Caesar, of the first Napoleon, told at a different time and under different conditions. Many native historians insist that Brian was actuated by purely patriotic motives, that he believed Ireland could only be safe and prosper-

ous under the rule of one Sovereign, and that he best knew how to initiate such a rule. It seems only reasonable, when we survey Brian's whole career, to assume that there must have been some element of the purely patriotic mingling with his natural ambition.

He was not allowed to obtain his place of supremacy without opposition. Some of the Irish Chieftains denounced him as a mere usurper, and rose in arms against him ; but he bore down their opposition. The Irish people, who had seen their country conquered by the Danish invaders because the separate Chieftains could not unite in resistance, might well have believed that the government of a single ruler, and that ruler the man who had just overcome the Danes, would bring about a better era for their native land.

Brian was before long acknowledged as King of all Ireland, and he proved himself a most wise and capable monarch. Under his reign peace prevailed throughout the land ; the laws of property were respected, men and women could make their living in safety and no attempt was made at any uprising, even local, against his beneficent rule. The poems and legends which tell of the perfect order and prosperity prevailing under Brian's rule, although sometimes extravagant in their terms, form a very substantial tribute to the general character of his reign. When the whole minstrelsy and legendary art of a people unite in describing a certain ruler as wise and beneficent, their testimony is not to be classed with the mere eulogy of court poets and flattering pensioners. Brian had still some military work to do before his people could consider themselves free from the enterprises of the Danes. The Danish residents in Ireland began to chafe at the subordinate position to which Brian had reduced them, and they kept up a constant communication with their kinsmen and friends in the North. The result was that another expedition from the Danish shores was organized against Ireland, and a great fleet, as fleets were then, was sent to make war upon the new Irish Sovereign. Brian was now sinking into age he had had some twelve years of peaceful reign but he showed that the courage and capacity of his earlier days had not deserted him. He roused the whole country to a determined resistance. He took command himself. He encountered the Danish army at Clontarf on the Good Friday of 1014, and inflicted on them a defeat so crushing that it put an end to all likelihood of further Danish invasion.

The victory of the Irish was not gained without heavy cost, for it brought with it the death of Ireland's great Sovereign. Brian, who took but too little care for the safety of his own person, assumed that the battle was all over when he had seen the Danes defeated and dispersing in utter flight. He returned to his tent, in order, it is supposed, to give directions to officers whom he expected to meet there, or, as some say, to offer up a prayer, and was killed by one of the Danish leaders. He may be said to have accomplished the one great purpose of his life, for his active career closed that whole volume of Irish history which has to do with Danish invasion. His memory is still cherished in the national sentiment of Ireland as that of King Alfred is in England. No matter what historical criticism may do with many of the stories which glorify the life and deeds of King Brian, his figure must stand out to all time as that of a great soldier, a sincere patriot, and a wise ruler. His death was in every sense a great loss to his country. There are conditions which may justify at some national crisis the usurpation of supreme authority by a master-spirit, but the master-spirit is not always able to bequeath his own genius and authority to his successors. No Sovereign followed King Brian who could continue the work of peace, union, and prosperity he had begun.

It must be said for the Danes that they had in their time rendered material service to the country they invaded and occupied. Belonging to the race of the Sea Kings, they naturally were able to do good work in the making of harbours, and the remains of their skill are to be seen on many parts of the Irish shores. They were given to the building of towns, and history

credits them with the foundation of the City of Dublin, Ireland's metropolis, and other cities as well. After the death of Brian, when all idea of reconquering the island had passed out of the Danish mind, a large number of Danes kept up their settlement in Ireland, and it must be owned that if they did some substantial work for the benefit of the island, they sometimes exercised a very baneful influence by promoting dissension among the ruling Irish Septs and Chieftains.

After Brian's death there came up no man capable of reuniting the whole Celtic population under his rule, and the resident Danes were only too ready to avail themselves of any dissensions going on among the Irish ruling families, and to support one Chieftain or to oppose another, according as it might seem to suit their own immediate interests. Thus the condition of Ireland, when the rule of the strong man ended, became, so far as its system of rule was concerned, very much the same as before the birth of Brian. The country was once again divided into the dominions of separate Chiefs or Kings, all professing an allegiance, which was merely nominal, to the government of one Sovereign Chief. The country was divided amongst four rulers. Each of these four dominions was but a federation of tribes and families. The four divisions were those we now know as the provinces of Leinster, Ulster, Munster, and Connaught. Lagenia was then the name of Leinster, Mononia Munster, Conacia Connaught, and Ulidia Ulster. It is believed that with the reign of King Brian came into settled use the fashion of describing Irish families by the prefix O or Mac, in each case indicating descent, and showing that the head of the family was the son or grandson of some distinguished founder or leader of a sept.

There were keen rivalries and jealousies among the different chieftains, families, and provinces, and it is curious to notice how the Irish poetry of that day, as well as of a much later day, harps continually on the perils to which the country was subjected by the want of union among the leaders and people. "While your tyrants joined in hate, you never joined in love" were the words of reproach Thomas Moore addressed to his countrymen during the nineteenth century, and he but echoed the remonstrance which had thrilled on many harp-strings through long ages of the past. The quarrels between Irish chieftains found their culmination in an event which belongs to the same romantic order as the story of Helen and the war of Troy. One of the Irish nobles, the Lord or Chief of Brefni, had a beautiful wife, who attracted the admiration of Dermot Macmurragh, the King of Leinster. Macmurragh was a type of the royal savage, as we have known him through all legend and history, a reckless warrior, loving the battle-field and the chase, enjoying revelry of every kind, and utterly selfish in gratifying his desires. The fair Devorgilla yielded herself only too readily to the appeal of her lover, and was carried off by him. The immediate result was a civil war. Brefni took up arms against the chieftain who had so deeply wronged him, and the supreme Sovereign of Ireland espoused the cause of the injured husband. The story was made by Moore the subject of one of his most popular ballads. Dermot fled the country and threw himself at the feet of the English monarch, Henry II., to whom he offered allegiance. There was a combination of conditions peculiarly favourable to Dermot's desire for vengeance upon his countrymen, from whom he had had to seek safety by flight. The Norman rulers of England were a race even more formidable and enterprising as invaders than the Danes, and they had long been casting eager eyes upon the island that lay at the North-West. The ruler of the Christian Church at that time, Pope Adrian IV., the only Englishman who ever filled the Papal throne, had before this given to Henry II. a Bull of Authority over Ireland, and now the time seemed most convenient to the Norman King for making himself the master of Ireland. He did not make any decided movement on his own account at first, but looked on encouragingly while many of the Norman Barons, at the persuasion of Dermot, prepared for an invasion of Ireland. One of these Barons was Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, who is best remembered by his famous appellation "Strongbow." To make the alliance between the

Norman invaders and their Irish associate more firm, Strongbow married Dermot's daughter Eva. The Normans were splendid soldiers, trained to warfare under the latest developments of military science, and well provided with armour and weapons quite unfamiliar to the Irish. The Normans at first carried all before them. Still, the Irish resisted manfully, and, by a strange turn of fate, they now found reinforcements among their old enemies the Danes, who refused to submit to Norman occupation of the seaports in which they had settled. The resistance of the Irish aroused King Henry to decisive action. He had already shown himself uneasy about the influence Strongbow was obtaining over the Norman forces in Ireland, and apparently was impressed with the idea that Strongbow had the ambition to set himself up as a rival to the King himself. Henry summoned Strongbow back to England in order to obtain from him a clear explanation of his purposes. Strongbow was too busily engaged in war at the time to obey even the royal command, but when he found an opportunity, after an important success, he returned to England and came to a thorough understanding with his Sovereign. The result was that Henry called together a great Norman army, led it himself into Ireland, crushed all resistance offered to his conquering progress, accomplished his Norman invasion, and made Ireland a part of his dominions.

FROM the time of the Norman Conquest the history of Ireland is associated with that of Great Britain. But the sentiments of the Irish never became thoroughly assimilated with those of the conquerors. Ireland was incorporated with the Norman Sovereignty of England, but her individuality was never absorbed into that of the ruling race. Most of the great Irish Chiefs, seeing no hope of successful resistance, accepted the rule of King Henry II., and swore allegiance to him, but others held out to the last. It may seem a curious fact that the strongest and longest resistance to the Norman power was found in the northern part of Ireland, now the province of Ulster. Henry went to work to organize the country after his own fashion, and set up some great institutions which have kept their undisputed place up to the present day. He laid the foundation of the legal system and established the courts of law, which no subsequent revolution has endeavoured to disestablish. He divided the island into counties. But he also introduced the feudal system, as it prevailed in England, in place of the principle of land tenure and the arrangement between Chieftain and people which had existed in Ireland from the earliest days. His new systems of government were intended mainly for the security and benefit of the new settlers, and for a time, at least, the native Irish were allowed to maintain the old systems which they had derived from the Brehon laws.

Henry prudently refrained from any attempt to effect a complete revolution in the social and economic principles of the conquered race. It was not until a later time that the policy came into force which had for its object the transformation of the island into a mere dependency of England, compelled to adopt English systems and methods. Henry accomplished one great change before he left Ireland, as to the results of which the writers of history have ever since been engaged in controversy. He adopted a system of what must be called confiscation with regard to the lands of the Chieftains and the Septs he had reduced to submission, and divided these lands amongst his followers, with the avowed object of establishing a Norman settlement in Ireland. It may be admitted that he did no worse than most other conquerors have done at all times with the land of those they had conquered, but Henry's policy had unquestionably the effect of making the whole native population hostile to the Sovereign power of England.

The Irish Celts were devoted to the traditions of their ancestors, and no power in any human system could reconcile them to the new principles of ownership, or to the Normans as lords of the soil. For many years the history of Ireland told of nothing but continuous struggles between the Irish inhabitants and the Norman settlers, mingled with much occasional strife between one Irish Chieftain and another. The cause of these latter struggles

is not to be found merely in the tendency to jealousy and disunion among Irish ruling families. Many of the Irish Chiefs had sworn allegiance to the Conqueror and accepted his support, while others held out to the last against him. The hatred of those who accepted the new conditions for those who refused to acknowledge them must have been as intense as the hatred of the conquering Normans for the native Chiefs who resisted their rule.

Ireland then became divided into four sections. By far the largest was made up of those Irish who held out against the invaders, and whose nearest approach to a pacific condition was that state of sullen, indomitable opposition which only waits for an opportunity to attempt a new uprising. Next came the Chiefs and their followers who submitted to Norman rule because they saw no means of getting rid of it, and were ready to accept any advantages it might bring. These two sections were always in more or less open hostility. Then came the Norman settlers, who were constantly increasing because of the attractions held out to them by royal grants of land. Finally, there were the Danes at the sea-ports, whose first desire was to be allowed to carry on their occupations without disturbance, and who were ready, if occasion tempted, to offer their services to that section of disputants from whom they might expect the greatest benefit. The Norman Barons built castles and strongholds wherever they settled, ruled the people after the feudal fashion, and were their own law-makers. The estate of a Norman Baron was something very like a fortified camp, and his jurisdiction was limited only by the amount of armed force he could command. Everywhere outside these limits was the Celtic population, lying in wait for any chance of recovering the soil from the invaders.

Some of the invaders, when they had made homes in the island, grew into a genuine love for the country, and were proud in the hope that their names might become associated with its history. There was much in the scenery and atmosphere of Ireland as well qualified to exercise an influence over these new-comers as over the native race. Ireland is marvellously picturesque in its landscape, and its climate lends it a peculiar charm in keeping with the outlines of its hills, the melancholy beauty of its lakes, and even the monotonous level of its low-lying inland regions. Almost everywhere around the coasts the island is hilly, while most of the interior is flat. Some parts are even swamp-like, and these gain from the soft gray atmosphere around them a poetic beauty unlike any that could be given to an expanse of flat land under a blazing sun. There are magnificent harbours here and there around the coast, with in most places a background of hill or mountain, making each great indentation of the shore a picture in itself. There are many rivers, some broad and rapid, some narrow, all alike charming. Edmund Spenser, who lived for a long time by one of these rivers, has celebrated in some of his noblest lines the loveliness of the Avondu, which he tells us "of the Englishmen is called Blackwater." The most famous lakes in the country are the Lakes of Killarney in the south and Lough Neagh in the north, and they might well challenge comparison with Windermere or Loch Katrine, Lucerne or Maggiore. The Irish lakes have not the bright skies and glowing sun of Switzerland or Italy, but their soft clouds and gray poetic atmosphere lend them a beauty entirely their own. The Irish lake and mountain scenery is, on the whole, less bold and broken than the Scotch, but more varied than that of England, and has a charm of soft melancholy which harmonizes with the poetic dreamings of Irish legendary literature. Every lake, mountain, and valley has its own legend. On the Lakes of Killarney Irish boatmen still describe the foam-crested waves flung out by some waterfall as "O'Donoghue's horses," O'Donoghue being the patronymic of a great house, whose descendants have come down to our own times. The traveller who sails over Loch Neagh is told of the buried city whose towers may be seen shining beneath the waters. With the first dawn of Christianity upon the island the building of great churches and abbeys began almost every-where, and the ruins of some of these are still a peculiar feature of Irish landscape. Even the marshy regions have a charm for the artistic eye, and are haunted by poetic legends. The most unsympathetic

stranger travelling through the island could hardly describe it as a natural home for the prosaic and the commonplace.

It is not surprising that many of the Norman invaders who had eyes to see and hearts to feel should have yielded to the witchery of this country so new to them, and have become permanent settlers there. A new race grew up of Norman or English invaders, who were proud in later days to be described as more Irish than the Irish themselves. Most of these families can be traced through history by the Norman prefix of Fitz, as the Fitzgeralds, the Fitzmaurices, Fitzpatricks, and many others. The Fitzgeralds were probably the most numerous, and gave the title of Geraldines to the new order of settlers. Many of their descendants took a leading part in all the Irish uprisings against English rule down to the days when Lord Edward Fitzgerald was one of the leaders in the rebellion of 1798. So thoroughly is this Geraldine race associated with Irish nationality that the name of Fitzgerald would now seem to the ordinary English reader as distinctly Hibernian as O'Donoghue or O'Neill.

Except for this gradual and peculiar blending, it may be said that while the history of Ireland was becoming more and more a part of England's history, the Irish populations in general showed no signs of accepting English rule or becoming to any extent Anglicized. The land question in Ireland has always been the great trouble to English legislators. The complete revolution effected in the system of Irish land tenure after the Norman settlement was always regarded by the vast majority of the Irish as an outrageous act of tyranny. The Irish depended for the most part on the culture of the soil, and under the old patriarchal system that culture was so carried on as to identify with it the comfort and growing prosperity of the cultivator while he kept on doing his work well, as directly as it provided for the dignity of the local Chieftain. It was a sort of Communism in which the proportionate rights of the occupier were as clearly recognised and firmly maintained as those of the landlord if I may use this modern word. The great change in the national mode of life was the more unwelcome because it was the result of a foreign invasion and conquest, the expulsion of the old-time Chieftains and heads of families, and the settling of foreign masters over the conquered people. The Irish tiller of the soil had not only to accept a system of land tenure entirely strange to all his national traditions, but also to accept the presence of a foreign landlord whose language and habits and sympathies were alike unintelligible to him.

The assimilation between the settlers from England and the native populations of Ireland was peculiarly distasteful to the English Government. The rulers in England felt bound to do something to prevent this unwelcome alliance. In 1295 a law was passed which prohibited, under severe penalty, the adoption of the Irish dress by Norman settlers. The statute never had any real effect, for just then the ruling powers in England were too much engrossed with their difficulties at home to be able to enforce their decrees in Ireland. After the defeat of the English at Bannockburn by Robert Bruce, affairs in Ireland became more troublesome than ever to the English Sovereign, and the Irish Chieftains actually organized a formidable rebellion. Edward Bruce, brother of the victorious Robert, came over to Ireland to help the insurrection, which gave him a welcome opportunity for paying off national grievances against England. It is an undoubted fact that many of the Norman Barons in Ireland actually joined the forces of Edward Bruce and the Irish. Edward Bruce was crowned King of Ireland, and the insurrection for a while seemed likely to carry all before it. The English Sovereign rallied all the forces he could command for what seemed an almost desperate effort, and he gained a complete victory over his Irish, Anglo-Irish, and Scottish opponents. In this battle Edward Bruce lost his life.

The victory, however, did not accomplish much for the pacification of Ireland. In a certain sense it made things worse. The Anglo-Irish nobles who had not thrown off their allegiance to

the English Sovereign saw only too plainly what an immense effort it had cost him to send into Ireland an army strong enough to defeat the insurgents and their allies in the open field. They knew they could not count on the English Government for continuous protection if the great majority of the Irish were still bitterly opposed to them. It was one thing to gather together an army strong enough to win a single battle, and quite another to maintain such a force in Ireland as should assure the safety of the settlers who professed allegiance to English rule. The result was that many of the settlers who had up to this time resisted the process of amalgamation with the Irish Chieftains began to find that they could secure quieter daily lives for themselves by following in the steps of the Geraldines. Statute after statute was passed to prohibit this. The famous Parliament of Kilkenny in 1367 passed laws which proclaimed the heaviest penalties against any English in Ireland who adopted Irish names, customs, or even costume.

It should be explained that the Parliament of Kilkenny was one of a series of assemblies instituted by the English Government after the fashion of the Parliament then existing in England. These Parliaments constituted the first rude attempts at a system of constitutional government, and were, after their imperfect fashion, the predecessors of the Parliamentary system prevailing in Great Britain at the present day. The King summoned an Upper House, consisting of lay peers and the higher clergy, and a Lower House made up of the Knights of the Shires and burgesses. These chambers were called together with the object of enabling the Sovereign to receive trust-worthy advice from the chosen and loyal representatives of the different orders in the country. But when this system was set up in Ireland it was fenced around by so many limitations that it became merely a convocation of those who were openly hostile to the claims of the native population. Those parts of the country which were wholly in the hands of the native Irish or of the Anglo-Irish were not invited to send representatives to either House. This curious anomaly, the Parliament of Ireland, was summoned at irregular intervals by the King, and met, now in Dublin, now in Drogheda, now in Kilkenny. The whole attempt at the creation of a Parliament in Ireland under such conditions must seem to modern readers to have very little to do even with the earliest and rudest growth of the representative principle. But it is certain that if the English Sovereigns who successively endeavoured to maintain the conquest of Ireland had allowed the Irish people to express their views through any form of representation, that expression would have embodied itself in the demand for Ireland's absolute independence.

It is quite obvious that the rule of the conqueror can, at its earliest stages, only be maintained by the sword. If the conquering race be inspired by wise, just, and generous counsels, they may win the conquered into willing acceptance of their rule ; but the conquerors of Ireland at the time of this Kilkenny Parliament had not advanced far enough in civilization to trouble themselves with moral or philosophical speculations as to the best manner of winning the friendship of those they strove to govern. The Parliament of Kilkenny took energetic measures against the growing amalgamation of the English invaders and the Irish. One of these measures decreed that an English settler who married an Irish woman should forfeit his estate and be put to death, the death itself being preceded by the disembowelling process, which made a part of capital punishment down to a much later period. Macaulay has said somewhere that it was not likely a disloyal subject could feel himself won back to loyalty while the hangman was grabbing at his entrails. It is not likely that the English settler in Ireland who married an Irish wife would have felt loyal devotion to the Sovereign while the hangman was performing that peculiar ceremonial.

Fortunately, these atrocious enactments were not carried out as often as the ruling powers in England might have desired. The English Government had not the strength to enforce such a policy in many instances, and the statutes passed by the Parliament of Kilkenny were

doomed to comparative failure on both sides. They failed to satisfy the vengeance of the conquerors, and they further embittered the mood of the half-conquered. Meanwhile England had so many troubles of her own that she could not devote herself exclusively to the subjugation of Ireland.

Richard II., King of England, was in Ireland with a large force, endeavouring to reduce the whole island to submission, when the tidings came to him that Bolingbroke had landed “upon the naked shore at Ravenspurgh.” Richard hurried back to England with the hope of putting down his cousin's enterprise, but he utterly failed, and had to resign the crown. Bolingbroke became Henry IV. Richard was imprisoned for a while in the Tower, and is believed to have been murdered afterwards at Pontefract Castle. The long struggles between the rival houses of York and Lancaster were carried on in Ireland as well as in England. The Norman families settled on Irish soil were divided, as their kinsmen were in England, and for a time the Irish national question was put in the background. Civil war went on in both islands until after the defeat and death of Richard III. on Bosworth Field. Henry VII. had not time at first to give himself much trouble about Ireland. Gradually, however, his attention became drawn to the fact that the Irish Chieftains were becoming more powerful throughout the country than they had been since the Norman invasion. Henry at last determined to reduce the country to complete subjection by a process which he believed to be more statesmanlike and to promise a more abiding effect than a momentary conquest on the battlefield. Up to this time no comprehensive attempt had been made to establish by force in Ireland the whole system of government and law prevailing in England. The “Parliaments” held from time to time in Ireland were, indeed, moulded after the fashion of the English Parliaments ; but as they were allowed to retain, in the one country as in the other, something professing to be a representative principle, the Irish Parliament, with its Geraldine members, was never quite submissive to the wishes of the English Sovereigns. Henry and his advisers were of opinion that the time had come to assert the complete supremacy of the English constitution and laws over the unmanageable and indomitable Irish people.

We now come to an event of the greatest importance in Irish history, the mission of Sir Edward Poynings to Ireland as Lord Deputy. Henry sent him over to establish a change in the system of Ireland's government which should, to begin with, make the authority of the Irish Parliament wholly and avowedly subservient to that of the Sovereign and Parliament of England. Poynings went to Ireland with a powerful army, and convened in the name of the King such a Parliament at Drogheda as best suited his master's purpose. He succeeded in passing through that Parliament the measure ever since famous as Poynings' Law. We shall hear of this measure again and again during the present narrative. It was passed on September 13, 1494. It declared and established two principles : the first, that all laws existing in England should apply with equal validity to Ireland ; the second, that no measures, even though applying to Ireland alone, should be initiated by an Irish Parliament without the preliminary consent of the English Sovereign and Council. The Irish Parliament was thus to be prevented from even discussing any proposal which the King of England did not wish to have passed into law. The English statesmanship of the time seemed now satisfied that the whole question was settled for ever. Did Ireland want a Parliament ? Behold she had a Parliament, although that Parliament could not even listen to a proposal for any measure without the previous consent of the English King ; and what more could any loyal and reasonable country desire ?

King Henry seemed to believe that the main difficulties were now removed from the way of English government in Ireland, and that there was nothing more to be done so far as he was concerned. There is a story told of Henry VII. which is believed to have some historical foundation. One of the most powerful Geraldine nobles in that day was the Earl of Kildare,

and it is said that Henry had received admonitions that Kildare's influence might be a danger in England's way. Henry expressed a wish to know what was to be said against the Earl. He was told that all Ireland could not control the Earl of Kildare. "Very well," was the reply attributed to Henry, "then let the Earl of Kildare control all Ireland." There was a certain humour in Henry's answer, but he soon showed he was not merely jesting. He left to the Earl of Kildare the full authority of governing Ireland in the best way he could. This probably seemed to Henry the easiest way of getting out of the difficulty. To govern Ireland after the fashion in which an English Sovereign would have her governed seemed to him to mean nothing but unceasing civil war, for which he had now no inclination. If the Earl of Kildare or any other man had influence enough to keep Ireland out of actual rebellion, and with any semblance of submission to the English monarch, Henry probably thought that no more satisfactory plan could be devised for maintaining the connection and sparing England the cost and trouble of another invasion and conquest. The statesmanship of the time does not seem to have thought of consulting the national feelings of the Irish. It did not occur to the advisers of Henry VII. that in the exercise of such a policy might be found the surest and indeed the only possible way to a genuine union of interests and affections between England and Ireland.

Ireland and her story (1903)

Author : McCarthy, Justin, 1830-1912

Subject : Ireland — History

Publisher : New York : Funk and Wagnalls

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : cdl; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/irelandherstory00mccaiala>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

July 5 2013