

Narrative of A Voyage.

Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe and Along the Shores of the Mediterranean

William Robert Wilde

1844

Corunna.

Departure from England—The Bay of Biscay—Corunna—Costumes—Troops—The Hercules Tower

THE boats were hoisted to the davits, the anchor catted, and the last cheering note of the sailors' "Ye ho, my hearties, O!" had ceased on board the Crusader yacht on the evening of the 24th of September, 1837, as her light sails bent to the wind, and she slipt past the white cliffs of the Isle of Wight, to seek for her inmates in warmer climes that health which an English winter cannot afford. A nine-knot breeze soon took us out of the chops of the channel to where the god of the stormy water rules with undisputed sway—the sleepless Bay of Biscay—where we rocked and tossed about for the ensuing three days—the wind heading us hourly, and the sea rolling a tremendous swell. Old Neptune seemed to welcome this my first visit to his dominions with all due honours ; but notwithstanding the sea-faring philosophy of our own lordly poet, my soul *did*

—“sicken o'er the heaving wave.”

How my spirits sank within me when, lying in my birth on the weather-quarter, every swell broke upon the bulwarks, and the scattered wave, splashing over the deck, ran hissing along the vessel's side. What sensations this state begets, especially during those dark and dismal hours of night, when, in addition to the elemental war without, the ocean's roar, and the howling wind, each bulk-head and spar would express its sufferings in the most mournful complainings ! At times, these hitherto plaintive wailings would wax “louder, longer, louder still,” till, rising in full chorus, they would become as outrageous and discordant as a menagerie at feeding time ;—and then would come an interval of rest—a moment of intense stillness, as if the winds and waves took breathing time, and paused to watch the effect of their last effort upon our gallant bark, or mark how they could best apply the succeeding one.

On Wednesday, a small bird (one of the fly-catchers) hovered about the vessel, at least seventy miles off land : unable to bear up longer, it fluttered a few minutes among the rigging, fell exhausted upon the deck, and died almost immediately. Next day, a dove made its appearance, endeavouring to reach us ;—poor thing ! it came, like Noah's of old, not with an olive leaf, and the welcome tidings of land, but to tell us, that she, too, could find “no rest for the sole of her foot.” The wind continuing to head us, and freshening into a gale, we made but little way, and, to complete our miseries, the mainmast sprung at the deck ! This misfortune was remedied during the day, the mast having been “fished” and rendered secure enough to carry a trysail, under which we made land on the following morning, September 29th, and a more welcome hail never saluted my ears. The sea moderated, and we determined on running into Corunna to refit. How weary one feels on first coming on deck, after a few days' sea-rocking ; a lassitude very similar to that experienced in coach-travelling. We had

perceived it gradually getting warmer for the last two days, and now the difference of climate was much greater than we could have supposed, from so slight a difference of latitude.

The north-west coast of Galicia, along which now lay our course, is bleak and rugged, though not deserving the term bold or iron-bound. The famous Hercules light, which forms so striking an object on this coast, soon pointed to where the swollen waves of Biscay give place to the calm and secure waters of the united harbours of Corunna and Ferrol. The numberless wind-mills that crown every eminence, in full work, with their snow-white sails glancing in the sun, carried us back to the days of Quixotte and Spanish knight errantry. The sight of them, indeed, always created a smile ; and perhaps it may be here observed, that much of the extravagance we are inclined to impute to the poor Don, from *our* notions of the magnitude of wind-mills at home, is greatly diminished by those of this country being so exceedingly small. Many are constructed solely of wood, and, viewed in the indistinctness of twilight, do not require the imagination of even the hero of Cervantes to transform them into giants.

A most wretched pilot-boat came alongside, from the ragged and noisy crew of which we selected a pilot ; the similarity in feature, expression, and coal-black hair to those of a like class on the western coast of Ireland, who boast a Spanish origin, struck me instantly. The only peculiarity in costume of these people, besides the invariable red sash and its accompanying chuchilla, was their prodigious wooden shoes, which, on emergency, would almost serve them to float in. I need hardly inform those who have ever entered a foreign port, that our pilot's first inquiry, on coming aboard, was after the *rum bottle*. Except one of the forts, and a spire or two, there is little of the town seen before entering the harbour ; but on rounding the point, the whole bursts upon your view, lying principally along the beach and on the water's edge.

Corunna—that name so stamped on the page of British history—what recollections does it not revive as we ride before these once bristling walls ? Within view are *the heights*, whence so destructive a fire was poured down upon our gallant countrymen, and the tomb of their renowned leader crowns one of the bastions beside us. After waiting for some hours, the health and excise officers arrived. These officious gentry being satisfied as to the purity of our bills of health, which being in Latin, neither they nor our skipper knew one word of, we were permitted to land.

The harbour is very fine, secure, and almost land-locked ; the town forms a crescent around it, and when seen at a little distance, presents a rather novel appearance, owing to the irregularity of the white-washed houses, their green windows, verandahs, and numerous balconies, together with their red-tiled roofs and tall chimneys. There is little commerce, and but few vessels ; the latter being principally small Spanish brigantines, feluccas, and guardacostas. Two packets sail monthly to the Havannah. There are no docks, those originally commenced having long since been abandoned ; and like all continental fortified cities, the gates are shut at sunset. The streets of Corunna are wider than those of most Spanish towns ; the shops poor, the trade inconsiderable, and although containing 20,000 inhabitants, the place has a deserted and desolate appearance. The town is divided into old and new ; the former, situated on the hill surrounding the citadel, is the residence of the aristocracy ; while the new, which runs along the water's edge, is mostly composed of shops. There is a very tolerable Prado, where the inhabitants walk at dusk, to smoke cigaritas, inquire into the merits of the last public report, [1] discuss the chances of the war, and the certain destruction of the *Prentender*, as they term Don Carlos, being all violent Christinos ; and “ Spain's dark glancing

daughters" issue forth, attended by their duennas, to court the moonlight, exercise their fans, and return the salutations of the passing cavallos.

The place was at one time strongly fortified ; it is now but " mouldering walls and towers defenceless," and in many places the guns he dismantled in the embrasures. At the entrance of the harbour stands the castle of Saint Antonia, on a rock about a musket-shot off shore ;— it is in tolerably good condition, and serves at present as a state prison for the Carlists.

The costume of the females is very pretty, and amongst the upper orders black seems the prevailing colour ; but as you descend in the scale of society it is of every hue. The women have all good figures, being particularly straight, some indeed so much so, as to give the appearance of constraint ; but the head seems to be the *point d'appui*, the object of all their care, from the highest to the lowest. No matter how badly they are dressed in other respects, the head is always neat and elegant. I have seen many going without shoes, whose head-dress might be envied by an English lady of the highest fashion. Their hair, of a shining jet, is either madonnaed, or drawn tightly off the forehead, made as smooth as possible all over the head, and collected at the back into one tail, or sometimes two, often reaching far below the long slender waist. One small curl, pressed flat on each temple, is kept in its exact position for great occasions, by a black patch the size of a shilling ! Ringlets and curls are unknown, and I never saw the hair turned up—that object so longed for by the sex in our own country—so anxiously looked forward to by all *industrious* mammas, and forming such an eventful epoch in a young lady's life—the bridge from youth to womanhood—the very next step to " going out." They wear no bonnets, but the graceful mantilla of black silk, trimmed with velvet and edged with lace, is drawn half-way over the head, and hangs low down on the figure ; it is a very beautiful and becoming piece of female attire. In a few instances I saw white lace ones worn by Carlists : but caps are unknown. All the better classes carry fans, which they keep in constant motion, and the dexterous management of which forms, I should think, no small item in the accomplishments of a Spanish lady of fashion.

The complexion of all ranks is very dark, more so than one would be inclined to attribute to the influence of a few hundred miles' difference of latitude. I cannot take it upon my conscience to say that the women of Galicia are handsome ; their features are indeed regular and tolerably well-formed, with straight noses, delicately pencilled eye-brows, and beautifully modeled chins, but the want of colour and animation deadens all interest, unredeemed even by the black and brilliant eye which is universal. To this the county girls are, however, an exception ; they fully compensate for a somewhat less tasteful toilette, by a complexion bright, animated, and blooming. The gentlemen citizens are all enveloped in the enormous cloak, above which are just seen a pair of formidable moustaches ;—I never could divest myself of the idea of their having the deadly, treacherous stiletto hidden in the dark folds of the former. They seem partial to the brightest colours ; scarlet trowsers being a favourite piece of dress. The costume of the farmers is much more picturesque and national, but gaudy and of all hues, principally red and light brown : their high-peaked hats being tastefully ornamented with feathers, artificial flowers, and ribbons of every brilliant colour ;—they wear the hair in long ringlets behind, and falling over the shoulders ; and the jacket, of red or yellow, with particoloured sleeves, is profusely decorated with braid and buttons. These, with their Dutch breeches of enormous folds, give them a most grotesque appearance ; but with all this finery, they generally go barefooted, and few wear the moustache, that adornment being resigned to the more dandified citizen, who cultivates it to a most luxuriant extent.

The dress of the muleteer is peculiar ; his dark brown leathern jacket, purple velvet breeches, and great leggings, together with the sombrero or large slouched hat, which shadows his handsome dark features, deck a form often of the finest mould, and capable of bearing every hardship. These men, remarkable for the honesty of their dealings, are incessantly traversing the whole extent of the Peninsula, and many of them realize large fortunes ; they form a community in themselves, and you may meet them in great droves along the roads, each having under his care from six to twelve mules, tied in a row, laden with tobacco and merchandise, with the drivers sitting sidewise on the hinder one, and singing some of their own wild and beautiful melodies.

The farmers and the poorer inhabitants generally are a small race ; I never saw so many deformities any where, and the children are squalid in the extreme ; but with the exception of one or two blind crones seated at the gates of the town, there are very few beggars, although there is no asylum for them.

The soldiery are the most miserable, half-starved, and ill-looking set of fellows I ever beheld ; ragged and shoeless. Just fancy a barefooted corps ! The national, or city guard, would be a disgrace to any party of ragamuffins ; their dress, an old blue jacket, dirty yellow cross-belts, sacken trowsers that never saw a wash-tub, and a little grey forage cap, no stockings, and rarely shoes ; this is full dress. The artillery are somewhat better, but their long light-grey bedgowns, and high narrow black caps make them look like so many chandler's boys with tin cans on their heads. The officers are little better, though they twist their moustaches, puff paper cigars, look fierce, and strut about with all the “ pride, pomp, and circumstance of war”—surely a hungry Scot, a well-fed English, or a half-drunken Irishman ought to be able to thrash a dozen of them.

You still see the old women sitting at their doors plying with great industry the distaff and spindle, the only spinning machine now in use here. There are no public conveyances of any kind, and the only carriage is a most ill-constructed sort of cart, drawn by two half-starved bullocks of a tawny colour, and usually much too young to work ; they draw it by a rude pole and collar, and are themselves half-dragged along by a most wretched, ragged driver ; the wheels are two wooden rollers turning in wooden blocks, and as the axles are never greased, the screeching which is created is the most intolerable that ever assailed human ears. It would be hard, I think, for any people on the earth but themselves to find an excuse for such a detestable nuisance ; yet they not only tolerate but encourage it, as they say the sound drives on the animals, and it certainly looks as if they embraced this as a *dernier resort* with the miserable brutes. In the morning, when the different articles are bringing to market, you hear the bullock-carts in perfection ; indeed it is utterly impossible to hear any thing else, and when you ride into the country, their screaming assails you from all directions. The horses and asses in this part of Spain are smaller than in any other : the former have a good dash of Arab blood in them, and the Moorish or Memlook stirrup is still in use here.

The religious edifices are hardly worth the notice of a traveller, except probably on Sunday, when the aisles, which are unincumbered with pews, are crowded with their congregations, who, fetching in with them baskets of fish, fruit, vegetables, and wares of all kinds, give the place the air of a market. As to pictures, if any ever graced the walls, they will most likely be found in the cabinets of Paris, probably in that of Marshal Soult ; and as most of the religious orders have been abolished, you scarcely ever meet with a priest or a friar in the streets.

There is very little national music heard in this part of Spain, save the occasional twilight note of the guitar, touched by some fair signorita, half-hidden behind a green verandah.

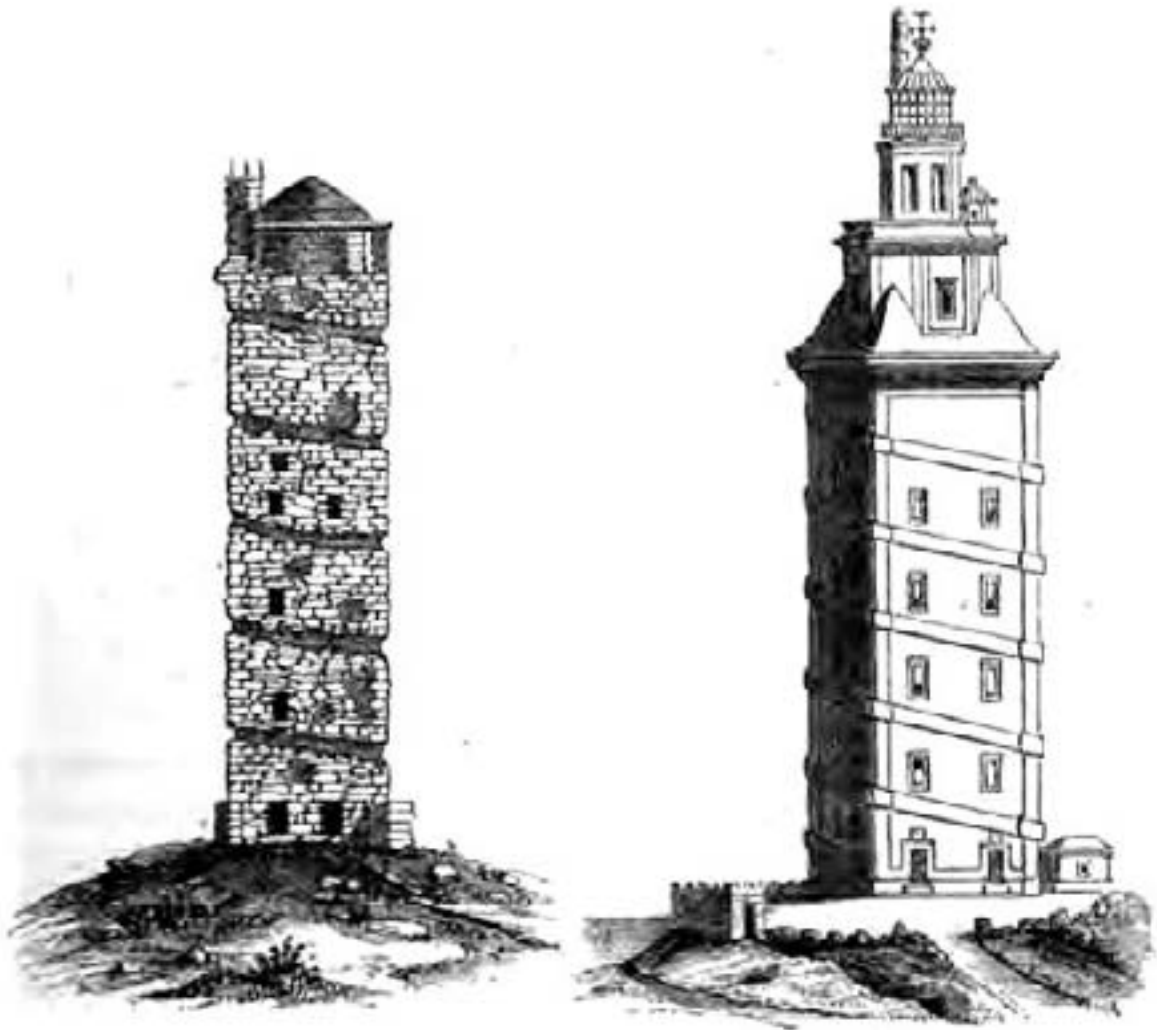
We visited the Hercules Tower, situated on the extremity of the Peninsula, about a mile to the south-west of the town. It is a magnificent square tower, rising at least two hundred feet above the level of the sea, which breaks here with tremendous violence; it stands upon a rocky base of about eighty feet, and is exceedingly well built of hard close white granite, and has an electric conducting wire extending from a small pillar elevated above the lantern to a house about twenty yards off. An inscription over the doorway states that it was built by the merchants or board of trade of the province of Galicia. It has been erected since 1809, and must be of inestimable value to mariners, as it is seen from an immense distance, and marks the common entrance to the harbours of Corunna and Ferrol ; but what adds still greater interest to it in the eye of the traveller, is the fact of its enclosing within its massive walls, one of the most interesting monuments of antiquity—the pharos of Hercules, the oldest existing specimen of this kind in Europe, and amongst the very few now any where to be found.

The origin of this (the *original* tower) and its name are involved in much obscurity. The tradition here is, that it was built by Hercules himself. Humboldt mentions, that Laborde had discovered an inscription near its foundation, stating, that “ this pharos was constructed by Caius Severus Lupus, architect of the city of Aqua Flavia (Cheves), and that it was dedicated to Mars. Strabo, indeed, affirms that Galicia, the country of the Galici, had been peopled by Greek colonies. According to an extract from the geographies of Spain, by Asclepiades, the Myrlean, an ancient tradition stated that the companions of Hercules settled in these countries.”

To the Irish antiquarian this building must be of considerable interest, from its supposed connection with the early history of this country, and its reputed Phœnician origin. Since the first edition of this work was published. Sir William Betham has stated, in his *Etruria Celtica*, that he has discovered references made to this tower in the *Eugubian Tables*, translated by him into Irish ;—the passage to which he alludes in the seventy-eighth line of Table VI. — “ mil e tin ar, a thousand from the FIRE steering,” refers, he supposes, “ to the ship leaving the coast of Spain for the Turn (Came), and mentions the fire kept up on the land for the guidance of mariners ; and also in Table VI., line 119, the words tri bri sin e, *three mountains there from*, point out Cape Ortegal too plainly to be mistaken.” In another place Sir William says, “ The name of *Corunna*, and the Groyne, are both derived from the river on which the town stands, Graronne, or garb abhar na, *the rough or boisterous river*, as the Graronne of France.” Corunna, however, does not stand on any river, and the only one in its neighbourhood is not the Groyne, or Garonne, but the Rio Burgo ; the Groyne being a term sometimes applied to this bay.

Again, “ there is,” says my friend, “ some incongruity between the accounts of Mr. Wilde and Laborde. The latter says the light-house is situated ‘ upon a very high mountain, a league from the harbour;’ ” and I have stated its position to be about a mile to the S.W. of the town, on a rock by the water’s edge. Any one, however, at all acquainted with the locality knows that there is no such mountain in this vicinity as that described by Laborde, and the position of the Hercules tower can easily be ascertained by referring to any of the Admiralty’s charts of the coast ; and moreover, a light on “ a very high mountain, a league from the harbour,” would be of little service for nautical purposes. The same authority doubts the circumstance of the original Pharos being enclosed within the modern tower. Having, however, communicated on this subject with the British consul at Corunna, I have just received the most

confirmatory proof of the fact, in the two original drawings kindly forwarded to me by him, from which the accompanying illustrations have been made.



That to the left represents the old Pharos as it stood in 1797, the date marked on the drawing, under which we find the following inscription : “ *Perspectiva que de muestra el estado de la torre antigua llamada de Hercules quando se emprendio sure-edificacion y revestimiento de canieria par orden del Real cansulado du la Coruna,*” — View exhibiting the condition of the ancient tower called Hercules when its rebuilding and facing with cut stone were undertaken by order of the royal consulate of Corunna ;” and beneath this the line — “ *Fecit Trueva Alumnus Aoademie ex Civitate partus Brigantini, anno, 1797.*” [2]

The height of this tower is about 139 English feet ; the architecture bespeaks it of no older period than that of the Romans, and tends to support the view taken of it by Humboldt and Laborde already referred to. The inclined marks on the exterior appear to have been the remains of an external winding stair, although the tower itself was hollow. The right-hand figure exhibits the appearance of the present modern tower, or “ facing with cut stone,” that surrounds the antique building, from a sketch made in 1829, and in which the original plan of the pharos is preserved. There can, I think, be little doubt but that the earliest beacon—that mentioned by Sir W. Betham, in the translation of the Etruscan tables and the Irish records—

stood likewise upon this spot, which is one of the most valuable and most commanding sites for a lighthouse in the world ; and it is of the highest interest to find so much recorded in history and so well established by the actual existence and preservation in situ, of one of the most curious relics of antiquity in Europe.

There are many traditions in this part of Spain about Hercules and his companions ; and at Betanzos, a few leagues hence, there is some curious old architecture, and also a museum, where they go so far as to exhibit the very arms of the hero, and the *leather money* used in his time ! There can be no doubt, however, that the Hercules here referred to was the Phœnician, and not the Grecian. Orosius, a writer of the fifth century, gives an account of a very fine column or pharos, which tradition in his day said had been erected by Hercules on the coast of the Celtiberian Galida, as a guide to ships coming there from Britain. Mr. G. Higgins supposes the town of Corunna took its name from this column, and says, “ there is every reason to believe that the sea coast was possessed by the Sidonian race the whole way from Sidon to Corunna, with the exception perhaps of the Delta of Egypt. Under these circumstances, it is very evident that a voyage to Britain must have been very easy, even with very indifferent ships.” We must recollect that the Sidonian colonists spread themselves chiefly along the African shore, and crossed over to Tartessos in Spain by the pillars of Hercules ; Cartage being probably their first settlement in Europe, except Greece. It is sometimes called the “ Iron Tower,” and near it, about a mile and a half from the town, one of the embarkations of the English troops took place. On our way to it we saw an old Moorish castle upon a rock, not far from the shore, and north-west of the town. From thence we passed over a wide uncultivated common covered with innumerable land shells, a small and very beautiful species of the common helix ; with a great variety of small motley green lizards, and grasshoppers of all hues, chirping and springing about in all directions in the warm sunshine. The *Datura Stramonium* grows here and there in great luxuriance, and was then in both flower and fruit, and also a small shrubby daphne, with a white flower, and reddish berry. The meadow saffron (*colchicum autumnale*) flourishes here in great profusion, the hills about the light-house being literally covered with it, and as it is now in full blow, its light pink flowers produce a very gay, lively appearance; and the charming belladonna lily lends its graceful form to beautify nature’s verdant carpet. The soil, which is of a light and sandy character, is principally cultivated with Indian corn.

[1] Lies are rife here ; one evening during our stay we were surprised at the sight of the town illuminated, accompanied with great rejoicing. We found it was for a victory said to have been gained over the Carlists near Madrid, in which the rebel force was totally annihilated. A few days after, other accounts arrived, by which it appeared that an engagement had taken place, but with a different result, four *Christinos* having been killed, the rest running away, “ to live to fight another day.”

[2] The most remarkable circumstance attending this tower is the coincidence of an account of its building being preserved in the oldest Irish MSS., and the most remote traditional history of Ireland, which appears to be but an allegorical account of the acts of the Phœnicians. The Gadelians are, in Irish history, stated to have migrated over all the known world of the ancients, ‘ from their original country to Egypt, from thence to Crete, from Crete to Scythia, from thence to Gothia, then to Spain, from thence to Scythia, again to Egypt, then to Thrace, then to Gothia, again to Spain, and then to Ireland.’ This apparent rigmarole, in other words means nothing more than that the Celtæ, or Gadelians, carried on commercial navigation to and from all these countries, and eventually found their way

to Ireland. This is related by Giolla Keavin, an Irish poet, who lived about A.D. 1072, in a poem called *Ream re Riogh*, or the *Race of Kings*.

‘ Braha the son of worthy Deyaha
Sailed from Crete to Sicily
In four good ships, which after
Bore him to Spain, in the south of Europe.’

“ Braha is said to have had a son Breogan, who had a son *Galamh*, or *the victorious*, who was afterwards in Irish history called Milesian, or Milesius. It is related of Breogan that he *built a watch tower* in Galicia in Spain, and that there had been traffic between Spain and Ireland previously to the building of this tower, which was for the purpose of assisting in the intercourse between the two countries. Ith, the son of Breogan, is said to have seen Ireland, like a cloud in a winter’s evening, from the top of Breogan’s Tower. That is, in more simple language, he contemplated the direct passage across the sea, even in the winter, by means of the lighthouse erected on the *Bri gan*, *bri*, *mountain*, *gan*, *extreme*, or *the farthest mountain to the north*. Whether there was ever such a man as Breogan, or whether he obtained the name from building the tower, is a question not necessary to inquire into, but the fact of such a tower still existing in this spot, and there being the same tradition respecting it in Galicia is a strong corroboration of the truth of the Irish historical tradition.

“ In the Annals of the Four Masters is an account of this tower, and also in the Book of Ballymote, in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, is the following passage :—

“ ‘ Bai mac maith ag brath .i. breogan aga noernadh tor mbreogan 7 in cathair .i. brigandisa a hainm a tir breogain .o. ad ceas crir ifeascur geaimrigh .i. osdhche rhamhna ad condaire ith mc breogain amhigl ro chan gilla caeman in dsan.

“ ‘ Brath had a noble son, viz. Breogan, by whom was built the Tower of Breogan, and the city called Brigandsia. From the tower of Breogan, by the bye, Ireland was beheld, on a winter’s evening, namely, on the night of Laman (i. e. All-Hallows.) Ith, the son of Breogan beheld it, as Giolla Caemhan has sung :—

STANZA XXXIX.

Do bris mor camloñ is cath
For slragh neaspam nillathach
Breogan na nglor is na nglia
less do ronda brisgandisa

Great skirmishes and battles were fought
Against the renowned Spanish hosts.
By Breogan, of deeds and battles.
By him was founded Brigandsia.

“ The meaning of the name *Brigandsia*, is the *mountain most remote*, *bri gand sia*, and the founding alluded to the tower, rather than a town. The same account is to be found in *Ledbhar Oabhiaiag*, or *Book of Conquests*, a *History of Ireland of good reputation*.

“ The authority of Keating has been so mach stigmatised, by the translation published by Dermot O’Connor, that I have been unwilling to quote any thing from him, but the original is written in an honest spirit, free from the many absurdities and amplifications of the translator. The translation by W. Haliday is much better. Henry O’Hart, a schoolmaster in the county Sligo, about 1686, made a good translation, the original of which is in my possession. The following extract from it shows that he considered Corunna and Breoghain’s Tower the same, though Peter Walsh makes it Compotrtella :—

“ ‘ Then Lughaign, the son of Ith, went to Tuir Breoghain, or Corunna, and showed his father’s dead body unto the posterity of Breoghain, &c’

“ Again—‘ Then they ship themselves at Corunna, or Tuir Breoghain, in Galicia, (leaving Spain among the forraigners, like a boane among a company of quarrelling cures,) and to sea they goe in thirty shippes, each whereof carried thirty valiant men, besides their women, and a number of the vulgar sorte under their forty-nine commanders, viz. eight sons of Breoghain, viz. Breagha, from whom Magh Breaghe, or *Meath*,” &c. &c.

[*Etruria Celtica—Etruican Literature and Antiquities investigated, by Sir William Betham. 2 vols, 8vo. Dublin, 1842.*]

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