

Story and Tradition

The story of the Irish race : a popular history of Ireland

Seumas MacManus

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THIS is an attempt to sketch a rough and ready picture of the more prominent peaks that rise out of Ireland's past—the high spots in the story of our race.

The writer was impelled to the compilation of this story of our race by the woeful lack of knowledge on the subject which he found in the four corners of America, among all classes of people, alike the intelligent and the ordinary. With the vast majority of America's intellectual ones he found Ireland's past as obscure as the past of Borneo. On three occasions he was asked by educated women who were pillars in their Societies, Has Ireland got a history ?

To a large extent the blame for American ignorance of Ireland's story rests upon the ignorance of our own exiles, and the children of those exiles. Were these possessed of a general knowledge of Ireland's past, and the proper pride that must come of that knowledge, the good Americans around them would catch information by contagion. The writer hopes that even this crude compendium may put some of the necessary knowledge and pride in the minds and hearts of his people—and also the incentive to seek out and study the history of the country that endowed them with the rare riches, spiritual and mental, that characterises the far-wandered children, and children's children, of the Gael.

Also it is to be hoped that many of the general American public, ever sympathetic toward Ireland, may, through the aid of this rough record, graduate from a state of instinctive sympathy and love to the beginning of an intelligent one.

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EARLY COLONISATIONS

THE Irish Race of to-day is popularly known as the Milesian Race, because the genuine Irish (Celtic) people were supposed to be descended from Milesius of Spain, whose sons, say the legendary accounts, invaded and possessed themselves of Ireland a thousand years before Christ. [1]

But it is nearly as inaccurate to style the Irish people pure Milesian because the land was conquered and settled by the Milesians, as it would be to call them Anglo-Norman because it was conquered and settled by the twelfth century English.

The Races that occupied the land when the so-called Milesians came, chiefly the Firbolg and the Tuatha De Danann, [2] were certainly not exterminated by the conquering Milesians. Those two peoples formed the basis of the future population, which was dominated and guided, and had its characteristics moulded, by the far less numerous but more powerful Milesian aristocracy and soldiery.

All three of these races, however, were different tribes of the great Celtic family, who, long ages before, had separated from the main stem, and in course of later centuries blended again into one tribe of Gaels—three derivatives of one stream, which, after winding their several ways across Europe from the East, in Ireland turbulently met, and after eddying, and surging tumultuously, finally blended in amity, and flowed onward in one great Gaelic stream.

Of these three certain colonisations of Ireland, the Firbolg was the first. Legend says they came from Greece, where they had been long enslaved, and whence they escaped in the captured ships of their masters.

In their possession of Ireland the Firbolgs were disturbed by the descents and depredations of African sea-rovers, the Fomorians, who had a main stronghold on Tory Island, off the Northwest Coast.

But the possession of the country was wrested from the Firbolgs, and they were forced into partial serfdom by the Tuatha De Danann (people of the goddess Dana), who arrived later.

Totally unlike the uncultured Firbolgs, the Tuatha De Danann were a capable and cultured, highly civilized people, so skilled in the crafts, if not the arts, that the Firbolgs named them necromancers ; and in course of time both the Firbolgs and the later-coming Milesians created a mythology around these.

The great Irish historiographer, Eugene O'Curry, says : "The De Danann were a people remarkable for their knowledge of the domestic, if not the higher, arts of civilized life"—and he furthermore adds that they were apparently more highly civilized than even their conquerors, the Milesians.

In a famed battle at Southern Moytura (on the Mayo-Galway border) it was that the Tuatha De Danann met and overthrew the Firbolgs. There has been handed down a poetical account of this great battle—a story that O'Curry says can hardly be less than fourteen hundred years old—which is very interesting, and wherein we get some quaint glimpses of ancient Irish ethics of war (for even in the most highly imaginative tale, the poets and seanachies of all times, unconsciously reflect the manners of their own age, or of ages just passed) . The Firbolgs, only too conscious of the superiority of the newcomers, used every endeavour to defer the fatal encounter. When the armies were drawn up in seeming readiness, the Firbolgs refused to begin battle. And they coolly replied to the impatient enemy that they could not say when they would be ready to begin. They must have time to sharpen their swords, and time to put their spears in order, to furbish their armour, and brighten their helmets. The Tuatha De Danann had better restrain their impetuosity. Tremendous things hung upon the outcome of this fight, and they, wisely, were not going to be rushed into it until the last rod in the last (wicker work) shield was perfect.

Moreover, they observed that their opponents had a superior kind of light spear : so time must be given them to get like weapons made. And they magnanimously pointed out to the Tuatha De Danann that, on the other hand, as they, the Firbolgs, had the advantage of possessing *craisechs*, heavy spears that could work great destruction, the De Danann needed to provide themselves with *craisechs*. Anything and everything to stave off the dread matching of courage and skill. Altogether they most skillfully managed to keep the enemy fretting and fuming with impatience for a hundred days and five before the great clash resounded to the heavens.

But the De Danann gained an important point also. For, as the Firbolgs were possessed of overwhelming numbers, the strangers demanded that they eliminate their majority and fight on equal terms, man for man—which the laws of battle-justice unfortunately compelled the reluctant Firbolgs to agree to.

The battle raged for four days. Then the Firbolgs, finding themselves beaten, but pretending not to know this, proposed that the doubtful struggle be ended by halting the great hosts and pitting against each other a body of 300 men from each side. So bravely had the losing ones fought, and so sorely exhausted the De Danann, that the latter, to end the struggle, were glad to leave to the Firbolgs that quarter of the Island wherein they fought, the province now called Connaught. And the bloody contest was over.

The Firbolgs' noted King, Eochaid, was slain in this great battle. But the greatest of their warriors, Sreng, had maimed the De Danann King, Nuada, cutting off his hand—and by that stroke deposed

him from the kingship. Because, under the De Danann law (and ever after in Eirinn) no king could rule who suffered from a personal blemish.

The great warrior champion of the De Danann, Breas (whose father was a Fomorian chief) filled the throne while Nuada went into retirement, and had made for him a silver hand, by their chief artificer, Creidné.

Breas, says the legend, ruled for seven years. He incensed his people by indulging his kin, the Fomorians, in their depredations. And he was finally deposed for this and for another cause that throws light upon one of the most noted characteristics of the people of Eire, ancient and modern. Breas proved himself that meanest of all men, a king ungenerous and inhospitable—lacking open heart and open hand—“The knives of his people” it was complained, “were not greased at his table, nor did their breath smell of ale, at the banquet. Neither their poets, nor their bards, nor their satirists, nor their harpers, nor their pipers, nor their trumpeters, nor their jugglers, nor their buffoons, were ever seen engaged in amusing them in the assembly at his court.” So there was mighty grumbling in the land, for that it should be disgraced by so unkingly a king. And the grumbling swelled to a roar, when, in the extreme of his niggardliness, he committed the sin, unpardonable in ancient Ireland, of insulting a poet. Cairbre, the great poet of the time, having come to visit him, was sent to a little bare, cold apartment, where a few, mean, dry cakes upon a platter were put before him as substitute for the lavish royal banquet owed to a poet. In hot indignation he quitted the abode of Breas, and upon the boorish king composed a withering satire, which should blight him and his seed forever. Lashed to wrath, then, by the outrage on a poet’s sacred person the frenzied people arose, drove the boor from the throne, and from the Island—and Nuada *Airgead Lam* (of the Silver Hand) again reigned over his people.

Breas fled to the Hebrides, to his father, Elatha, the chief of the Fomorians, where, collecting a mighty host of their sea-robbers, in as many ships as filled the sea from the Hebrides to Ireland, they swarmed into Eirinn—and gave battle to the De Danaan at Northern Moytura, in Sligo. In this, their second great battle, the De Danann were again victorious. They routed their enemy with fearful slaughter, and overthrew the Fomorian tyranny in the island forever. The famous Fomorian chief, Balor of the Evil Eye, whose headquarters was on Tory Island, off the Northwest coast, was slain, by a stone from the sling of his own grandson, the great De Danann hero, Lugh. But Balor had slain King Nuada before he was himself dispatched.

This famous life and death struggle of two races is commemorated by a multitude of cairns and pillars which strew the great battle plain in Sligo—a plain which bears the name (in Irish) of “the Plain of the Towers of the Fomorians.” The De Danann were now the undisputed masters of the land. So goes the honored legend.

II

THE TUATHA DE DANANN

OVER the island, which was now indisputably De Danann, reigned the hero, Lugh, famous in mythology. And after Lugh, the still greater Dagda—whose three grandsons, succeeding him in the sovereignty, were reigning, says the story, when the Milesians came.

Such a great people were the De Danann, and so uncommonly skilled in the few arts of the time, that they dazzled even their conquerors and successors, the Milesians, into regarding them as mighty magicians. Later generations of the Milesians to whom were handed down the wonderful traditions of the wonderful people they had conquered, lifted them into a mystic realm, their greatest ones becoming gods and goddesses, who supplied to their successors a beautiful mythology.

Most conquerors come to despise the conquered, but here they came to honor, almost to worship those whom they had subdued which proves not only greatness in the conquered, but also bigness of mind and distinctiveness of character in the conquerors.

The De Danann skill in the arts and crafts in course of time immortalised itself in beautiful legends among the Milesians. Lugh was not only the son of a god (of Manannan MacLir, the sea-god), and the greatest of heroes, but tradition gave him all the many mortal powers of his people, so that he was called Sab Ildanach meaning Stem of all the Arts. When the De Danann had first arrived in Ireland Lugh went to the court of Eochaid, the Firbolg king at Tara, and sought an office. But no one was admitted a member of this court unless he was master of some art or craft not already represented there. The doorkeeper barring Lugh's way demanded on what ground he sought to be admitted. Lugh answered that he was a *saer* (carpenter). No, they had a good *saer* in the court already. Then he said he was a good smith. They had an able smith, also. Well, he was a champion. They already had a champion. Next, he was a harper. They had a wonderful harper, too. Then a poet and antiquarian. They had such—and of the most eminent. But he was a magician. They had many Druids, adepts in the occult. He was a physician. They had the famous physician, Diancecht. He was a cupbearer. They had nine. Then, a goldsmith. They had the famous Creidné. [3] “Then,” said Lugh, “go to your king, and ask him if he has in his court any man who is at once master of all these arts and professions. If he has, I shall not ask admittance to Tara.”

Eochaid, the King, was overjoyed. He led in the wonderful Lugh, and put him in the chair of the ard-ollam, the chief professor of the arts and sciences.

The Dagda, who reigned just before the coming of the Milesians, was the greatest of the De Danann. He was styled Lord of Knowledge and Sun of all the Sciences. His daughter, Brigit, was a woman of wisdom, and goddess of poetry. The Dagda was a great and beneficent ruler for eighty years.

III

THE MILESIAINS

THE sixteenth-century scholar, O'Flaherty, fixes the Milesian invasion of Ireland at about 1000 B.C.—the time of Solomon. Some modern writers, including MacNeill, say that they even came at a much later date. There are, however, philologists and other scientific inquirers, who to some extent corroborate O'Flaherty's estimate.

It is proven that the Celts whencesoever they came, had, before the dawn of history, subjugated the German people and established themselves in Central Europe. At about the date we have mentioned, a great Celtic wave, breaking westward over the Rhine, penetrated into England, Scotland, and Ireland, Subsequently a wave swept over the Pyrenees into the Spanish Peninsula. Other waves came westward still later.

The studies of European scholars have shown that these Celts were an eminently warlike people, rich in the arts of civilized life, who subdued and dominated the ruder races, wherever they went on the Continent. They were possessed of “a high degree of political unity, had a single king, and a wise and consistent external policy.” Mostly, however, they seem to have been a federation of patrician republics. At various times they had allied themselves with the Greeks to fight common enemies. They gave valuable service to, and were highly esteemed by Philip, and by his son, the great Alexander. In an alliance which they made with Alexander, before he left on his Asiatic expedition, it was by the elements they swore their fealty to the pact—just as we know they continued to swear in Ireland, down to the coming of Christianity in the fifth century.

They piqued Alexander's pride by frankly telling him that they did not fear him—only feared Heaven. They held sway in Central Europe through long centuries. A Celtic cemetery discovered at Hallstatt in upper Austria proves them to have been skilled in art and industries as far back as 900 B.C.—shows them as miners and agriculturists, and blessed with the use of iron instruments. They invaded Italy twice, in the seventh and in the fourth centuries before Christ. In the latter time they were at the climax of their power. They stormed Rome itself, 300 B.C.

The rising up of the oppressed Germans against them, nearly three centuries before Christ, was the beginning of the end of the Continental power of the Celt. After that they were beaten and buffeted by Greek and by Roman, and even by despised races—broken, and blown like the surf in all directions. North and South, and East and West. A fugitive colony of these people, that had settled in Asia Minor, in the territory which from them (the Gaels) was called Galatia, and among whom Paul worked, was found to be still speaking a Celtic language in the days of St. Jerome, five or six hundred years later. Eoin MacNeill and other scientific enquirers hold that it was only in the fifth century before Christ that they reached Spain—and that it was not via Spain but via north-western France and Britain that they, crushed out from Germany, eventually reached Ireland. In Cæsar’s day the Celts (Gauls) who dominated France used Greek writing in almost all their business, public or private.

The legendary account of the origin of the Gaels and their coming to Ireland is as follows :

They came first out of that vast undefined tract, called Scythia—a region which probably included all of Southwest Europe and adjoining portions of Asia. They came to Ireland through Egypt, Crete, and Spain. They were called Gaedhal (Gael) because their remote ancestor, in the days of Moses, was Gaodhal Glas. When a child, Moses is said to have cured him of the bite of a serpent—and to have promised, then, that no serpent or other poisonous thing should infest the happy western island that his far posterity would one day inhabit. Niul, a grand-son of Gaodhal, who had been invited as an instructor into Egypt by one of the Pharaohs, married Pharaoh’s daughter Scotia—after whom Ireland was, in later ages, called Scotia. And the Irish Scoti or Scots are the descendants of Niul and Scotia. In Egypt Niul and his people grew rich and powerful, resented the injustice of a later Pharaoh, were driven from the land, and after long and varied wanderings, during succeeding ages, reached Spain. When, after they had long sojourned in Spain, they heard of Ireland (perhaps from Phœnician traders) and took it to be the Isle of Destiny, foretold for them by Moses, their leader was Miled or Milesius, whose wife also was a Pharaoh’s daughter, and named Scotia. Miled’s uncle, Ith, was first sent into Ireland, to bring them report upon it. But the Tuatha De Danann, suspecting the purpose of his mission, killed Ith.

Miled having died in Spain, his eight sons, with their mother, Scotia, their families and followers, at length set out on their venturous voyage to their Isle of Destiny. [4]

In a dreadful storm that the supposedly wizard De Danann raised up against them, when they attempted to land in Ireland, five of the sons of Milesius, with great numbers of their followers, were lost, their fleet was dispersed and it seemed for a time as if none of them would ever enjoy the Isle of Destiny.

Ancient manuscripts preserve the prayer that, it is said, their poet, Amergin, now prayed for them—

“ I pray that they reach the land of Eirinn, those who are riding upon the great, productive, vast sea :

“ That they be distributed upon her plains, her mountains, and her valleys; upon her forests that shed showers of nuts and all fruits ; upon her rivers and her cataracts; upon her lakes and her great waters ; upon her spring-abounding hills :

“ That they may hold their fairs and equestrian sports upon her territories :

“ That there may be a king from them in Tara; and that Tara be the territory of their many kings:

“ That noble Eirinn be the home of the ships and boats of the sons of Milesius :

“ Eirinn which is now in darkness, it is for her that this oration is pronounced :

“ Let the learned wives of Breas and Buaigne pray that we may reach the noble woman, great Eirinn.

“ Let Eremon pray, and let Ir and Eber implore, that we may reach Eirinn.”

Eventually they made land—Eber with the survivors of his following landing at Inver Sceni, in Bantry Bay; and afterwards defeating a De Danann host under Queen Eiré but losing their own Queen Scotá in the fray—and Eremon with his people at Inver Colpa (mouth of the Boyne).

When they had joined their forces, in Meath, they went against the De Danann in general battle at Tailte, and routed the latter with great slaughter. The three kings and the three queens of the De Danann were slain, many of them killed, and the remainder dispersed.

The survivors fled into the remote hills and into the caves. Possibly the glimpses of some of these fugitive hill-dwellers and cave-dwellers, caught in twilight and in moonlight, by succeeding generations of Milesians, coupled with the seemingly magical skill which they exercised, gave foundation for the later stories of enchanted folk, fairies, living under the Irish hills.

Though, a quaint tale preserved in the ancient Book of Leinster says that after Tailte it was left to Amergin, the Milesian poet and judge, to divide Eirinn between the two races, and that he shrewdly did so with technical justice—giving all above ground to his own people, and all underground to the De Danann !

Another pleasant old belief is that the De Danann, being overthrown, were assembled by their great immortal Mannanan at Brugh of the Boyne, where, after counselling together, it was decided that, taking Bodb Derg, son of the Dagda, as their king, and receiving immortality from Mannanan, they should distribute themselves in their spirit land under the happy hills of Ireland— where they have, ever since, enjoyed never-ending bliss. [5]

Of the Milesians, Eber and Eremon divided the land between them—Eremon getting the Northern half of the Island, and Eber the Southern. The Northeastern corner was accorded to the children of their lost brother, Ir, and the Southwestern corner to their cousin Lughaid, the son of Ith.

An oft-told story says that when Eber and Eremon had divided their followers, each taking an equal number of soldiers and an equal number of the men of every craft, there remained a harper and a poet. Drawing lots for these, the harper fell to Eremon and the poet to Eber—which explains why, ever since, the North of Ireland has been celebrated for music, and the South for song.

The peace that fell upon the land then, and the happiness of the Milesians, was only broken, when, after a year, Eber’s wife discovered that she must be possessed of the three pleasantest hills in Eirinn, else she could not remain one other night in the Island. Now the pleasantest of all the Irish hills was Tara, which lay in Eremon’s half. And Eremon’s wife would not have the covetousness of the other woman satisfied at her expense. So, because of the quarrel of the women, the beautiful peace of the Island was broken by battle. Eber was beaten, and the high sovereignty settled upon Eremon.

It was in his reign, continues the legend, that the Cruithnigh or Picts arrived from the Continent. They landed in the south-west, at the mouth of the River Slaney (Inver Slaigne). A tribe of Britons who fought with poisoned arrows were at the time ravaging that corner of the Island. The Picts helped to drive out the marauders, and in reward were granted a settlement there, from Crimthann, the chief of that quarter. Afterwards they had an outfall with Crimthann—and it was decided that they should be passed into Alba (Scotland). [6] The three Pictish chiefs were given Irish wives to take to Alba with them, on condition that hence- forth their royal line should descend according to the female succession—which, it is said, was henceforth the law among the Alban Picts.

Eremon’s victory over Eber had slight effect in fixing on his lineage the succession to the overlordship : for, through many hundreds of years afterward, the battle had to be refought, and the question

settled once more—sometimes to the advantage of the Eremonians, sometimes to that of the Eberians. A warlike people must have war. Occasionally, during the reigns of the early Milesian kings, this want was filled for them by the Fomorians, who, though disastrously defeated by the De Danann at Northern Moytura, were far from being destroyed. Irial, the prophet, the grandson of Eremon, and third Milesian king of Ireland, had to fight them again. And at many other times the Island suffered from their depredations.

Names of a long list of kings, from Eremon downward, and important particulars regarding many of them, were preserved by the historical traditions—traditions that were as valuable, and as zealously guarded, as are the written State Records of modern days. [7] The carefully trained *filé*, who was poet, historian, and philosopher, was consecrated to the work—and, ever inspired with the sacredness of his trust, he was seldom known to deviate from the truth in anything of importance—however much he confessedly gave his imagination play in the unimportant details. And, much as the people revered him, they revered the truth of history more; and it was the law that a file, discovered falsifying, should be degraded and disgraced.

The Scottish historian Pinkerton, who was hardly sympathetic, admits : “ Foreigners may imagine that it is granting too much to the Irish to allow them lists of kings more ancient than those of any other country of modern Europe. But the singularly compact and remote situation of that Island, and the freedom from Roman conquest, and from the concussion of the Fall of the Roman Empire, may infer this allowance not too much.”

And the British Camden, another authority not partial to Ireland, but sometimes hostile, says : “ They deduced their history from memorials derived from the most profound depths of remote antiquity, so that compared with that of Ireland, the antiquities of all other nations is but novelty, and their history is but a kind of infancy.”

Standish O’Grady in his “ Early Bardic History of Ireland” says : “ I must confess that the blaze of Bardic light which illuminates those centuries at first dazzles the eye and disturbs the judgment . . . (but) that the Irish kings and heroes should succeed one another, surrounded by a blaze of Bardic light, in which both themselves and all those who were contemporaneous with them are seen clearly and distinctly, was natural in a country where in each little realm or sub-kingdom the *ard-ollam* was equal in dignity to the King, as is proved by the equivalence of their *eric*. The dawn of English history is in the seventh century—a late dawn, dark and sombre, without a ray of cheerful sunshine; that of Ireland dates reliably from a point before the commencing of the Christian Era—illuminated with that light which never was on sea or land—thronging with heroic forms of men and women—terrible with the presence of the supernatural and its over-reaching power.” [8]

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Some Notable Milesian Royalties

THE popular traditions give details regarding many notable Milesian royalties in the decade of centuries before the Christian Era.

Within the first century after Eremon, is said to have reigned the distinguished Tighernmas (seventh of the Milesian line) who, they say, first smelted gold, and introduced gold ornaments, and gold fringes on dress. He also introduced various colours into dresses. Sometimes to him, sometimes to his successor, Eochaid, is credited the ancient ordinance which distinguished the various classes and professions by the colours in their dress. A King or Queen might wear seven colours; a poet or Ollam six; a chieftain five; an army leader four; a land-owner three; a rent-payer two; a serf one colour only.

Tighernmas and two-thirds of his people were wiped out when they were assembled in the plain of Magh Slecht in Brefni, at worship of Crom Cruach—a great idol which St. Patrick in his day destroyed.

All the stories say that the greatest king of those faraway times was the twenty-first Milesian king, known to fame as Ollam Fodla (Ollav Fola) who blessed Ireland in a reign of forty years, some seven or eight centuries before the Christian Era. His title, Ollam Fodla, Doctor of Wisdom, has preserved his memory down the ages. The legends indicate that he was a true father to his people, and an able statesman. He organised the nation for efficiency—divided it into cantreds, appointed a chief over every cantred, a brugaid (magistrate) over every territory, and a steward over every townland. Some traditions say that he established a School of Learning. And as crowning glory he established the celebrated Feis of Tara, the great triennial Parliament of the chiefs, the nobles, and the scholars of the nation, which assembled on Tara Hill once every three years to settle the nation's affairs. This great deliberative assembly, almost unique among the nations in those early ages, and down into Christian times, reflected not a little glory upon ancient Ireland.

One queen, famous and capable, whom early Ireland boasted was Macha Mong Ruad (the Red-haired), who reigned over the land about three hundred years before Christ. Her father, Aod Ruad was one of a triumvirate—the others being Dithorba and Cimbaoth—who by mutual agreement took seven-year turns in reigning. Aod Ruad was drowned at Eas-Aod-Ruad (Assaroe), now Ballyshanny. And when came round again the seven-year period which would have been his had he lived, his daughter, Macha, claimed the crown. But for it she had to fight her father's two partners—which she did, killing Dithorba ; and first defeating, And afterwards marrying, Cimbaoth—and making him king.

For many, the reign of Cimbaoth—which synchronises with that of Alexander the Great—marks the beginning of certainty in Irish history—because of the famed remark of the trusted eleventh century historian, Tighernach, that the Irish records before Cimbaoth were uncertain.

When Cimbaoth died this able woman took up the reins of government herself, becoming the first Milesian queen of Ireland. But the record above all others by which this distinguished woman lives to fame, is her founding of the ancient and much-storied stronghold—named after her—of Emain Macha, which henceforth, for six hundred years, was to play a most important part in the fortunes of Uladh (Ulster) and of Ireland.

Macha's foster-son, Ugani Mor (the Great), who succeeded her, led his armies into Britain, and had his power acknowledged there. After bringing a great part of Britain to obedience, some traditions say that his ambition led him on the Continent, where he met with many successes also, giving basis for the ancient seanachies styling him, “ King of Ireland and of the whole of Western Europe as far as the Muir Torrian” (Mediterranean Sea).

All the leading families of Ulster, Leinster and Connaught trace their descent from Ugani Mor—the common father of the royalties of the three provinces. The origin of the name of Leinster is ascribed to the activities of Ugani Mor's great grandson, Labraid Loingsech. Labraid's grandfather (Ugani Mor's son), Laegaire Lorc, was killed for sake of his throne, by his brother, Cobtach. His son was killed at the same time : and the grandson, Labraid Loingsech, only spared because he was dumb, and consequently could not rule. Labraid Loingsech was reared up in secret, under the joint fosterage and tutorship of a celebrated harper, Craftine, and a celebrated poet and philosopher, Feirceirtne, Getting a blow of a caman once, when playing caman (hurley) with other boys, he suddenly found the use of speech. When he grew up and Cobtach discovered that he no longer had the disabling blemish, and was moreover held in high esteem, he drove him out. The young man was received with honor at the King's court in Gaul—whence after some time he returned, with an army of over two thousand Gauls, armed with broad spears to which the Irish gave the name of Laighen. On his arrival in Ireland, he learnt that Cobtach, with thirty princes, was holding an assembly in Dinn Righ. There Labraid marched, and destroyed them all. He attacked and burned the Dinn and its guests—and won his grandfather's throne—and incidentally supplied the plot for one of the most famous of old Irish tales, “ The Burning of Dinn Righ.” From the Laighen of the Gauls, whom he settled in this southeastern part, Leinster, it is said took its name. [9]

The story of Cobtach and Labraid is to some extent curiously paralleled in that of the next Irish monarch of much note, Conaire Mor, who reigned within the century before, or at the time of, Christ: and who, in establishing his strong rule over Ireland, putting down lawlessness and making himself and his rule respected and feared, drove out his own foster-brothers, the four sons of a chieftain of Leinster. These returned after a time with a great body of Britons, under Ingcel, son of a British king. They destroyed and burned Meath, and then attacked Conaire Mor and his retinue in the Bruighean of DaDerga (one of the six public houses of hospitality that Ireland then boasted) destroyed it, and killed Conaire and his retinue. This tragic incident gave us the equally famous and remarkably beautiful tale, The Bruighean DaDerga.

Some of the historians say that it was Conaire Mor who reigned in Ireland when Christ was born. But others make the reigning monarch then Crimthann Niad Nair (Abashed Hero)—a king famous in ancient story for his foreign expeditions—from one of which we are told he brought back, among the booty, a gilt chariot, a golden chess-board inlaid with 300 transparent gems, a sword entwined with serpents of gold, a silver embossed shield, and two hounds leashed with a silver chain.

During Crimthann's reign occurred a notable return of Firbolgs from the Western Islands of Alba (Scotland) whereto their forefathers had been driven, long ages before. Now a colony of them, led by the four sons of the chief, Umor, with the eldest son, Angus, at their head, took refuge in Ireland from the persecution of the Picts, and by the high king were granted lands in Meath. They soon however found him as oppressive as the Picts had been coercive. And on a night they fled Westward from their Meath possessions. They crossed the Shannon into Connaught, which was still largely inhabited and dominated by their Firbolg kin. There, the celebrated Queen, Maeve, and her husband, Ailill, gave them lands in South Connaught, where they settled once more.

But they were pursued by the two great Ulster warriors and heroes of the Red Branch, Cuchullin and Conal Cearnach, who had gone security to the high king for their good behaviour—who here fought them a battle wherein great numbers of the Umorians were slain, including Angus' three brothers, and his son, Conal the Slender. A great cairn, known to this day as Cairn Chonail, was erected on the battlefield to commemorate him and them. Angus with his own people then settled in the islands of Aran, in Galway Bay, where he built the wonderful fortress still standing there and known as Dun Angus.

At the time of Christ, the celebrated Conor (Conchobar) Mac- Nessa reigned over Ulster.

Ireland in The Lore of The Ancients

SCOTIA (a name transferred to Alba about ten centuries after Christ) was one of the earliest names of Ireland—so named, it was said, from Scota, the daughter of Pharaoh, one of the ancient female ancestors of the Milesians—and the people were commonly called Scotti or Scots [10]—both terms being frequently used by early Latin historians and poets.

Ireland was often referred to—by various names—by ancient writers both Latin and Greek. Plutarch testifies to the nation's antiquity by calling it Ogygia, meaning the most ancient.

One of its ancient titles was Hibernia (used by Cæsar)—which some trace from Ivernia, the name, it is said, of a people located in the south of the Island ; but most trace it from Eber or Heber, the first Milesian king of the southern half ; just as the much later name, Ireland, is by some traced from Ir, whose family were in the northeastern corner of the Island. Though it seems much more likely that this latter name was derived from the most common title given to the Island by its own inhabitants, Eiré—hence Eire-land, Ireland. It was first the Northmen and then the Saxons, who, in the ninth and tenth century began calling it Ir-land or Ir-landa—Ireland.

In the oldest-known foreign reference to Ireland, it was called Ierna. This was the title used by the poet Orpheus in the time of Cyrus of Persia, in the sixth century before Christ. Aristotle, in his Book

of the World, also called it Ierna. In the first half of the first century Pomponius Mela refers to it as Iuvernica.

It was usually called either Hibernia or Scotia by the Latin writers. Tacitus, Cæsar, and Pliny call it Hibernia. Egesippus calls it Scotia—and several later Latin writers did likewise. A Roman, Rufus Festus Avienus, who wrote about the beginning of the fourth century of this era called it “ Insula Sacra”—which leads us to suppose that in the very early ages, it was, by the pagans, esteemed a holy isle. In a noted geographical poem of his occur the lines

“ This Isle is Sacred named by all the ancients,
From times remotest in the womb of Chronos,
This Isle which rises o’er the waves of ocean,
Is covered with a sod of rich luxuriance.
And peopled far and wide by the Hiberni.”

And the fourth century Istrian philosopher Ethicus in his cosmography tells how in his travels for knowledge he visited “ Hibernia” and spent some time there examining the volumes of that country—which, by the way, this scholarly gentleman considered crude.

That travellers’ tales were about as credible in those far-away days as they are in days more recent, is evident from some of the curious things related about this Island by the early Latin writers—often-times grotesque blends of fable and fact. The Latin writer, Pomponius Mela (who was a Spaniard and flourished near the middle of the first century of the Christian Era), says in his cosmography books : “ Beyond Britain lies Iuvernica, an island of nearly equal size, but oblong, and a coast on each side of equal extent, having a climate unfavourable for ripening grain, but so luxuriant in grasses, not merely palatable but even sweet, that the cattle in very short time take sufficient food for the whole day—and if fed too long, would burst. Its inhabitants are wanting in every virtue, totally destitute of piety.”

The latter sentence is quite characteristic of the Latin writers of that day, to whom the world was always divided into two parts, the Roman Empire with which exactly coincided Civilisation and the realm of all the Virtues, and the outer world which lay under the black cloud of barbarism.

But Strabo, who wrote in the first century of this era, does even better than Pomponius Mela. Quoting Poseidonios (who flourished still two centuries earlier) , he informs us that the inhabitants of Ierne were wild cannibals who considered it honourable to eat the bodies of their dead parents ! But he blends sensational picturesqueness with caution; for he adds : “ But the things we thus relate are destitute of witnesses worthy of credit in such affairs.” He suspected he was setting down wild fiction, but evidently could not resist the temptation to spice his narrative for the sensating of his readers. [11]

Solinus (about 200 A.D.), as naive as any of his fellows, has the inhabitants of Juverna (as he names the Island) “ inhuman beings who drink the blood of their enemies, and besmear their faces with it. At its birth the male child’s foot is placed upon its father’s sword, and from the point of the sword it receives its first nourishment !” He, however, also heard of, and records, the account of Juverna’s luxuriant grasses, which he says injure cattle. And the true statement that there is no snake in the Island he counterbalances by the misstatements that there are few birds in it, and that the inhabitants are inhospitable !

Seemingly forgetful of the fact that even the early Christians were accused of eating human flesh, St. Jerome accused the Irish of cannibalism. And a reason suggested for his making the wild accusation was because he smarted under the scathing criticism of the Irish Celestius—“ an Alban dog,” as the good sharp-tongued Father calls him, “ stuffed with Irish porridge.”

The careful Ptolemy, in the second century, gives a map of Ireland which (from a foreigner in that age of the world) is remarkable for the general correctness of the outline, and more noteworthy features. He names sixteen “ peoples” (tribes) inhabiting it (the names of half of them being now recognised), and he mentions several “cities”—probably royal residences.

With the exception of Ptolemy who, in all likelihood, derived his knowledge from the trading Phœnicians, the early Greek and Latin writers only knew of Ireland that it was an island sitting in the Western ocean, and remarkable for its verdure. Yet the Phœnicians were probably well acquainted with its ports. Tacitus says, “ The Irish ports in the first century were well known to commerce and merchants.”

The great antiquity of Ireland, incidentally acknowledged by foreign writers of olden time, is, as might be expected, sometimes fantastically exaggerated by ancient native writers.

We have the legend set down by several early Irish writers that a Greek, Partholan, with his people came here a few hundred years after the flood. The Island of Inis Saimer, in the mouth of the River Erne, at Ballyshanny, is named after Partholan’s favourite hound. A plague exterminated the Partholans.

But, not to be outdone in antiquity, by any European nation, some very ancient Irish poets people their country even before the flood—when, they say, in a well-known legend, that the Lady Cesair came with her father Bith, a grandson of Noah, and their following to Ireland, hoping to escape the flood—but in vain. [12]

[1] Many scientific historians deny this in toto.

[2] De Jubainville denies a De Danann race to Ireland. He asserts they were mythological. MacNeill agrees with him. But many students of the question disagree with both of these able men. The fact that myths grow around great people must not lead us to conclude that the people were mythical. Fortunately Fionn and his Fian fell within historical time when actual facts, countering the myths that have gathered around them, were set down ; otherwise, by the same process of reasoning, they might have been classed with the De Danann as an entirely imaginary people.

[3] The old traditional tales say that the Creidné mentioned was a very famous worker in the precious metals. The basic truth of these traditions seems evidenced by the reference in very ancient manuscripts to Bretha Creidné, “ The Judgments of Creidné,” a body of laws dealing with fine scales, weights and measures, and the precious metals. There is still preserved part of a very old poem, which says that Creidné was drowned, returning from Spain with golden ore.

[4] Inisfail, one of many ancient names for Ireland, signifies Isle of Destiny. Of “ The Coming of the Milesians,” Moore sang :

They came from a land beyond the sea,
And now o’er the western main
Set sail in their good ships, gallantly.
From the sunny lands of Spain.
“Oh, where’s the isle we’ve seen in dreams.
Our destin’d home or grave ?”
Thus sang they, as by the morning beams,
They swept the Atlantic wave.

And lo, where afar o’er ocean shines
A sparkle of radiant green,
As though in that deep lay emerald mines
Whose light through the wave was seen,
’Tis Inisfail—’tis Inisfail !
Rings o’er the echoing sea ;
While, bending to heaven, the warriors hail
That home of the brave and free.

Then turned they unto the Eastern wave
Where now their Day-God’s eye
A look of such sunny omen gave
As lighted up sea and sky.

No frown was seen through sky or sea.
Nor tear o'er leaf or sod,
When first on their Isle of Destiny
Our great forefathers trod.

Here let us understand that the ancient historical legends of Ireland are, generally speaking, far from being baseless myths. The Irish people are a people who eminently cling to tradition. Not only were the great happenings that marked great epochs enshrined in their memory forever, but even little events that trivially affected the history of their race, were, and are, seldom forgotten. We know that away back to the remotest antiquity, the *seanachie* (shanachy, the historian) and the poet were honored next to the king, because of the tremendous value which the people set upon the recording and preserving of their history. The poet and the *seanachie* following the fashion of the time, took advantage of their artist privilege to color their narrative to an extent that to the modern mind would seem fantastic. But it was with the details of the story that they were granted this liberty. The big, essential facts had to remain unaltered. The things of importance no poet of repute, however highly he might color, could or would dare to falsify.

- [5] Here is the ancient story-teller's description (from the *Táin Bo Cuailgne*) of the cavalcade of Bodb Derg, in after ages, coming from his palace under Sliab-na-mban to pay a visit to the De Danann chief, Ochail Oichne, who resided under Cruachan (in Roscommon)—“ Seven score chariots and seven score horsemen was their number. And of the same colour were all their steeds ; they were speckled ; they had silver bridles. There was no person among them who was not the son of a king and a queen. They all wore green cloaks with four crimson pendants to each cloak ; and silver cloak-brooches in all their cloaks ; and they wore kilts with red interweavings, and borders or fringes of gold thread upon them, and pendants of white bronze thread upon their leggings or greaves, and shoes with clasps of red bronze in them. Their helmets were ornamented with crystal and white bronze; each of them had a collar of radiant gold around his neck, with a gem worth a newly calved cow set in it. Each wore a twisted ring of gold around him, worth thirty ounces of gold. All had white-faced shields, with ornamentations of gold and of silver. They carried flesh-seeking spears, with ribs of gold and silver and red bronze in their sides ; and with collars (or rings) of silver upon the necks of the spears. They had gold-hilted swords with the forms of serpents of gold and carbuncles set in them. They astonished the whole assembly by this display.”
- [6] MacNeill holds that the Picts came to Ireland ahead of the Gael : and that, as distinct tribes, portions of them inhabited many parts of it, down till historic times. They also occupied large part of Scotland.
- [7] Many notable scholars deny the complete authenticity of this list. But undoubtedly the greater part of the names are the real names of real kings who held sway over the Northern or the Southern half, if not over all, of Ireland.
- [8] D'Arcy McGee sang of

THE CELTS

Long, long ago beyond the misty space
Of twice a thousand years,
In Erin old there dwelt a mighty race,
Taller than Roman spears ;
Like oaks and towers they had a giant grace,
Were fleet as deers
With winds and waves they made their 'biding place,
These western shepherd seers.

Their ocean-god was Mannanan MacLir,
Whose angry lips,
In their white foam, full often would inter
Whole fleets of ships ;
Crom was their day-god, and their thunderer.
Made morning and eclipse ;

Bride was their queen of song, and unto her
 They prayed with fire-touched lips.
 Great were their deeds, their passions, and their sports ;
 With clay and stone .
 They piled on strath and shore those mystic forts,
 Not yet o'erthrown ;
 On cairn-crowned hills they held their council-courts;
 While youths alone,
 With giant dogs, explored the elks resorts.
 And brought them down.

Of these was Fin, the father of the Bard,
 Whose ancient song
 Over the clamor of all change is heard,
 Sweet-voiced and strong.
 Fin once o'ertook Grania, the golden-haired,
 The fleet and young;
 From her the lovely, and from him the feared,
 The primal poet sprung.

Ossian ! two thousand years of mist and change
 Surround thy name—
 Thy Finian heroes now no longer range
 The hills of fame.
 The very name of Fin and Goll sound strange—
 Yet thine the same—
 By miscalled lake and desecrated grange—
 Remains, and shall remain !

The Druid's altar and the Druid's creed
 We scarce can trace,
 There is not left an undisputed deed
 Of all your race.
 Save your majestic song, which hath their speed.
 And strength, and grace ;
 In that sole song, they live and love and bleed—
 It bears them on thro' space.

Oh, inspired giant I shall we e'er behold,
 In our own time,
 One fit to speak your spirit on the wold,
 Or seize your rhyme ?
 One pupil of the past, as mighty souled
 As in the prime,
 Were the fond, fair, and beautiful and bold—
 They, of your song sublime !

[9] About this Labraid Loingsech grew the myth (closely paralleled in the Greek) of his being cursed with the ears of a horse.

He always wore a golden helmet, says the legend, to conceal his horrible secret. Because the barber who cut his hair was ever chosen by lot, and put to death immediately after he had performed his task, a dread fear was on the whole nation, of some awful mystery that their king concealed from them.

Once the barber's lot fell upon the son of a poor widow. The woman's broken-hearted supplications so moved Labraid that he promised to spare her son's life, on his taking a solemn oath of secrecy. His terrible discovery, which he must now carry forever, a festering secret in his

mind, so preyed upon the young man that he lost his sleep, lost his health, and was on the verge of losing his reason. He consulted a wise Druid, asking what he should do to save himself. The Druid's advice was that he must travel to a place where four roads met, and then tell to the nearest growing tree the dread secret which he must not give to any living being. He did this, and was instantly relieved, and grew hale, with a mind at ease, once more.

Now it was a willow tree to which he told the secret. In course of years this tree was cut down, and a harp made of it for Craftine, the king's harper. And lo, when Craftine touched the strings of his new harp, in the hall of the king, the instrument sang : " The ears of a horse has Labraid Loingsech ! The ears of a horse has Labraid Loingsech !" Over and over again, " The cars of a horse has Labraid Loingsech !"

The court was horror-stricken, the king dumbfounded. Filled with remorse, and humiliated, but brave as a king should be, he bowed his head, and before the whole court, removed his golden helmet—thus ending the dreadful mystery forever.

- [10] MacNeill thinks the term Scot (and then Scotia) was derived from an old Irish word which signified a raider. He thinks they earned the title from their frequent raiding in Alba and in Britain in pre-Christian times. The conjecture is to the present writer unconvincing.
- [11] An English clergyman with the Cromwellian troops in Ireland vouched for the fact that every man in a garrison which they captured was found to have a tail six inches long. Some of the English still believe it.
- [12] Yet another legend, of much later origin, tells that one of the Lady Cesair's party did escape, namely, Finntann, a grandson of Bith, who kept afloat during the deluge—and lived afterwards, seemingly immortal, at Dun Tulcha in southwestern Kerry. Finntann reappeared in Irish history, on a notable occasion some thousands of years later, when, in the reign of Diarmuid MacCarroll, in the sixth century of our Era, this veteran, turned up at Tara to settle, by testimony taken from his long memory, a dispute about the limits of the Royal Demesne. Great was the awed wonder at the King's palace, when the old man arrived, preceded by nine companies of his own descendants, and followed by another nine. To prove the fitness of his memory, for testifying what had or had not been from the founding of Tara downward, he gave the wondering king and people some little idea of his age, by telling them the following story : " I passed one day through a wood in West Munster: I brought home with me a red berry of the yew tree, which I planted in the garden of my mansion, and it grew there until it was as tall as a man. I then took it out of the garden, and planted it in the green lawn of my mansion ; and it grew in the centre of that lawn until an hundred champions could fit under the foliage, and find shelter there from wind, and rain, and cold, and heat. I remained so, and my yew remained so, spending our time alike, until at last it ceased to put forth leaves, from old age. When, afterwards, I thought of turning it to some profit, I cut it from its stem, and made from it seven vats, seven keeves, seven stans, seven churns, seven pitchers, seven milans and seven medars, with hoops for all. I remained still with my yew-vessels, until their hoops all fell off from decay and old age. After this I re-made them, but could only get a keeve out of the vat, and a stan out of the keeve, a mug out of the stan, a cilorn out of the mug, a milan out of the cilorn, and a medar out of the milan—and I leave it to Almighty God that I do not know where their dust is now, after their dissolution with me, from decay."

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