

Visionary Legends & Brian

Hours with eminent Irishmen and a glimpse of Irish history

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I.

THE LEGENDS.

As we peer doubtfully into the dim past of Irish history we seem to stand like Odysseus at the yawning mouth of Hades. The thin shades troop about us, and flit hither and thither fitfully in shadowy confusion. Stately kings sweep by in their painted chariots. Yellow-haired heroes rush to battle shaking their spears and shouting their war-songs, while the thick gold torques rattle on arm and throat, and their many-colored cloaks stream on the wind. They sweep by and are lost to sight, and their places are taken by others in a shifting, splendid, confused pageant of monarchs and warriors, and beautiful women for whose love the heroes are glad to die and the kings to peril their crowns ; and among them all move the majestic, white-robed bards, striking their golden harps and telling the tales of the days of old, and handing down the names of heroes forever. What may we hope to distinguish of this weltering world of regal figures, whirled by before our eyes as on that infernal wind which seared the eyes of Dante ? The traveller in Egypt goes down into the tombs of the kings at ancient Thebes. By the flaring flicker of a candle he discerns dimly on the walls about him endless processions of painted figures—the images of kings and beggars, of soldiers and slaves, of the teeming life of ages—portrayed in glowing colors all around. It is but for a moment, while his candle is slowly burning down, that he seems to stand in the thronged centuries of Egyptian dynasties with all their named and nameless figures ; and then he passes out again into the upper air and level sunlight of the Theban valley, as one who has dreamed a chaotic dream.

Groping in the forgotten yesterday of Irish legend is like this groping in an Egyptian tomb. We are in a great sepulchral chamber—a hall of the dead, whose walls are pictured with end-less figures, huddled together in bewildering fantastic medley. What can we make out, holding up our thin taper and gazing doubtfully at the storied walls ? Yon fair woman, with the crowd of girls about her, is the Lady Ceasair, who came to Ireland before the deluge, with fifty women and three men, Bith, Ladra, and Fintain. The waters swept away this curiously proportioned colony, and their place was taken “ in the sixtieth year of the age of Abraham ” by the parricide Partholan, of the stock of Japhet. For three hundred years his descendants ruled, until a pestilence destroyed them all. The Nemedhians, under Nemedh, loomed up from the shores of the Black Sea and swarmed over Ireland. They were harassed by plagues and by incessant battlings with the Fomorians, a race of savage sea-kings, descendants of Cham, who had settled in the Western Isles. In the end the Fomorians triumphed ; they drove out the remnant of Nemedhians whom plague and sword had spared. This remnant fled, some to the north of Europe to become the ancestors of the Firbolgs, some to Greece to give a parentage to the Tuatha de Danann, and some to Britain, which took its name from the Nemedhian leader, Briotan-Maol.

After a time, the first of the Nemedhian refugees, the Firbolgs, came back to Ireland, to be soon dispossessed by another invasion of Nemedhian descendants, the

Tuatha de Danann, who came from Greece, and who were deeply skilled in all wizardries. Their sorceries stood them in good stead, for the Firbolgs made a fierce resistance. A desperate battle was fought, in which the Firbolg king was slain. His grave is still shown on the Sligo strand, and it is fabled that the tide will never cover it. Nuada, the king of the Tuatha de Danann, lost his right hand in this fight, and seems to have gone near losing his kingship in consequence, as his warlike people would have refused to recognize a mutilated monarch. But there were cunning artificers among the Greeks. One of these fashioned a silver hand for the king, who was known as Nuada of the Silver Hand ever after. The first of “The Three Sorrowful Tales of Erin” belongs to the reign of this Sovereign with the Argent fist—the tale of the fate of the children of Turenn. The three sons of Turenn, Brian, Ur, and Urcar, killed Kian, father of Luga of the Long Arms, and one of the three sons of Canta, with whom the three sons of Turenn were at feud. Six times the sons of Turenn buried the body of their victim, and six times the earth cast it up again, but on the seventh burial the body remained in the grave. As the sons of Turenn rode from the spot a faint voice came from the ground, warning them that the blood they had spilled would follow them to the fulfilment of their doom. Luga of the long Arms, seeking for his father, came to the grave, and there the stones of the earth took voice and told him that his father lay beneath. Luga unearthed the body, and vowed vengeance on the sons of Turenn over it. He then hastened to Tara, to the court of Nuada of the Silver Hand, and denounced the sons of Turenn. In those days the friends of any murdered person might either receive a fine, called “eric,” in compensation, or might seek the death of the murderer. Luga called for the “eric.” He demanded three apples, the skin of a pig, a spear, two steeds and a chariot, seven pigs, a hound-whelp, a cooking-spit, and three shouts on a hill. To this “eric” the sons of Turenn agreed readily enough before all the court. Then Luga explained himself more fully. The three apples were to be plucked from the garden of Hisberna, in the east of the world. They were the color of burnished gold, and of the taste of honey, and cured wounds and all manner of sickness, and had many other wonderful qualities. The garden of Hisberna was carefully guarded, and none were allowed to take its precious fruit. The pig-skin belonged to the King of Greece, and possessed the power of healing whosoever touched it. The spear was a venomous weapon with a blazing head, belonging to the King of Persia. The two steeds and chariot belonged to the King of Sicily. The seven pigs were the delight of Asal, King of the Golden Pillars, for they could be killed and eaten one day, and become alive and well the next. The hound-whelp belonged to the King of Iroda, and every wild beast of the forest fell powerless before it. The cooking-spit belonged to the warlike women of the island of Fincara, who never yet gave a cooking-spit to any one who did not overcome them in battle. The hill on which the three shouts had to be given was the hill of Midkena, in the north of Lochlann, the country of the Danes, which was always guarded by Midkena and his sons, who never allowed any one to shout on it.

The sons of Turenn were much daunted by this terrible “eric,” but they were bound to fulfil it. They set sail in an enchanted canoe, the *Wave Sweeper*, to the garden of Hisberna, and succeeded, by turning themselves into hawks, in carrying off the apples. They then visited Greece in the guise of learned poets from Erin, and after a desperate fight overcame the King of Greece and his champions, and carried off the pig-skin. Leaving the shores of Greece “and all its blue streams,” they sailed to Persia, where they had to fight another battle with the king before they could carry off the blazing weapon in triumph. They then voyaged to Sicily, overcame its monarch, and drove off the famous chariot and horses. Next came the turn of Asal, King of the Golden Pillars, but their fame had gone before them, and Asal gave up his seven pigs without a contest. He even accompanied them to Iroda, and aided them to obtain the hound-whelp.

Meanwhile the fame of the successes of the sons of Turenn had come to Erin, and Luga of the Long Arms cast a Druidical spell over them, so that they quite forgot the cooking-spit and the three shouts on a hill, and came back to Erin thinking that they had fulfilled their “eric.” But when Luga saw their spoils, he reminded them of the unfulfilled part of the compact, and the heroes had to set out again with heavy hearts, for they knew that Luga desired their death. When Brian got to the island of Fincara, which lies beneath the sea, his beauty so pleased the warlike women that they gave him a cooking-spit without any trouble. Now all that was left to the heroes to do was to shout the three shouts on Midkena’s hill. They sailed out into the north till they came to it, and there they fought desperately with Midkena and his sons, and overcame and killed them. But they were wounded themselves nigh unto death, and with the greatest difficulty they raised three feeble shouts on Midkena’s hill. Then, wounded as they were, they sailed back to Erin, and implored Luga to let them taste of the apples of Hisberna, that they might recover. But Luga taunted them with their murder of his father, and would be content with nothing short of their death ; so they died, and the blood of Kian was avenged.

While Nuada’s silver hand was making, his place as king was taken by a regent named Bres. But when the silver hand was finished, Bres had to resign, to his great wrath ; and he left the country and roused up a huge host of Fomorians under Balor of the Mighty Blows, and invaded Ireland, and was totally defeated. Balor of the Mighty Blows slew the poor silver-handed monarch, and was slain in his turn by Luga Long-Arms. Then Luga became king himself, and reigned long and happily, and many Tuatha de Danann reigned after him. But their time came at last to be overthrown by a fifth set of invaders—the Milesians, the sons of Milidh. The Milesians were an eastern race, whom hoar tradition had set seeking a destined island ; and they pursued the star of their destiny, the fine-eyed Ull-Erin, to the Irish shore. But they had no small trouble to win their way ; the Tuatha de Danann kept them off as long as they could by spells and incantations, which wrapped the Milesian fleet in thick folds of impenetrable mist, and shook it with storms, and tossed the ships together on writhing waves. In that fierce tempest of dark enchantments many of the sons of Milidh perished ; but they effected a landing at last, and carried all before them, and drove the De Danann into the fastnesses of the hills ; and the Milesian leaders, Heber and Heremon, divided the island between them. They quarrelled about the division soon after, and Heremon killed Heber and took the whole island to himself—a Milesian version of Romulus. To this period belongs the second sorrowful tale of Erin—the tale of the fate of the children of Lir.

After the battle of Tailtinn, in which the Milesians won Ireland, the defeated Tuatha de Danann of the five provinces met together and chose Bove Derg king over them all. Lir, of Shee Finnalia, alone refused to acknowledge the new monarch, and retired to his own country. Some of the chieftains called for vengeance on Lir, but Bove Derg resolved to win his allegiance by friendship. He offered him the choice of his three foster-daughters—Eve, Eva, and Alva—in marriage. Lir relented, recognized the authority of Bove Derg, and married Eve, who bore him one daughter, Finola, and three sons, Aed, Ficia, and Conn. Eve died. Lir was for a time inconsolable, but on the advice of Bove Derg he married the second foster-daughter, Eva. The new step-mother, after the fashion of fairytales, grew jealous of Lir’s love for his children, and, like the woman in the German folk-story, turned them into swans. Mere metamorphosis did not content her ; she laid this further doom on the children of Lir—that they must pass three hundred years on the smooth Lake Darvan, three hundred years on the wild Sea of Moyle, and yet three hundred more on the Western Sea. Nor was the spell to be loosened until the sound of a Christian bell was first heard in Erin. The

only mitigation of their sufferings was the privilege of retaining their human voices. The wicked step-mother was punished by Bove Derg by being turned into a demon of the air ; but the children of Lir had to dree their weird for the nine appointed centuries until the coming of Christianity, when they were disenchanting by St. Kemoc. In their human form they were very, old ; the saint baptized them, and they died and went to heaven.

What shall be said of the hundred and eighteen kings of the Milesian race ? Which of those crowned figures is Tighearnmas, who first taught the Irish the worship of idols, and who distinguished his people into different ranks by the different hues of their garments ? Or the wise Ollav Fodhla ? Or that Cimbaoth, of whom the good chronicler Tighernach, Abbot of Clonmacnoise, wrote that all the Irish records before him were uncertain ?—a respectable antiquity enough, if we might but take this Chimbaoth and his deeds for granted ; for Pythagoras had just been crowned in the sixteenth Olympiad, and Numa Pompilius was still listening to the sweet counsels of the nymph Egeria in the cave celebrated by Juvenal, when Cimbaoth reigned.

Cimbaoth built the palace of Emania. Ugaine Mor laid all Ireland under solemn oath, fearful as the ancient pledge by Styx ; for he bound them by the visible and invisible elements to respect the rule of his race. But the oath was like thin air, and bound no one. Ugaine's son Lorc, and Lorec's son Oileel Ainey, were slain by Lorc's younger brother Corvac. But Corvac did not slay the grandson Lara ; for the boy feigned idiocy, and the cruel king spared him—to his own doom ; for the boy was brought up by a faithful harper, and in the fulness of time married a king's fair daughter, and passed over to France, and brought thence an army of stout Gaulish spearmen, and came back to his own, and slew Corvac, and founded a mighty line. One of his most famous descendants was Yeoha, surnamed the “ Sigher ” for the sorrows he endured. For he married a fairy bride, whom he loved tenderly ; but after a time there came a stranger from the land of the fairies, and bore her back to the fairy world, and with her went all the joy of Yeoha's life. Then his three sons rose in shameful rebellion against him, and were all slain, and their heads were laid at their father's feet. Good cause for sighing had Yeoha. But he was not all unhappy. His fairy bride had borne him a fairy daughter, the beautiful and gifted Meave, famous in Irish chronicles, and destined to fame through all the world as Queen Mab. Meave was a fierce, warlike woman, a very Semiramis of early Irish story. She married three husbands, and quarrelled with them all. In her reign occurred a battle between two bulls, which is recounted by the bards with all Homeric gravity. Meave lived a hundred years, and waged war with a great hero, Cucullin, and at last the fierce queen died and passed away. To her time belongs the third of the sorrowful tales of Erin—the story of Deirdri, the beautiful daughter of the bard Felemi, doomed at her birth to bring woe to Ulster.

Conor Mac Nessa, the King of Ulster, adopted her, kept her secluded, like Danæ, in a guarded place—not so well guarded but that she was once seen by Naesi, son of Usna. Naesi fell in love with her, and she with him. He carried her off with the aid of his two brothers, Anli and Ardan. Conor offered to pardon them if they came back to Emania, and in the end they did agree to return, escorted by a legion of soldiers under Fiachy, a gallant young noble. As they approached Emania, Deirdri, whose heart forebode evil, declared that she saw a blood-red cloud hanging in the distant sky. Her fears were well founded. When they drew near the king's capital, another noble, Durthacht, with another escort, came from Conor, and called upon Fiachy to yield him his charge. Fiachy suspected the treachery, refused to yield up the sons of Usna and the beautiful Deirdri, put them into a palace, and guarded it with his troops. It was his

duty, he said, to show that the sons of Usna had not trusted in vain to the king's word or his good faith. Then Durthacht began the assault. The sons of Usna wished to surrender themselves, but Fiachy would not allow this—would not even permit them to take any share in the defence ; it was his duty, and his alone. Then the sons of Usna and Deirdri withdrew into the palace, and Deirdri and Naesi played chess, and Anli and Ardan looked on while the battle raged outside. This battle deserves a place in story with the fierce strife in the halls of Attila which ends the “ Niebelungen Lied.” All through the bloody struggle the sons of Usna seemed intent alone upon the game they were playing, and as defence after defence of the palace was taken they remained unmoved, till at last Fiachy was killed, and the enemy rushed in and slew the sons of Usna at the board, and carried off Deirdri to Conor. But the king had no joy of her, for she killed herself soon after.

Meave's descendants ruled till the reign of Fiacha Finnolaidh, when there occurred a revolt of some tribes called the Attacotti, under a leader nicknamed “ Cat-Head.” They slew the king, and placed Cat-Head on his throne. After his death the rightful heirs came back, and the earth showed its approval by bountiful produce : fruitful meadows, fishful rivers, and many-headed woods proclaimed the joy of the Irish earth at the return of its true lords. But the Attacotti rose again and killed a rightful king, and a curse came upon the earth, and it was fruitless and cornless and fishless, till once again a king of the old race, Tuathal, seized the throne from the usurpers, and pledged the people by sun and moon and elements to leave the sceptre untroubled to his posterity. Tuathal then took a piece of land from each of the four provinces, and formed the kingdom of Meath to be the dwelling of the Ard-Righ ; and he built there four painted palaces, one for the king of each province.

Conn of the Hundred Fights, beloved of the bards, is the next famous king. After Conn's death the land passed to a usurper, Mac Con, for a time only, to return to the most famous of the early kings, Cormac Mac Art, in whose reign the Feni flourished. The Feni are strange and shadowy figures, Ossianic ghosts, moving in dusky vales, and along hill-sides clothed with echoing woods and seamed with the many-colored sides of roaring streams ; or by the angry sea, where the screaming sea-bird wings his flight towards the dark rolling heavens, where the awful faces of other times look out from the clouds, and the dread deities keep their cloudy halls, and the nightly fires burn. It is a land of mists and rains, through which the figures of the heroes loom gigantic. They are the kings of shaggy boars, the dwellers on battle's wing. They joy in the chase, with their gray, rough-eared dogs about them. They rush against each other in war like the murmur of many waters, clashing their iron shields and shouting their surly songs ; they remember the deeds of the days of old, and deaths wander like shadows over their fiery souls. Shadowy Death floats over the hosts, and rejoices at the frequent victims. When a hero falls, his soul goes forth to his fathers in their stormy isle, where they pursue boars of mist along the skirts of winds. Women, white-bosomed and beautiful, move like the music of songs through these antique tales, loving and beloved by heroes and kings of heroes.

Many of the stories have for their hero Finn, the son of Coul, the Fingal of the Scottish Ossian. Around him are his Feni, who stand in the same relation to him that the twelve peers do to Charlemagne, or the Knights of the Round Table to Arthur. Oisin, the sweet singer ; Oscar, his glorious son, the Roland of the Feni ; Dermat, of whom it might be said, as of Malory's Launcelot, that he was “ the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman ;” Dering, the beloved of Finn, and Kylta, the leader of the Clan Ronan ; Conan, the comic glutton, of craven spirit and bitter tongue, a more grotesque Thersites ; Fergus Finnvel, the warrior poet, reminding one

of the Fiddler Knight in the “ Niebelungen Lied ;” Ligna, the swift-footed ; Gaul, the leader of the Clan Morna, whose enmity to the Clan Baskin made the battle of Gawra the Roncesvalles of the Feni. These are all heroes, going through all dangers, ever ready to do and to suffer bravely, battling with all the powers of darkness, loyal to each other, tender and courteous with women, gallant and goodly men, models of an early chivalry. Nor are Finn’s famous dogs to be forgotten—Brann and Skolan, the companions of all his huntings and all his dangers.

Finn himself is a marvellous figure. In his youth, he, like Theseus, destroyed all sorts of fearful monsters. He had also the privilege on occasion of knowing the future. His hair was gray through enchantment long before old age had clawed him in its clutch. Two fair sisters had loved him, and one of them said to the other that she could never love a man with gray hair. Then the other sister, despairing of winning Finn herself, lured him into an enchanted pool, which turned him into a withered old man. The angry Feni forced her to restore to their leader his youth, but his hair remained gray always.

The people of Lochlann, in the north of Europe, invaded Ireland with a mighty fleet, but were wholly routed by the Feni under Finn, in a battle in which Oscar, the son of Oisín, greatly distinguished himself. The enemy were routed with great slaughter, their king was slain, and his young son, Midac, was taken prisoner. Finn brought up Midac in the ranks of the Feni, and treated him like a comrade ; but Midac was always meditating revenge. At last, after fourteen years, Midac induced Sinsar of Greece and the Three Kings of the Torrent to come secretly to Ireland with a mighty host, and they waited in a palace in an island of the Shannon, below where Limerick now is. Then Midac lured Finn, and many of the bravest of the Feni, who were on a hunting excursion, into a dwelling of his, the palace of the Quicken Trees, as the mountain-ashes were called. The palace was enchanted, and once in it the heroes found themselves unable to get out, or even to move. So they set themselves to sing, in slow unison, the Dord-Fian, the war-song of their race, while waiting death. But the party of Feni whom Finn had left behind him when he went to the Palace of the Quicken Trees began to grow anxious, and Ficna, Finn’s son, and Innsa, his foster-brother, set out to look for them. When the pair came near the Palace of the Quicken Trees they heard the strains of the Dord-Fian ; so they came close, and Finn heard them, and calling out, told them how he and his companions were trapped and waiting death, and that nothing could free them from enchantment but the blood of the Three Kings of the Torrent. Luckily for Finn, the only way to get to the Palace of the Quicken Trees from the palace of the island, where Minac and the foreigners were, lay over a narrow ford, where one man might well keep a thousand at stand. This ford Ficna and Innsa defended against desperate odds for long enough. Innsa was first slain, and Ficna is engaged in a desperate struggle with Midac when Dermot appears on the scene. The Feni who were at the hill were growing impatient for the return of Ficna and Innsa, so Oisín sent Dermot and Fatha to look for them. As they approached the Palace of the Quicken Trees they heard the noise of fighting at the ford. Then they ran like the wind to the hill-brow over the river, and looking across in the dim moonlight, saw the whole ford heaped with the bodies of the slain, and Ficna and Midac fighting to the death. Dermot hurled his spear and pierced Midac, who struck Ficna dead, and fell dead himself. Then Dermot and Fatha defended the ford against reinforcements of foreigners, and Dermot soon killed the Three Kings of the Torrent, and undid the spell that held Finn and his friends. Then all the Feni came together, and the foreigners were routed with great slaughter ; the King of Greece and his son were both slain, and the remnant of the enemy fled to their ships in confusion and sailed away.

The friendship of Dermot and Finn was unfortunately broken for a woman's sake. Finn sought the daughter of Cormac Mac Art, the beautiful Grania, in marriage, but the beautiful Grania had long loved the fair-faced Dermot, in secret. When she saw herself about to be wedded to Finn, no longer a young man, she told her love to Dermot, and besought him to carry her away from Finn. At first, Dermot, loyal to his king, refused, though he was, indeed, deeply in love with the beautiful Grania; but Grania placed him under "gesa," a kind of mysterious command which heroes were supposed never to disobey, to marry her and carry her off. Dermot, in despair, consulted with his bravest comrades, with Kylta, and Oscar, and Dering, and Oisín himself, and all agreed that Finn would never forgive him, but that he was bound to go with Grania and take the risk. So he did, and fled with her far from the court of King Cormac. But great, indeed, was the wrath of Finn, and for long after he pursued Dermot and Grania from place to place, always seeking to have Dermot killed, and always failing, owing to the skill of Dermot. All the sympathy of the Feni went with Dermot, and not with Finn. Very beautifully the old story celebrates the love of Dermot and Grania, and the gallant deeds Dermot did for her sake. At last, weary of the pursuit, Finn consented to pardon Dermot, but in his heart he always cherished hatred against him, and when Dermot was wounded to death by a boar, Finn refused him the drink of water which, from his hand, would prove a cure. So Dermot died, to the great sorrow and anger of all the Feni. The story is one of the most beautiful, as it is the saddest, of the old Irish legends.

Oisín, the last of the Feni, is said to have outlived all his companions by many centuries, and to have told of them and their deeds to St. Patrick. He had married a beautiful girl, who came to wed him from a country across the sea, called Tirnanoge, and there he dwelt, as he thought, for three, but as it proved, for three hundred, years. At the end of that time there came on him a great longing to see Erin again, and after much entreaty his fair wife allowed him to return, on the one condition that he never dismounted from a white steed which she gave him. When he got to Ireland he found that the Feni had long passed away, and that only the distant fame of them lingered in men's minds. Of course he dismounts from the horse—how many fairy tales would have ended happily if their heroes had only done as they were told!—and the horse straightway flies away, and then the curse of his old age comes upon Oisín, who falls to the ground an old, withered, blind man, doomed never again to go back to Tirnanoge and his fair wife and his immortal youth. St. Patrick was now in Ireland, and often spoke with Oisín, who never tired of telling of the heroes of his youth, and wondering that death could ever have laid hands upon their bright beauty. Bitterly he complained of the sound of the Christian bell, and the hymns of the Christian clerics, which had enchanted and destroyed the Feni. "There is no joy in your strait cells," Oisín wails. "There are no women among you, no cheerful music;" and he laments for the joys of his youth, the songs of the blackbirds, the sound of the wind, the cry of the hounds let loose, the wash of water against the sides of ships, and the clash of arms, and the sweet voices of his youth's compeers.

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Christianity.

The authorities for all this wonderful fanciful legend, for all this pompous record of visionary kings and heroes, are to be found in the ancient Irish manuscripts, in the Ossianic songs, in the annals of Tighernach, of Ulster, of Inis Mac Nerinn, of Innisfallen, and of Boyle, in the "Chronicum Scotorum," the books of Leinster and of Ballymote, the Yellow Book of Lecain, and the famous Annals of the Four Masters,

which Michael O’Clerigh, the poor friar of the Order of St. Francis, compiled for the glory of God and the honor of Ireland. They are interpreted and made accessible to us by scholars and writers like O’Curry, and Ferguson, and Mr. P. W. Joyce, and Mr. Standish O’Grady. These and others have translated enough to show that the Irish manuscripts enclose a store of romantic records and heroic tales that will bear comparison well with the legends and the folk-lore of any other country. There is yet much to do in the way of translating and popularizing these old Irish legends, and it may well be hoped and believed that Irish scholarship will prove itself equal to the task. But these antique tales are not history. We cannot even say whether they have an historical basis. It matters very little. They are beautiful legends, in any case, and, like the tale of the Trojan War, and the records of the Seven Kings of Rome, they may be believed or not, according to the spirit of their student. It is more probable than not that they have a foundation of truth. Recent discoveries in the Troad have given an historical position to the siege of Troy ; and the Irish chronicles have no worse claim to respect, as historic documents, than the rhapsodies of the Homeric singer. But modern historians prefer to leave the Tuatha de Danann and the Milesians undisturbed in their shadowy kingdom, and content themselves with suggesting that Ireland was at first inhabited by a Turanian race, and that there were Celtic and Teutonic immigrations.

The social organization of pre-Christian Ireland shows many remarkable signs of civilization, especially in its treatment of women, who were invested with a respect and dignity not common in the early history of races. In the legends, women receive always from men a tender and gracious submission that rivals the chivalry of the Arthurian romances ; and there is every reason to believe that this was not confined to legend. The married woman was regarded as the equal of her husband no less than if she had lived in Rome, and repeated on her wedding-day the famous formula, “ Ubi tu Caius ego Caia.” The religion seems to have been a form of sun-worship, regulated by Druids, and not, it is said—though this is strongly contested—unaccompanied with human sacrifices. The people were divided into septs, composed of families bearing the name of their founder. The headman of each family served the chief of the sept, and each septal king in his turn recognized the authority of the Ard-Righ, or chief king. All chieftainships, and the offices of Druid and of Brehon, or lawgiver, were elective. During the life of each chief, his successor, called the “ Tanist,” was chosen from the same family. Land was held by each sept in common, without any feudal condition, and primogeniture was unknown. Legitimate or illegitimate sons were partners with their father, and after his death took equal shares of his holding. The Brehon criminal laws punished almost every offence by more or less heavy fines. Agriculture was in its infancy. Wealth lay in cattle, pigs, sheep, and horses. Ore and slaves were exported to the Mediterranean countries from the earliest times. The people dwelt in wattled houses, and their palaces were probably only of painted wood built on dyked and palisaded hills ; but they could build strong fortresses and great sepulchral chambers, and raise vast cromlechs over their warrior dead. Whether the round towers which are still the wonder of many parts of Ireland were built by them or by the early Christians, and for what purpose, is still a subject of fierce controversy among archæologists. Diodorus Siculus would seem to refer to them in a passage in which he speaks of an island of the size of Sicily, in the ocean over against Gaul, to the north, whose people were said to have a great affection for the Greeks from old times, and to build curious temples of round form. Whether they built the round towers or no, the early Irish were skilled in the working of gold ornaments, and in the manufacture of primitive weapons. They seem to have known the art of writing early, and to have had a strange alphabet of their own, called Ogham, from a shadowy King

Oghma, who was supposed to have invented it. It was written by cutting notches in wood and stone, and there has been no small discussion over the reading of it.

Authentic history begins with St. Patrick. Patrick had been carried as a slave from Gaul to Erin in his youth. He escaped to Rome and rose high in the Christian Church. But his heart was stirred with pity for his land of bondage, and about 432 he returned to Ireland, inspired by the hope of converting the country. He was not the first. Palladius had tried to convert pagan Ierne already, but where Palladius failed, Patrick succeeded ; and the complete conversion of Ireland is one of the most splendid triumph of the early Church. Wherever the saint went, conviction and conversion followed. He had dreamed a strange dream while in Rome, in which an angel appeared to him, bearing a scroll, with the superscription, “ The voice of the Irish.” The voice of the Irish had called him, and the ears of the Irish were ready to accept his teaching : king after king, chieftain after chieftain, abandoned the worship of their ancient gods to become the servants of Christ. For more than sixty years Patrick wrestled with the old gods in Ireland and over- threw them. He had found Ireland pagan, but when he died and gave

“ His body to that pleasant country’s earth,
And his pure soul unto his captain Christ,
Under whose colors he had fought so long,”

the spirit of Christianity was over the island, and the powder of the old gods was gone forever. He was buried in Saul, in the County of Down, but his spirit lived in the souls of his followers. Long after Patrick had been laid to rest, his disciples carried the cross of Christ to the gaunt Scottish highlands, the lonely German pine-forests, the savage Gaulish settlements, to Britain, and the wild islands of the northern seas. The Irish monks wandered into the waste places of Ireland, and noble monasteries—the homes of religion and of learning—sprang up wherever they set their feet. The fathers of the Irish Church were listened to with reverence in the court of Charlemagne and in the Roman basilicas ; and foreign ecclesiastics eagerly visited the homes of these men — the monasteries famous for their learning, their libraries, and their secure peace.

The island of the Sun-god had become the island of Saints. To Ireland belong St. Columban, the reformer of the Gauls ; St. Columbkil, the “ Dove of the Cell,” whose name has made Iona holy ground ; St. Foelan ; St. Killian, the apostle of Franconia ; St. Aidan ; St. Gall, the converter of Helvetia ; and St. Boniface. One hundred and fifty-five Irish saints are venerated in the churches of Germany, forty-five in Gaul, thirty in Belgium, thirteen in Italy, and eight in Scandinavia. For a long time all Christendom looked upon Ireland as the favorite home of religion and of wisdom. Montalembert, in his great history of “ The Monks of the West,” has given a glowing account of the civilization and the culture of the Irish monasteries. There the arts were practised—music, architecture, and the working of metals. There the languages of Greece and Rome were studied with the passionate zeal which after-wards distinguished the Humanistic scholars of the revival of learning. The Irish monastic scholars carried their love for Greek so far that they even wrote the Latin of the Church books in the beloved Hellenic characters—and as we read we are reminded again of the old tradition of Greek descent—while, curiously enough, one of the oldest manuscripts of Horace in existence, that in the library of Berne, is written in Celtic characters, with notes and commentaries in the Irish language. It is worthy of remark that Montalembert says, that of all nations the Anglo-Saxons derived most profit from the teaching of the Irish schools, and that Alfred of England received his education in an Irish university.

With the lapse of time, however, and the disorders that came over the country during the struggles with the Danes, the organization of the Church suffered severely. In the twelfth century the irregularities that had crept into the Irish Church were brought before the notice of the Roman court. A synod, held at Kells, A.D. 1152, under the papal legate Paparo, formally incorporated the Irish Church into the ecclesiastical system of Rome. The metropolitan sees of Armagh, Cashel, Dublin, and Tuam were created, with their suffragan sees, under the primacy of the Archbishop of Armagh.

Towards the end of the eighth century the Danes made their first descent upon Ireland, and for a time established themselves in the country, expending their fiercest fury upon the Church of the West, and driving the Irish scholars to carry their culture and their philosophy to the great cities of the European continent. The Irish chiefs, divided among themselves, were unable to oppose a common front to the enemy, and for more than a century the sea-kings held Ireland in subjection. At length a man arose who was more than a match for the sea-kings. Brian Boroihme, brother of the King of Munster, in 968, thoroughly defeated them, and reduced them to the condition of quiet dwellers in the seaport towns. But the master-spirit that the troublous time had conjured up was not content to remain the conqueror of the Danes alone. He was determined to become the sovereign of all Ireland. It was sheer usurpation, and many of the Irish chiefs opposed Brian ; but he soon raised an army against the Danes overcame their resistance, and in 1001 he was acknowledged as King of all Ireland. He made a just and wise king, and for twelve years reigned in triumph and in peace. Then the Danes in Ireland began to pluck up heart again. They sent for help to their kinsmen over sea, and the Vikings came across the Swan's Bath with a mighty fleet, and made war upon Brian. Brian was an old man now, but as fierce and brave and skilful as ever. He raised up all his power to meet the Danes, and completely defeated them after a bloody struggle, at Clontarf, on Good Friday, 1014. Their bravest chiefs were slain, and their spirits sent to the Hall of Odin to drink ale with the goddesses of death, while all the hawks of heaven mourned for them. But the victorious Irish had to bewail their king, who, owing to the negligence of his guards, was killed in his tent towards the end of the fight by the Danish leader. This great defeat of the Danes put an end to any further dreams of a Danish invasion of Ireland, though it did not by any means destroy the influence that the Danes had already acquired in the island. They still held their own in the great seaport towns, and carried on fierce feuds with the native tribes, and in the slow processes of time became absorbed into and united with them. The death of Brian had a disastrous effect upon the condition of Ireland. The provinces that he had subjugated reasserted their independence ; but his usurpation had shattered the supremacy of the old royal race, and the history of Ireland until the middle of the twelfth century is merely a melancholy succession of civil wars and struggles for the crown, upon which it would be alike painful and profitless to dwell.

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Brian Boroihme

Many persons of playful temperament and unincumbered by any wealth of historical or other information are accustomed to allude to Brian Boroihme in all lightness of heart as a more or less mythical individual whose deeds and words are to be placed on the same footing as those of Cucullain or Finn MacCoul. I am not at all prepared myself to abandon the right to distinct historical recognition of so distinguished a warrior as Cucullain or so eminent a monarch as Finn. In an age

which excavates Troy Town and unearths from the dusts of Mycena the mouldering remains of the King of Men, the scholar would be rash, indeed, who denied to the Feni and their forefathers the respect due to the heroes of Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy. But while we may frankly admit that the case for the historical existence of Oisín or Dermot is not yet conclusively made out, we must insist, wherever such insistence is necessary, upon the very different degree of authenticity which attaches to the memory of the famous and fearless king who made himself the terror of the Danes. Brian Boróimhe is as historical a personage as O'Connell or Grattan, or Silken Thomas or Shane O'Neill. To relegate him in any way into the ghostly company of Ossianic heroes who haunt the twilight regions of romance, is to commit a grave offence of lese majesté against that most high and potent prince.

Brian Boróimhe, or Brian of the Tribute, was the greatest king of the old Dalcassian line, which was founded by Cormac Cas in the third century. In alternation with the princes of the Eugenian Hne the Dalcassian princes had ruled over Munster for seven centuries, when a son was born to Cinneidigh, who was christened Brian. Before I explain the signification of the surname which was afterwards given to the glory of the Dalcassian House, I may not inappropriately quote a passage from O'Curry's delightful lectures, in which one valuable social reform, in itself enough to illuminate a kingly reign, is set forth :

“ Previous to the time of the Monarch Brian Boróimhe—about the year 1000—there was no general system of family names in Erin ; but every man took the name either of his father or of his grandfather for a surname. Brian, however, established a new and most convenient arrangement—namely, that families in future should take permanent names, either those of their immediate fathers or of any person more remote in their line of pedigree. And thus Murie Adhach, the son of Carthach, took the surname of Mac-Carthaigh (now MacCarthy), ‘ Mac’ being the Gaelic for ‘ son.’ Toirdhealbhagh, or Turloch, the grandson of Brian himself, took the surname of O'Brian or ‘ the grandson of Brian’—O' being the Gaelic for ‘ grand-son ;’ Cathbarr, the grandson of Donnell, took the name of O'Donnell; Donnell, the grandson of Niall Glendubh, took the surname of O'Neill; Tadgh or Teige, the grandson of Conor, took the name of O'Conor of Connacht; Donogh, the son of Murchadh, or Murogh, took the surname of MacMurogh of Leinster; and so as to all the other families throughout the kingdom.”

Brian was born in the year 941. When he was ten years old his brother Mahon succeeded to the kingship. At that time the Danes were the scourge and the dread of the native Irish princes. Their wild Vikings came from the far north in their long ships and settled eagerly upon the smiling Irish shores, plundering and devastating in all directions, and ever encroaching more and more upon the soil, and pushing the lines of the settlements farther and farther away from the sea. From his earliest boyhood Brian seems to have been animated by the fiercest hatred against the invaders, and by consuming indignation at the humiliation involved in the presence of the marauding encampments on Irish soil. Hitherto no prince or league of princes had been found strong enough to drive the Danes back over the swan's bath to their homes in the frozen North. The desperate courage, the vast physical strength, the gigantic frames of the Northmen, made them exceedingly dangerous adversaries, and moreover, they settled upon the country in such numbers as made any attempt to overthrow them difficult in the extreme. Brian's patience seems to have given way when Mahon, in his sovereign capacity as King of Munster, withdrew from what looked like a hopeless struggle with the Danes, and entered into a solemn treaty with them. The treaty could not bind Brian. He rallied around him a mere handful of the bravest and most

desperate chieftains, and fought the hostile Danes wherever and whenever he could, and to such good purpose that he succeeded in restraining their onward advance. Fired by the courageous example of Brian, his brother Mahon and other princes took heart and joined together in a comprehensive bond against the common enemy. Limerick, in which the power of the Munster Danes was massed, was assailed and carried after some hot fighting, and the Irish found themselves masters of many prisoners and a vast quantity of treasure. Still, in spite of this signal victory, such was the power of the Danes, and such the strength of their arms from constant reinforcements, and such the dread of their desperate reputation, that after a while they were permitted to re-enter Limerick as traders, and become masters of the town again.

The reinstated Danes were full of bitter feelings towards Mahon as head of the great enter-prise which had for a time struck so heavy a blow at their influence, and they determined on revenge. A conspiracy was formed between Ivar, head of the Danes of Limerick, and a renegade Irish prince, Molloy, son of Bran, Lord of Desmond, who had long been a jealous rival of Mahon, whom Mahon had expelled from Desmond, and who was thirsting for revenge. Between the pair a scheme was laid for the assassination of Mahon, which was carried out under conditions of peculiar and revolting perfidy. Molloy summoned Mahon to an amicable conference, at which the claims of the two rival princes might be discussed and settled. The meeting was to be held at the house of Donovan, a Eugenian prince. Mahon went to the meeting without any suspicion of the meditated treason; he was immediately seized, made prisoner, hurried to the mountains, and slain. The manner of his death was particularly horrible, for it is told that when the murderers drew their weapons the betrayed king caught up a copy of the holy gospels and placed the open volumes as a shield against his breast. But neither the sacred book, nor the presence of two priests, who had courageously followed the doomed king, stayed the murderous hands. The assassins closed round the king, a ring of levelled points, and plunged their weapons again and again through the book into his body. Mahon fell to the ground dead; the priests caught up the sacred volume, its pages torn with treason's swords and blackened with Dalcassia's noblest blood, and hurried from the scene of slaughter to bear the news of the murder far and wide. Whether even such assassins were unwilling to lay hands upon a holy man, or whether they wished the news of Ivar's vengeance and Molloy's treason to be bruited abroad as soon as might be, they seem in no wise to have interfered with the departure of the priests. Perhaps the murderers deemed that in slaying Mahon they had sapped the strength of Munster. But they reckoned without the young chieftain who had been foremost in the late war, and whose courage and genius made him a far more dangerous enemy to the Danish strength than the monarch who had been so foully done to death in the Knocinreorin Mountains.

News of his brother's death was brought to Brian at Kinkora. Every historian has recorded the passion of grief and rage which seized upon the young prince; every historian has told how, like a leader in Israel or a Hellenic hero, he immediately seized his harp and sang the death-song of his brother and king; every historian has quoted the mighty words in which he pledged himself to vengeance:

“ My heart shall burst within my breast
Unless I avenge this great king ;
They shall forfeit life for this foul deed,
Or I must perish by a violent death.”

Bravely and resolutely Brian fulfilled his vow. Rousing all his following, he flung himself first upon his Danish foes under Ivar of Limerick, and routed them completely. Ivar, the chief of the traitors, with his two sons, was slain. Then he turned the edge of his sword against the false Eugenician Donovan. Donovan raised a mighty power of his own people and of Desmond Danes, but they could make no head against Brian ; they were scattered like chaff, and Donovan himself was slain. One alone now remained of Mahon's murderers, Molloy, son of Bran. Brian sent him a summons to fight, which Molloy answered by taking the field with a swollen armament. But these, too, like the others, were dispersed and scattered by Brian's army, and Molloy himself was slain in the thick of the fight by Murgough, Brian's valiant and high-spirited son. Such was the swift fate that overtook the slayer of Mahon.

While this blood-feud was being consummated Brian's dominions were invaded by Malachy Mor, the famous Malachy of the Collar of Gold. The precise cause of the quarrel between these two illustrious princes seems now to be somewhat uncertain, but it must have been fierce, indeed, when it moved so gallant a warrior as Malachy to the ungenerous action of cutting down the sacred tree at Adair, under which Brian himself, and the long line of his Dalcassian ancestors, had been crowned. As soon as Brian had his brother's vendetta off his hands he turned the strength of his arm against Malachy, by ravaging Westmeath. For some time the quarrel between Brian and Malachy raged with intermittent fury, victory sometimes inclining to one prince and sometimes to another. At last, however, a common peril and a common enemy united those hostile monarchs. The Danes, their decimated ranks stiffened by reinforcements from the far North, were again pursuing their old policy of aggression against the native Irish. Brian and Malachy clasped hands in amity, concluded a truce which proved to be a lasting one, joined their forces, beat back the desperate Danes, and entered Dublin. With this crushing defeat of the foreign foe came the hour of Brian's triumph. He claimed the kingship of Ireland, and called upon Malachy Mor to acknowledge him, a course which Malachy, after a little faltering and some unsuccessful attempts to stir up certain Irish princes to mutiny, finally adopted.

Why was Brian called Brian of the Tribute ? The story is curious. O'Curry tells it at considerable length, and from O'Curry it may be briefly summarized thus : In the first century there appears to have been a very fierce land agitation. The Aitheach Tuatha, who appear to have occupied something of the position, of the tenant farmers of our time, and to have been no less oppressed, issued a sort of No Rent Manifesto, which they enforced by rising in swift and successful rebellion. The power of the landlord was overthrown, and the Attacots, as the Aitheach Tuatha have come to be correctly called, set up a ruler of their own. King Cat-Head. Cat-Head's successor was defeated and slain by a prince of the legitimate line some quarter of a century after the revolution. This prince, Tuathal Teachtmair, had two fair daughters whom he loved passing well. One of them was wedded to Eachaidh Aincheann, Lord of Leinster. This false prince, hearing that the second sister was fairer than the first, shut his wife into close confinement, pretended that she was dead, and obtained from Tuathal the hand of his second daughter. The first wife escaped from her prison, confronted her false husband and deceived bride. The new queen died immediately of shame and horror at her situation, and her sister followed her to the grave soon after. When Tuathal heard of the insult to his children and of their fate, he carried fire and sword into Leinster, ravaged the province from north to south, and imposed upon its people forever the payment of a triennial tribute, which, as it consisted largely of cows, was called the " Boromean" tribute, from the Gaedhlic word " Bo," meaning a cow. For five centuries this tribute was the cause of fierce and bloody wars until, in the year 680, it

was abolished by Finnachta the Festive. Brian revived it as a punishment for the adherence of Leinster to the Danish cause, and hence his surname of Boromhe.

Brian's reign as King of Ireland was brilliant and prosperous. Commerce, arts, education all flourished, and the wealth and peace of the country became proverbial. But the old hatred of the Danes, long smoldering, blazed at last into determined insurrection. Aided by treason among the Irish chiefs and princes, a formidable army was levied against the aged king. But age had not cooled the fiery courage of Brian's nature. He raised all his power and met his foes at Clontarf on Good Friday, the 23d of April, 1014.

The fortunes of that fight are a familiar story. The Danes were defeated, but victory was scarcely less terrible to victors than to vanquished, for in the very ebb of the battle a Danish chief struck down and slew the greatest prince who ever ruled over Ireland, one of the greatest monarchs whose name is recorded in the history of the world.

Ireland was now divided into four confederations of tribes. The O'Neils held Ulidia, which is now called Ulster ; the O'Connors Conacia, or Connaught ; the O'Briens and the McCarthys Mononia, or Munster ; and the Macmurroughs Lagenia, or Leinster— all under the paramount but often-disputed rule of a branch of the Ulster O'Neils. The royal demense of Meath, the appanage of the Ulster family, which included Westmeath, Longford, and a part of Kings County, was sometimes counted a fifth kingdom.

In the wild north, O'Neil, O'Donnel, O'Kane, O'Hara, O'Sheel, O'Carrol, were mighty names. On the northernmost peninsula, where the Atlantic runs into Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly, O'Dogherty reigned supreme. In Connaught, O'Rourke, O'Reilly, O'Kelly, O'Flaherty, O'Malley, O'Dowd, were lords. In Meath and Leinster, MacGeoghegan, O'Farrell, O'Connor, O'Moore, O'Brennan, Macmurrough ruled. In Munster, by the western shore, MacCarthy More held sway. MacCarthy Reagh swayed the south, by the pleasant waters of Cork Bay. O'Sullivan Beare was lord of the fair promontory between Bantry Bay and Kenmare River. O'Mahony reigned by roaring Water Bay. O'Donoghue was chieftain by the haunted Killarney Lakes. MacMahon ruled north of the Shannon. O'Loglin looked on Galway Bay. All Ireland, with the exception of a few seaport towns where the Danes had settled, was in the hands of Irish chiefs of old descent and famous lineage. They quarrelled among themselves as readily and as fiercely as if they had been the heads of so many Greek States. The Danes had been their Persians ; their Romans were now to come.

Hours with eminent Irishmen and a glimpse of Irish history (1886)

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