

IRISH PRE-CHRISTIAN SAGAS

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ANY hundreds of years before the coming of Christ a vast empire stretched across the continent of Europe. It was formed by people Celtic in blood, in speech, and in customs, and it was a formidable power feared alike by Greeks and Romans. Once indeed, on the ill-omened "Dies Alliensis," July 18, 390, B. C., it brought the mighty "Mistress of the World" to her knees in shame and terror, when the Celts, turning at one blow the flank of the Roman army, completely annihilated it, and pillaged and burned the Eternal City. Then with the gradually increasing pressure of the Roman legions, and the south and westward movements of the Teutons, little by little, this great empire disintegrated; one by one its nations were brought to bear the foreign yoke or fell before the fire and sword of the barbarian hordes. Where Celtic towns had flourished sprang up German villages or Roman provinces. Celtic civilization, which had reached a very high state, was submerged and absorbed by Roman and German colonizations until the very language of the continental Celts was lost. So complete was this intermingling of the various cultures that today it seems almost impossible to determine just what is the Celtic element in European progress. But it is there, undeniably important, and it is the task of the student of modern civilization to sift out the Celtic leaven.

There was one spot where the Roman never came and where the Teuton could gain no permanent foothold. In a little island of the western sea, despite all obstacles, Celtic continuity has been maintained throughout the centuries. Ireland is now and has always been a Celtic stronghold, possessed of living traditions, customs, and literature with which the archaeological finds of the continent can never compare as sources of information regarding the Celtic peoples. Of these sources, perhaps the greatest is the literature of Ireland: the songs, stories, romances, myths, that have come down from the long ago, the accumulated wisdom of the race that it brings with it out of its shadowy beginnings.

It is the purpose of this article to give some account of the preservation of Irish literature in general, and then, confining itself to

one portion of the vast field, furnish a short outline review of the saga or historico-mythological type of Irish literature in particular. No claim is made to originality in the treatment, but the intense interest of the subject is sufficient apology for the present redaction.

When Patrick came to Ireland, in the year 432, A. D., he found two castes that practically controlled the literature of the country. The first was the Druidic or priestly order, who confined all religious knowledge and doctrine within their own caste. The second was the Bardic or Poetic caste, the singers, historians, and musicians of the land. In all probability none of this literature had ever been consigned to writing.¹ We know that such was the case with the Druidic lore. The Druids never permitted any of their learning to be written down, and we can well suppose that they refused to divulge it to the hated propagators of the new creed. With the Bards it was different; they received Christianity with enthusiasm and were, in turn, very graciously used by St. Patrick and his followers. These followers of Patrick were men skilled in the art of writing, and they eagerly took down from the lips of the Bard the thousands of songs and stories that made up the repertoire of the poets of Ireland. In the *Colloquy of the Ancients*, to be mentioned later in this article, there is an interesting account of Patrick and his monks listening spell-bound to one of these story tellers. "Were it not," says the Saint, "for us an occasion of neglecting prayer and converse with God, we, as we talk with thee, would feel the time pass quickly indeed." But Patrick is admonished in prayer by his guardian angel to listen untroubled and to bid his scribes write down for the sake of future generations all that is said. This incident, actual or imaginary, is certainly indicative of the respect in which the early apostles of Ireland held all that was good and beautiful in the old order of things. It is a matter of history that Dubthach, then chief poet of Ireland, was the constant companion of St. Patrick on his journeys through the island.² During the subsequent invasions of the Norsemen, much of the manuscript literature thus so carefully

¹ It seems certain that writing as we know it did not exist in pagan Ireland. There was a cumbrous alphabet consisting of lines and points, carved in wood or stone, and wholly insufficient for extended narrative, but the present Irish alphabet, made up of Latin characters, came in with Christianity.

² Later on the Bardic order was saved from complete extinction through the influence of St. Columba in the Synod of Druim Ceatt, A. D., 575. It was due to this saint, too, that in this synod Ireland granted home rule to her Scottish colonies, the first instance on record of a nation making such a grant without being forced to do so.

written, was lost with the destruction of the monasteries and schools. When these piratical wars were ended, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the monks and scribes faithfully copied everything they could find, but the loss was too often irreparable.

The Irish pre-Christian sagas, or historical tales, fall naturally into three great general divisions. The first is the Mythological or Invasions Cycle; the second, the Ultonian or Cuchulain Cycle; and the third, the Fenian or Ossianic Cycle. There are stories that belong properly to none of these, but the bulk of the saga material can be so assigned.

The Mythological Cycle deals with successive invasions of the five races that settled Ireland; the Partholarians, the Nemedians, the Firbolgs, the Tuatha De Danaan, and the Milesians. No definite time is assigned to the events of this cycle but they far precede all recorded history. The most interesting of these settlers are the Danaans, or the People of the Goddess Dana. Coming to Ireland out of the shadowy "Land of the Dead," they landed on the coast of Western Ireland under cover of a fog that they had raised by witchcraft to conceal themselves from the Firbolgs who then possessed the land. When the fog cleared away the Firbolgs were confronted with the sight of an armed host encamped on their plains. At Moytura, the Field of the Monuments, in the present Mayo, the first battle of Moytura was fought, the Firbolgs vanquished and the Danaans ruled the land. During the tenure of the Danaans, the Formorian, a piratical race living in the islands off the northwest coast, were completely routed at the second battle of Moytura, this Moytura being in Sligo instead of Mayo. The interest of this battle lies in the fact that here appears the Danaan god, Lugh of the Long Arm, one of the most popular of the Celtic deities.³ Here also we find that celebrated sword that figures so largely in the Arthurian tales and in the legends of Charlemagne. It is known by a Gaelic name translated as "The Answerer," of which "Excalibur" is thought to be a Latinization.

The Danaan Rule came to an end with the coming of the Sons of Miled. From Spain, which, however, does not seem to indicate the Spain of our times, came this race, the first of the Irish invaders to whom mortal characteristics are attributed. The Danaans, of course, disputed the right of the newcomers to settle in the country. An

³ The god Lugh seems to have been common to all the Celtic peoples. Leyden in Holland, Lyons in France, and other places on the continent are called after him. Leyden and Lyons are derivatives of the Celtic *Lugdunum*, "the dun or fortified place of Lugh."

agreement was reached by which the Milesians were to retire in their ships a distance of nine waves' length from the shore, then return and give battle. The issue was to decide the future lordship of Ireland. The Danaans, always powerful in their enchantments, played the Milesians false. They raised a magic tempest in which the sea well nigh swallowed up the ships of the invaders. The Milesians, discovering the fraud, put about at once, and completely routed the Danaans. Following upon their defeat the Danaans then "drew about themselves the cloak of invisibility" and retired into their own preternatural world. Here, contemporaneous with the rule of the Milesians, they are nevertheless invisible to the eyes of their conquerors. Behind this veil of invisibility they live and move, the "people of the Sidhe," the *fairy folk* of Ireland.

With the Milesians begins the human history of Ireland. What the races of Partholan and Nemed, of the Firbolgians and the Tuatha de Danaan, were thought to be in Gaelic mythology, it is hard to say, but there can be little doubt that they actually represent real men and women, different movements of the primitive races of Europe into the little western island, and that these dramatic presentations are fragmentary memories of real events, tinted with the diffused coloring of the half-forgotten ages. The absence of any account of creation will be noticed. If there was a Celtic cosmogony, it was the possession of the Druids and has perished with them. The mythological tales begin with Ireland—there is no Chaos from which sprang Earth and Sea and Time. The earth, to the pagan Irish, was never void and empty. In later ages it was customary, after Christianity had brought the light of truth to supplement the fading primitive revelation, to prefix the Mosaic account of creation to the tales.

The second grouping is that of the Ultonian or Cuchulain Cycle. Its principals are men and women of Ulaidh, the northern part of Ireland, corresponding roughly to the present Ulster. They are most certainly real personages, their deeds and persons, however, magnified to express the wonderment that later ages had for them. The Milesians were already long in the land, and their *Ard Righ* or High King reigned at Emain Macha, the present Armagh, where even yet the ruins of the ancient capital are discernible. Emain Macha was founded about the third century before Christ but the more important action of the sagas takes place about the opening of our era, when Conchobar Mac Iessa sat as High King in the place of Fergus Mac Roy who had abdicated in his favor. Under this warrior king moves a group of heroic figures such as Conall Cearnach, or Conall of

the Victories, Laery the Triumphant, and, but far overshadowing all the others, Cuchulain of Murthemny. This hero occupies the place in Irish story given to Hector or Achilles in the Greek, but no single figure of Greek or Latin epic tales ever embodied in himself the magnificent valour and chivalry or gathered the renown in battle that the Gaelic champion achieved. His birth was mysterious, he being the son of Lugh of the Long Arm by a mortal maiden, whom the Danaan god had enticed to the Tir nan Og. When but a youth of fifteen, he heard one day Cathbad the Druid casting a spell of divination in which the old man declared that the warrior who would that day take arms, would have a short life indeed, but that his fame would live forever upon the lips of the men of Erin. This lot Seanta, as Cuchulain was then called, took to himself. He went to Conchobar and asked arms. All that were brought to him at first, he broke with his bare hands, even to the poles of the stout war chariots. Then Conchobar's own weapons and chariot were brought and these he could not break, so he retained them. From the first of his many deeds of prowess he received the name Cuchulain, the Hound of Culain. A smith named Culain gave a banquet to Conchobar and his court. This smith had a great hound that guarded his dun at night. After the gates of the fortress were shut, the hound would course round it, and so great was the strength and ferocity of the dog that the smith feared nothing less than the invasion of an army. By chance the boy Seanta, now one of the warriors of Ulster though still young, came late to the banquet, after the gates were shut and while the hound was keeping its vigil. Those inside heard the awful baying of the dog, and then Conchobar remembered that it would be because of the approach of his young warrior. The men of Ulster lamented loudly for the boy, thinking that he would surely be destroyed, but when the gates were opened the lamenting turned into rejoicing for they saw the youth alive and unharmed, standing over the dead body of the watchdog. It was the smith's turn to lament now for he had lost his protector, but Seanta made an agreement with him to train one of the hound's whelps to take its place, and in the meantime, he himself would guard the smith's dun. Thenceforward he was always called Cuchulain, or the Hound of Culain. Part of the Cuchulain saga, also, is the story of the feast of Bricriu of the Poison Tongue. This evildoer, the Thersites of Ulster, was continually on the watch to set the heroes of Erin against each other, and in the present case almost succeeded by stirring up the jealousy of the champions' wives. In this saga occur for the first time some of

the stories that later were to become part of the Arthurian legends. The saga of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, belongs here. It describes the raid made by Maeve, the wicked queen of Connacht whom Shakespeare introduces in *Romeo and Juliet* to carry off a famed brown bull kept at Cooley. At the time of the raid the men of Ulster were suffering under the Debility of the Ultonians, a perennially recurring weakness resulting from a curse laid upon them by a Danaan woman that prevented them from taking the field. Cuchulain alone of Conchobar's warriors was exempt from the Debility, due to his extraordinary birth, and he alone held the Ford of Ardee against the invaders, bringing them to a halt single-handed. When all her other champions had either refused to fight the hero or had been vanquished by him, Maeve by her trickery persuaded Ferdia, a close friend of Cuchulain although in the opposite camp, to stand against him. Here follows the gallant and chivalrous "Fight at the Ford," the heroes striving manfully against each other during the day—at night binding up each other's wounds, in all a much finer and more chivalrous conception of manly ideals than that of Achilles dragging the dead body of Hector behind his car. On the last day the contest grows hotter. So bitterly did the champions struggle that, as the story has it, the water was forced from the river and the only moisture left upon the stones of the ford was the sweat that fell from the bodies of the warriors. So terrible grew the fight that Maeve's forces, with their horses and cattle, fled away in fear and trembling. Then Cuchulain, in the supreme moment of his war-fury, dealt the death blow and Ferdia fell at his hand. Still the Debility held the Ultonians, but Cuchulain's father Lugh came from the Tir nan Og to hold the ford, while his son slept, overcome by weariness and his sorrow at the death of his friend. At last the men of Ulster were aroused and came to the aid of the champion but it was too late for Maeve had seen to it that while Ferdia and Cuchulain fought, the brown bull was treacherously carried off to Connacht, the one defeat of Cuchulain's life. It was Maeve's hatred that at last procured his death. Although she had made peace with Ulster, she banded Cuchulain's enemies against him, spells of magic were woven round him, and he was brought once more to stand alone against her united ranks. The hour of his death, foreseen in the Druidic enchantment and presaged by certain unmistakable signs, had come and he fell by a return cast of his spear at the ford of Slieve Fuad, south of Armagh. Afterwards, Conall Cearnach, back from other battles, came all too late to the aid of the champion. He drove back the forces of Maeve,

brought back the Hound of Culain dead to Emain Macha, while great sorrow brooded over Ulster. So died the greatest hero of Irish legendary history.

The third grouping of the sagas is that of the Fenian or Ossianic Cycle, so called because it deals principally with the Fenians or the Fianna of Finn MacCumhal, and is, in some recensions, reported by Oisín the Poet, son of MacCumhal. The time of this cycle brings us to about the fourth century A. D. While the Ultonian Cycle deals with northern Ireland, the Fenian is concerned more with the country south of Ulster. Emain Macha is in ruins and the Ard Rí reigns at Tara. The Milesians are still men of gigantic stature and gigantic deeds, and there exists among them a body of picked warriors known as the Fenians or Fianna, dedicated to the service of the High King. Their leader is Finn MacCumhal, with whose exploits the stories in most part deal. The power and importance of the Fianna under his leadership grew to such an extent that they were more a source of worry and envy to the High King than of security. Cairbrí, then reigning, decided to bring matters to a crisis by withholding a tribute due the Fianna. They promptly rose in rebellion and at the battle of Gabhra, A. D. 293, were almost annihilated and their power broken forever. No sufficient account exists of the death of Finn—he disappears from the scene sometime before Gabhra and is heard of no more. A tradition, still extant and similar to the German legend of Barbarossa, says that he has not died but lies sleeping in some mountain cave, awaiting the time when he is to come forth again and do battle for Ireland. In the *Colloquy of the Ancients*, preserved in the Book of Lismore, Oisín and Caelte with sixteen of the Fenians are represented as wandering about after the battle of Gabhra, until the coming of Patrick. They appear suddenly in a church where the saint and his clerics were at the Divine Office. Great was the wonderment of the aged Fenians at the strange worship they beheld, but greater still that of the holy Patrick at the size and appearance of these giant warriors with their seemingly monstrous wolf hounds. St. Patrick, however, baptizes them and starts on a visitation of Ireland accompanied by Caelte. During the course of the journey the old man is questioned as to various places and events and thus an abundant history of the Fenian times is procured. Another account states that during the life time of Finn, Oisín one day saw a beautiful woman on a white horse appear suddenly before him. He questioned her, found that she was one of the Danaan folk, mounted behind her, and was carried off to the Tir nan Óg, where

for many years he dwelt in the delights of fairyland, and all the years were to him as so many days. Then, sated with the pleasures of the people of the Sidhe, he signified his desire to revisit his mortal companions. He was sent back upon the white horse, with instructions not to touch the ground, lest the spell be broken and he be unable to return to the Tir nan Og. By chance the spell was broken and Oisín, who in fairyland was still young and comely, found himself upon the ground, an old broken down man, while the white horse vanished in the mists. The Fenians had long ago disappeared and he was taken to Patrick who was then in the land. The Saint had his scribes write down all that the old man told them of Finn, the Fianna and of the people of the Sidhe. The alleged translation from Gaelic to English of the Poems of Oisín by MacPherson, caused quite a stir in English literature a hundred years ago.

Of course such an outline as the foregoing does not pretend to be detailed or exhaustive; that would be impossible in a short article. Irish literature, even of any one particular type, is far too extensive to be so treated in anything less than a volume. But it does give some idea of what the pre-Christian literature of Ireland is like. There runs through most of it the highly imaginative strain so common to the Celt, and matched only in that other great epic literature of Europe, the Grecian. As in the Iliad, the gods walk with men and the spirit world is closely intertwined with the mortal. In the interest of its content matter, Irish saga literature is unsurpassed. Ireland never had a poet of the genius of Homer or Virgil. If it had had such a one to throw this great mass of legend into a form worthy of the matter, the literary world would today go to Ireland for its models of classic poetry.

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