

An aerial photograph of a stone ruin, possibly a castle or fortress, with a person standing in a courtyard. The image is dark and moody, with a person in a blue shirt and dark pants standing in a grassy courtyard. The surrounding walls and structures are made of dark stone, some with moss or lichen. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

***ALICE
STOPFORD
GREEN***

***THE OLD
IRISH
WORLD***

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The Old Irish World

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PREFACE

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SOME Irish friends have asked me to print certain lectures concerning Ireland to which they had listened with indulgence; and to reprint also former papers in a manner more convenient for country readers. This volume is the answer to their request. It will be seen that I have not attempted to alter the lectures from their first purpose and form.

The various studies, thus accidentally united, have a connecting link in such evidences as they may contain of civilisation in the old Irish world. A hundred years ago, in 1821, Dr. Petrie noted that while the historians of ancient native origin were unable in their poverty and degradation to pursue the laborious study of antiquities, there were others of a different class and origin who had taken up the subject to bring it into contempt; and these indeed succeeded in the cause for which they, unworthily, laboured. Forty years later he recognised the same influences at work. It would appear, he said in a letter written to Lord Dunraven shortly before his death in 1865, to be considered derogatory to the feeling of superiority in the English mind to accept the belief that Celts of Ireland or Scotland could have been equal, not to say superior in civilisation to their more potent conquerors, or that they could have known the arts of civilised life till these were taught them by the Anglo-Normans. After the lapse of half a century we can still trace the same spirit—so powerful have been the hindrances to serious and impartial enquiry—so slow has been the decline of racial prejudice and political complacency. But in these latter days a great change has silently passed over the peoples. The difficulties of historical research and instruction do indeed remain as great as ever; but in the new society which we see shaping itself in Ireland on natural and no longer on purely artificial lines, there is no reason to fear truth as dangerous or to neglect it as unnecessary. There is now a public ready to be interested not only in Danish and Norman civilisation in Ireland, but also in the Gaelic culture which embraced these and made them its own.

I cannot adequately thank Professor Eoin MacNeill for generously allowing me to embody in my first chapter some of his researches on the history of the Scot wanderings between Scotland and Ireland; it is earnestly to be hoped that he will publish before long the results of his original work.

I owe my warm thanks also to Mr. F. J. Bigger for his unstinted help in references and suggestions out of the stores of his topographical knowledge. I may mention as an instance the grave-stone in Kilclief churchyard carved with a Celtic cross, which he discovered while these pages were going through the

press, so that I have been able to note it for the first time among Lecale antiquities.

Mr. R. I. Best has rendered me more services than I can here tell, however gratefully I acknowledge them.

The account of Ardglass has been re-printed with additions, by the kind permission of the Editor of the *Nation*. I have to thank the Editor of the *Nineteenth Century* for leave to add the article on Tradition in History, which is inserted at the request of readers in Ireland.

To prevent mistake I may add a word of explanation that the map, or rather diagram, which is entitled Scandinavian Trade Routes, contains not only those lines of sea-commerce, but also an indication of the ways across Europe which were used by Irish travellers from earlier times. The difference between these routes is clearly indicated in the text.

ALICE STOPFORD GREEN.

April 25, 1912.

IN MEMORY OF
THE IRISH DEAD



THE OLD IRISH WORLD



CHAPTER I

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THE WAY OF HISTORY IN IRELAND

IN all the countries of Europe the study of history for a citizen of the State is taken for granted, as the study of tides and currents might be held necessary for a mariner, or of the winds for an air-man, or that of the map for a merchant. It is only a dozen years ago, however, that its study was made compulsory in elementary schools in England, and in that country men are still discussing, by way of lectures and so forth, "What is the Use of History." The historical instinct among the English people has indeed never been very keen, so that, as learned men tell us, it would be more difficult to form a folk-museum in England than in any other country, so few are the objects of a distinctly national character that have survived. The past is rapidly overlaid among men who live intensely in the present and the immediate future. A great gulf separates them from a race like the Irish, to whom the far past and the far future are part of the eternal present, the very condition of thought, the furniture without which the mind is bare.

The Irish, nevertheless, have by long effort been brought under authority to the English mind in history, and an Anglicised Ireland now lies in the wake of England, a laggard in the trough of the wave,

rocked by the old commonplaces of the early Victorian age. The hope that our people may win out of that trough lies to a great extent in the new sails set by the National University, if they may at last catch the fresh breezes of Heaven, and be swept into the open sea of free knowledge and candid thinking. In Ireland, as in England, history has been made compulsory in a sense—a sense, we might irreverently say, of the “United Kingdom.” It has been made a department of English Grammar, and has further been portioned out to Irishmen as a fragment of English history, strictly confined within dates fixed for that history in the schools of England. The Irish story is thus shut up as it were like criminals of old in the Tower prison of Little Ease—a narrow place where no man could stand or lie at length. And Irishmen are still driven to discuss in belated fashion the question that all Europe settled long ago—Why should we make the History of our country our serious study?

The reason of Nature for this study is indeed as profound as the being of man. There is no other creature on this planet that can create a history of its kind. To man alone belongs the faculty of looking “before and after,” and considering the story of his race from the first human being that walked the earth. Our first forefather brought with him something new—the power to store up and to celebrate memories of the great dead. His elemental pieties have become part of the whole tradition of

our humanity; and that history which he began, and to which we add day by day, is our witness to the separateness of man from the other creatures of this world. When we cherish this study we are proclaiming our pre-eminence among all the living beings that we know. When we let this history fall from us we are sinking to the level of the dumb beasts. As living men, therefore, “let us enjoy, whenever we have an opportunity, the delight of admiration, and perform the duties of reverence.”

There is a practical reason, too, for the knowledge of history. The individual man left to himself is helpless to stand against the powers of the world. Alone he can do nothing. His strength lies in the generations and associations of man behind him, linked by an endless tradition, who have made for him his art, religion, science, politics, social laws. It is only in communion with that company of workers that he can take a step forward. The soul of a country is bound up with the heroes who still

**“... people the steep rocks and river banks,
Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul,
Of independence and stern liberty.”**

Rulers and commanders have known this well. When they have wanted to exalt peoples or armies under them, they have opened out to them the glories of their history, and called on them to admit into their souls the spirit of their fathers.

**“Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.”**

When they have wished to depress and subjugate a race they have slammed the doors of their history on them, and left them alone, spiritless and forlorn, passed by and forgotten by the Ages, despised of themselves and of their neighbours.

Whether therefore as men of a reasonable nature, or as members of a nation, we are bound to make History our all-important study. There is no question about this in any self-respecting nation in Europe. How does the case stand with us in Ireland?

When I first began the study of Irish History, I was dissuaded from it by a man of exceedingly acute mind and wide reading. His argument, I imagine, is a common one, and shows the kind of scruples that are set to bar our way to Irish history—as some primeval race once planted the slope of Cahir Mor on Aran with a forest of jagged standing-stones, to forbid all entrance to the fortress uplifted there above the expanse of the Ocean in its freedom. Why, said my typical objector, should we turn away from the great highways of the world's progress, with their sweeping procession of Empires and great Dominions, to lose ourselves in the maze where humble and unsuccessful nationalities walk obscurely. Stimulate the spirit of young men by giving them the examples of heroes whose fame has sounded through the earth, and societies that have been adorned by triumph. Let the men of local fame, the guardians of smaller nationalities, rest in darkness, and let us follow the sun in its strength.

We may remember one of the snares laid by the Prince of Evil for the Son of Man, when he set Him on a high place above the kingdoms of the world, to bend His soul before their ostentatious glory. From the mountain Satan displayed the emblems of their pride, palaces and towers and treasuries, “knowing that it was by those alone that he himself could have been so utterly lost to rectitude and beatitude. Our Saviour spurned the temptation, and the greatest of His miracles was accomplished.” England was just at the outset of her imperial career when Milton, in his “Paradise Regained,” pictured that tremendous scene, the passing of the empires in their state before the judgment of the Divine Reason. The prodigious procession was marshalled from the very dawn of history, powers and dominions sweeping over the earth, and disappearing with the suddenness with which they rose. Not one has survived. In the shifting scene forms of states move and stir dimly like the fallen angels from “Paradise Lost” as they lay prone, extended on the flood of ruin and combustion. One scheme of government after another is lifted up to be cast down—tyranny, oligarchy, slavery, commercialism, communism, parliaments, theocracies. The great warriors and the great statesmen are alike entombed in the ruins of their empires. “Head and crown drop together, and are overlooked.” On the other hand, when empires have fallen, the nationalities have not always perished. They die only with the utter extermination

of the people. So long as the old stock lingers on the soil, there is a spirit that can outlive all empires, form the scourge of conquerors, and set the last barrier to pride of dominion. We know how peoples enclosed within small states, fed from deep sources of heritage and tradition, have given the impress of their local passion to their art. Out of the intensity of national life have come those high inspirations that have given to us all that is best of literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, music, and however deeply the artist has felt the influence of the world outside, his ultimate power lies in the spirit which has entered into him from his native state and the race of which he sprang. The generous influences of local patriotism were recognised by the greatest political thinker that modern Ireland has sent out: "To be attached," said Burke, "to the sub-division, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections."

Perhaps, we might also suggest to our objector, the lesser nationalities are even now, in these days of triumphant Imperialism, beginning to have their revenge. The study of small societies seems to become fashionable among the new reformers. Do we not hear from all sides of the education, discipline, and public spirit of countries compassed within bounds suited to man's apprehension? With what respect do not Unionists extol the industrial success of States such as Holland and Denmark, for example. Even now do we not hear English Imperialists crying

out that perhaps Switzerland has got the secret of the democratic mind, or Norway, or New South Wales, or Arizona; might not England take a lesson from some little self-contained and thrifty community on the use of the referendum? It would seem that the influence of small commonwealths is not yet extinct among us.

It is very certain that Ireland of all countries, if left to itself, would never of its own will allow history to lie in a backwater among the flotsam of the current. History was the early study of the Irish, the inspiration of their poets and writers. Every tribesman of old knew, not only the great deeds and the famous places of his own clan, but of the whole of Ireland. In the lowliest cabin the songs of Irish poets lived on for hundreds of years, and dying fathers left to sons as their chief inheritance the story of their race. When war, poverty, the oppression of the stranger, hindered the printing of Irish records, there was not a territory in all Ireland that did not give men to make copies of them, hundreds of thousands of pages, over and over again, finely written after the manner of their fathers. Through centuries of suffering down to within living memory the long procession of scribes was never broken, men tilling small farms, labouring in the fields, working at a blacksmith's forge. And this among a people of whom Burke records that in two hundred thousand houses for their exceeding poverty a candle, on which a tax lay, was never

lighted. As we follow the lines and count the pages of such manuscripts, we see the miracle of the passion in these men's hearts. No relics in Ireland are more touching than these volumes, and none should be more reverently collected and preserved. They form a singular treasure such as no country in all Europe possesses.

But now, in spite of this tradition, history is more backward in Ireland than in any other country. Here alone there is a public opinion which resents its being freely written, and there is an opinion, public or official, I scarcely know which to call it, which prevents its being freely taught. And between the two, history has a hard fight for life.

Take the question of writing. History may conceivably be treated as a science. Or it may be interpreted as a majestic natural drama or poem. Either way has much to be said for it. Both ways have been nobly attempted in other countries. But neither of these courses is thought of in Ireland. Here history has a peculiar doom. It is enslaved in the chains of the Moral Tale—the good man (English) who prospered, and the bad man (Irish) who came to a shocking end—the kind of ethical formula which, for all our tutors and teachers could do, never deceived the generosity of childhood. The good man in the moral tale of Ireland is not even a fiction of Philosophy or of History. He is, oddly enough, the offspring of Grammar alone, and carries the traces of his dry and uninspired pedigree. He owes his being,

in fact, to the English dislike for a foreign language. The Gael, as we know, ever faithful to the tradition of his race, while he sang and recited and wrote and copied his story with an undying passion, did these things in his own speech. The Norman or “Frank” settlers, true “citizens of the world,” adopted his tongue, his poetry, and his patriotic enthusiasm. When the English arrived, however, they according to their constant insular tradition refused to learn a strange language, so that the only history of Ireland they could discern was that part of it which was written in English—that is, the history of the English colonists told by themselves. On this contracted record they have worked with industry and self-congratulation. They have laid down the lines of a story in which the historian’s view is constantly fixed on England. All that the Irish had to tell of themselves remained obscured in an unknown tongue. The story of the whole Irish population thus came to be looked on as merely a murky prelude to the civilizing work of England—a preface savage, transitory, and of no permanent interest, to be rapidly passed over till we come to the English pages of the book. Thus two separate stories went on side by side. The Irish did not know the language which held the legend of English virtue and consequent wealth. The English could not translate the subterranean legend of Irish poetry, passion, and fidelity. Religion added new distinctions. Virtues were Protestant, the sins of the prodigal were

Catholic. Finally, class feeling had its word. The upper class went to their university, and their manners and caste instincts entitled them as of course to the entire credence of their own social world; the lower class were alleged to be men whose manners were common and their prejudices vulgar.

In this way there grew up an orthodox history based on sources in the English tongue alone. The Colonists laid down by authority its dogmas and axioms. All that agreed with this conventional history was reputed serious and scholarly: whatever diverged from it was partial, partizan, or prejudiced. "Impartiality" and "loyalty" became technical terms, with a special meaning for Ireland. The two words were held also to be interchangeable. A strictly "impartial" writer must not let his "loyal" eye swerve from the fixed point, England. As a judicious Englishman said of his compatriots, they only think a man impartial when he has gone over to the opposite side.

The results of this system are conspicuous. A Frenchman may unreproved write with affection and ardour of France, and an Englishman of England. An Irishman, however, is in another case. He must have no patriotic fire for his own people. He must not acclaim their victories nor mourn their defeats. Take an illustration of this temper. A clergyman has lately written to the *Church of Ireland Gazette* to condemn history readers "written from an anti-English and anti-Church point of view"; he complains that the

writer describes the battle of the Blackwater in 1598, where the English were routed, as “a glorious victory for the O’Neill.” Such a phrase as this cannot be allowed to Irishmen. Or as a writer to the *Irish Times* puts a similar argument: “If the Nationalists want for ever to live in the glories of the past and to harp upon them, why do they not go far enough back ... to the time when they ate their grandmothers ... and indulged in all sorts of hellish rites.”

In fact, as we trudge along the dull beaten road of the orthodox history we never escape, not for a moment, from the monotonous running commentary which sounds continually at our side. “Nomadic,” “primitive,” “wigwam,” “aboriginal,” “savage,” “barbarous,” “lawless”—the words are always at hand. In the moral tale the accustomed stream of precept and delation never runs dry. It follows us through all the strictly “impartial” writers. The Irishman was a “kerne.” The Irish word cethern (kerne) meaning a troop or company of soldiers, probably foot soldiers, is as old as the Latin *caterva* with which it is cognate, or the Umbrian *kateramu*, and so is of quite respectable lineage; but being a foreign word to the Englishman, he used it as a natural term of contempt, as though a Chinese should cry “sailor” or “merchant” when he meant to say “English devil.” More than that, the Irishman was a “nomad,” apparently because he sent his cattle to graze on the hills in summer—a custom which in modern Switzerland is held to be quite respectable

by admirers of Federalism. This “nomad” idea is familiarly handed about from one writer to another. One of the most esteemed historians in Dublin was Mr. Litton Falkiner, who has added some notable pages to later Anglo-Irish history. Yet he was satisfied to dismiss the Irish population of mediæval times in one terse phrase: “the pastoral, and in great measure nomadic Celts, who stood for the Irish people before the 12th century”—in other words, before the Norman invasion. This absurd sentence seems to pass current; no objection has been made to it. What would educated Englishmen think of a leading historian who dismissed the pre-Norman population of that island as “boorish Low-Dutch, hut-dwellers round a common field cut into strips after their barbarous manner, *who stood for the English people before the Norman Conquest?*” Trivialities and ignorances of this sort are not in fashion in English history, and it is time that they were out of fashion in Ireland.

Irishmen of the north still preserved, Mr. Falkiner told us, even to the end of the 17th century, “all the primitive characteristics of the scarcely more than nomadic civilisation of Ulster.” With summary contempt he pretended to dispose of what he fancifully termed “the lawless banditti who commonly formed the body-guard of an Irish chief”; and in the orthodox manner confronts “Irish law” and “Irish lawlessness” under what he called “the English ownership of Ireland.” The great Hugh of Tyrone is

described as looking “on the onward march of English institutions with feelings not very different from those with which the aborigines of the American continent beheld the advance of the stranger from the east.” In the same spirit he informed Englishmen that Ireland was sadly deficient in the wealth of historical and literary associations which form the romantic charm of England. “Cathedral cities, in the sense in which the term is understood in England, Ireland may be almost said to be without. A few of the towns,” he generously admitted, “contain, indeed, the remains of ecclesiastical and monastic buildings. But even where these exist they are, with one or two exceptions, sadly deficient in human interest.” It is a cheap method, even if it is one out of date elsewhere, to deny human interest to a subject which one has learned to ignore, and may desire to see forgotten. Can no human interest touch the heart in Dromahair or Donegal or Glendalough? There is a remote and little-known road in the plains of Mayo where a singular sight may be seen. Near it stand the ruins of a majestic abbey founded over seven hundred years ago (1189-1190), by Cathal O’Connor (whose foster-father’s tomb has lately been found at Knockmoy with its Irish inscription). Nave and transepts were laid bare and open from their immense gable ends, and the tower flung from the four splendid arches that supported it, but the old vaulted roof of the choir still remains; and here, it is said, in this remoteness, is the only ancient church of