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***IRISH
NATIONALITY***

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[SOME IRISH WRITERS ON IRISH HISTORY](#)

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

THE GAELS IN IRELAND

Ireland lies the last outpost of Europe against the vast flood of the Atlantic Ocean; unlike all other islands it is circled round with mountains, whose precipitous cliffs rising sheer above the water stand as bulwarks thrown up against the immeasurable sea.

It is commonly supposed that the fortunes of the island and its civilisation must by nature hang on those of England. Neither history nor geography allows this theory. The life of the two countries was widely separated. Great Britain lay turned to the east; her harbours opened to the sunrising, and her first traffic was across the narrow waters of the Channel and the German Sea. But Ireland had another aspect; her natural harbours swelled with the waves of the Atlantic, her outlook was over the ocean, and long before history begins her sailors braved the perils of the Gaulish sea. The peoples of Britain, Celts and English, came to her from the opposite lowland coasts; the people of Ireland crossed a wider ocean-track, from northern France to the shores of the Bay of Biscay. The two islands had a different history; their trade-routes were not the same; they lived apart, and developed apart their civilisations.

We do not know when the Gaels first entered Ireland, coming according to ancient Irish legends across the Gaulish sea. One invasion followed another, and an old Irish tract

gives the definite Gaelic monarchy as beginning in the fourth century B.C. They drove the earlier peoples, the Iberians, from the stupendous stone forts and earthen entrenchments that guarded cliffs and mountain passes. The name of Erin recalls the ancient inhabitants, who lived on under the new rulers, more in number than their conquerors. The Gaels gave their language and their organisation to the country, while many customs and traditions of the older race lingered on and penetrated the new people.

Over a thousand years of undisturbed life lay before the Gaels, from about 300 B.C. to 800 A.D. The Roman Empire which overran Great Britain left Ireland outside it. The barbarians who swept over the provinces of the empire and reached to the great Roman Wall never crossed the Irish Sea.

Out of the grouping of the tribes there emerged a division of the island into districts made up of many peoples. Each of the provinces later known as Ulster, Leinster, Munster and Connacht had its stretch of seaboard and harbours, its lakes and rivers for fishing, its mountain strongholds, its hill pastures, and its share of the rich central plain, where the cattle from the mountains "used to go in their running crowds to the smooth plains of the province, towards their sheds and their full cattle-fields." All met in the middle of the island, at the Hill of Usnech, where the Stone of Division still stands. There the high-king held his court, as the chief lord in the confederation of the many states. The rich lands of Meath were the high-king's domain.

Heroic tales celebrate the prehistoric conflicts as of giants by which the peoples fixed the boundaries of their power. They tell of Conor Mac Nessa who began to reign in the year that Mark Antony and Cleopatra died, and of his sister's son Cuchulain, the champion of the north, who went out to battle from the vast entrenchments still seen in Emain Macha near Armagh. Against him Queen Maeve gathered at her majestic fort of Rathcroghan in Roscommon fifteen hundred royal mercenaries and Gaulish soldiers—a woman comely and white-faced, with gold yellow hair, her crimson cloak fastened at the breast with a gold pin, and a spear flaming in her hand, as she led her troops across the Boyne. The battles of the heroes on the Boyne and the fields of Louth, the thronged entrenchments that thicken round the Gap of the North and the mountain pass from Dundalk and Newry into the plains of Armagh and Tyrone, show how the soldiers' line of march was the same from the days of Cuchulain to those of William of Orange. The story tells how the whole island shared in the great conflict, to the extreme point of Munster, where a rival of Cuchulain, Curoi son of Dare, had sent his knights and warriors through all Ireland to seek out the greatest stones for his fortress, on a shelf of rock over two thousand feet above the sea near Tralee. The Dublin Museum preserves relics of that heroic time, the trappings of war-chariots and horses, arms and ornaments.

Amid such conflicts the Connacht kings pressed eastward from Usnech to Tara, and fixed there the centre of Irish life.

The Gaelic conquerors had entered on a wealthy land. Irish chroniclers told of a vast antiquity, with a shadowy line of monarchs reaching back, as they boasted, for some two

thousand years before Christ: they had legends of lakes springing forth in due order; of lowlands cleared of wood, the appearance of rivers, the making of roads and causeways, the first digging of wells: of the making of forts; of invasions and battles and plagues. They told of the smelting of gold near the Liffey about 1500 B.C. and of the Wicklow artificer who made cups and brooches of gold and silver, and silver shields, and golden chains for the necks of kings; and of the discovery of dyes, purple and blue and green, and how the ranks of men were distinguished henceforth by the colour of their raiment. They had traditions of foreign trade—of an artificer drowned while bringing golden ore from Spain, and of torques of gold from oversea, and of a lady's hair all ablaze with Alpine gold. Later researches have in fact shown that Irish commerce went back some fifteen hundred years before our era, that it was the most famous gold-producing country of the west, that mines of copper and silver were worked, and that a race of goldsmiths probably carried on the manufacture of bronze and gold on what is now the bog of Cullen. Some five hundred golden ornaments of old times have been gathered together in the Dublin Museum in the last eighty years, a scanty remnant of what have been lost or melted down; their weight is five hundred and seventy ounces against a weight of twenty ounces in the British Museum from England, Scotland, and Wales.

The earth too was fruitful. The new settlers, who used iron tools instead of bronze, could clear forests and open plains for tillage. Agriculture was their pride, and their legends told of stretches of corn so great that deer could

shelter in them from the hounds, and nobles and queens drove chariots along their far-reaching lines, while multitudes of reapers were at work cutting the heads of the grain with the little sickles which we may still see in the Dublin Museum.

But to the Irish the main interest of the Gaels lies in their conception of how to create an enduring state or nation.

The tribal system has been much derided as the mark of a savage people, or at least of a race unable to advance beyond political infancy into a real national existence. This was not true of the Gaels. Their essential idea of a state, and the mode of its government and preservation, was different from that of mediæval Europe, but it was not uncivilised.

The Roman Empire stamped on the minds of its subject peoples, and on the Teutonic barbarians who became its heirs, the notion of a state as an organisation held together, defended, governed and policed, by a central ruler; while the sovereign was supreme in the domain of force and maintenance of order, whatever lay outside that domain—art, learning, history and the like—were secondary matters which might be left to the people. The essential life of the nation came to be expressed in the will and power of its master.

The Gaelic idea was a wholly different one. The law with them was the law of the people. They never lost their trust in it. Hence they never exalted a central authority, for their law needed no such sanction. While the code was one for the whole race, the administration on the other hand was divided into the widest possible range of self-governing

communities, which were bound together in a willing federation. The forces of union were not material but spiritual, and the life of the people consisted not in its military cohesion but in its joint spiritual inheritance—in the union of those who shared the same tradition, the same glorious memory of heroes, the same unquestioned law, and the same pride of literature. Such an instinct of national life was neither rude nor contemptible, nor need we despise it because it was opposed to the theory of the middle ages in Europe. At the least the Irish tribal scheme of government contained as much promise of human virtue and happiness as the feudal scheme which became later the political creed of England, but which was never accepted in Ireland. Irish history can only be understood by realising this intense national life with its sure basis on the broad self-government of the people.

Each tribe was supreme within its own borders; it elected its own chief, and could depose him if he acted against law. The land belonged to the whole community, which kept exact pedigrees of the families who had a right to share in the ground for tillage or in the mountain pasturage; and the chief had no power over the soil save as the elected trustee of the people. The privileges of the various chiefs, judges, captains, historians, poets, and so on, were handed down from generation to generation. In all these matters no external power could interfere. The tribe owed to the greater tribe above it nothing but certain fixed dues, such as aid in road-making, in war, in ransom of prisoners and the like.

The same right of self-government extended through the whole hierarchy of states up to the Ardri or high-king at the head. The "hearth of Tara" was the centre of all the Gaelic states, and the demesne of the Ardri. "This then is my fostermother," said the ancient sage, "the island in which ye are, even Ireland, and the familiar knee of this island is the hill on which ye are, namely, Tara." There the Ardri was crowned at the pillar-post. At Tara, "the fort of poets and learned men," the people of all Ireland gathered at the beginning of each high-king's reign, and were entertained for seven days and nights—kings and ollaves together round the high-king, warriors and reavers, together, the youths and maidens and the proud foolish folk in the chambers round the doors, while outside was for young men and maidens because their mirth used to entertain them. Huge earthen banks still mark the site of the great Hall, seven hundred and sixty feet long and ninety feet wide, with seven doors to east and as many more to west; where kings and chiefs sat each under his own shield, in crimson cloaks with gold brooches, with girdles and shoes of gold, and spears with golden sockets and rivets of red bronze. The Ardri, supreme lord and arbitrator among them, was surrounded by his councillors—the law-men or brehons, the bards and chroniclers, and the druids, teachers and men of science. He was the representative of the whole national life. But his power rested on the tradition of the people and on the consent of the tribes. He could impose no new law; he could demand no service outside the law.

The political bond of union, which seemed so loose, drew all its strength from a body of national tradition, and a

universal code of law, which represented as it were the common mind of the people, the spontaneous creation of the race. Separate and independent as the tribes were, all accepted the one code which had been fashioned in the course of ages by the genius of the people. The same law was recited in every tribal assembly. The same traditions and genealogies bound the tribes together as having a single heritage of heroic descent and fame. The preservation of their common history was the concern of the whole people. One of the tales pictures their gathering at Tara, when before the men of Ireland the ancients related their history, and Ireland's chief scholars heard and corrected them by the best tradition. "Victory and blessings attend you, noble sirs," the men of Erin said; "for such instruction it was meet that we should gather ourselves together." And at the reciting of the historic glories of their past, the whole congregation arose up together "for in their eyes it was an augmenting of the spirit and an enlargement of the mind."

To preserve this national tradition a learned class was carefully trained. There were schools of lawyers to expound the law; schools of historians to preserve the genealogies, the boundaries of lands, and the rights of classes and families; and schools of poets to recite the traditions of the race. The learned men were paid at first by the gifts of the people, but the chief among them were later endowed with a settled share of the tribe land in perpetuity. So long as the family held the land, they were bound to train up in each generation that one of the household who was most fit to carry on learning, and thus for centuries long lines of

distinguished men added fame to their country and drew to its schools students from far and wide. Through their work the spirit of the Irish found national expression in a code of law which showed not only extraordinarily acute and trained intelligence but a true sense of equity, in a literary language of great richness and of the utmost musical beauty, and in a system of metrical rules for poets shaped with infinite skill. The Irish nation had a pride in its language beyond any people in Europe outside of the Greeks and Romans.

While each tribe had its schools, these were linked together in a national system. Professors of every school were free of the island; it was the warrior's duty to protect them as they moved from court to court. An ancient tale tells how the chiefs of Emain near Armagh placed sentinels along the Gap of the North to turn back every poet who sought to leave the country and to bring on their way with honour every one who sought to enter in. There was no stagnation where competition extended over the whole island. The greatest of the teachers were given the dignity of "Professors of all the Gaels." Learned men in their degrees ranked with kings and chiefs, and high-professors sat by the high-king and shared his honours. The king, said the laws, "could by his mere word decide against every class of persons except those of the two orders of religion and learning, who are of equal value with himself."

It is in this exaltation of learning in the national life that we must look for the real significance of Irish history—the idea of a society loosely held in a political sense, but bound together in a spiritual union. The assemblies which took place in every province and every petty state were the

guarantees of the national civilization. They were periodical exhibitions of everything the people esteemed—democracy, aristocracy, king-craft, literature, tradition, art, commerce, law, sport, religion, display, even rustic buffoonery. The years between one festival and another were spent in serious preparation for the next; a multitude of maxims were drawn up to direct the conduct of the people. So deeply was their importance felt that the Irish kept the tradition diligently, and even in the darkest times of their history, down to the seventeenth century, still gathered to "meetings on hills" to exercise their law and hear their learned men.

In the time of the Roman Empire, therefore, the Irish looked on themselves as one race, obedient to one law, united in one culture and belonging to one country. Their unity is symbolised by the great genealogical compilations in which all the Gaels are traced to one ancestry, and in the collections of topographical legends dealing with hundreds of places, where every nook and corner of the island is supposed to be of interest to the whole of Ireland. The tribal boundaries were limits to the material power of a chief and to that only: they were no barriers to the national thought or union. The learned man of the clan was the learned man of the Gaelic race. By all the higher matters of language and learning, of equity and history, the people of Ireland were one. A noble figure told the unity of their land within the circuit of the ocean. The Three Waves of Erin, they said, smote upon the shore with a foreboding roar when danger threatened the island; Cleena's wave called to Munster at an inlet near Cork, while Tonn Rury at Dundrum and Tonn

Tuaithe at the mouth of the Bann sounded to the men of Ulster.

The weaknesses of the Irish system are apparent. The numerous small territories were tempted, like larger European states, to raid borders, to snatch land or booty, and to suffer some expense of trained soldiers. Candidates for the chieftdom had to show their fitness, and "a young lord's first spoil" was a necessary exploit. There were wild plundering raids in the summer nights; disorders were multiplied. A country divided in government was weakened for purposes of offence, or for joint action in military matters. These evils were genuine, but they have been exaggerated. Common action was hindered, not mainly by human contentions, but by the forests and marshes, lakes and rivers in flood that lay over a country heavy with Atlantic clouds. Riots and forays there were, among a martial race and strong men of hot passions, but Ireland was in fact no prominent example of mediæval anarchy or disorder. Local feuds were no greater than those which afflicted England down to the Norman Conquest and long after it; and which marked the life of European states and cities through the middle ages. The professional war bands of Fiana that hired themselves out from time to time were controlled and recognised by law, and had their special organisation and rites and rules of war. It has been supposed that in the passion of tribal disputes men mostly perished by murder and battle-slaughter, and the life of every generation was by violence shortened to less than the common average of thirty years. Irish genealogies prove on the contrary that the generations must be counted at from

thirty-three to thirty-six years: the tale of kings, judges, poets, and householders who died peacefully in an honoured old age, or from some natural accident, outruns the list of sudden murders or deaths in battle. Historical evidence moreover shows us a country of widening cornfields, or growing commerce, where wealth was gathered, where art and learning swept like a passion over the people, and schools covered the land. Such industries and virtues do not flourish in regions given over to savage strife. And it is significant that Irish chiefs who made great wars hired professional soldiers from oversea.

If the disorders of the Irish system have been magnified its benefits have been forgotten. All Irish history proved that the division of the land into separate military districts, where the fighting men knew every foot of ground, and had an intense local patriotism, gave them a power of defence which made conquest by the foreigner impossible; he had first to exterminate the entire people. The same division into administrative districts gave also a singular authority to law. In mediæval states, however excellent were the central codes, they were only put in force just so far as the king had power to compel men to obey, and that power often fell very far short of the nominal boundaries of his kingdom. But in Ireland every community and every individual was interested in maintaining the law of the people, the protection of the common folk; nor were its landmarks ever submerged or destroyed. Irish land laws, for example, in spite of the changes that gradually covered the land with fenced estates, did actually preserve through all the centuries popular rights—fixity of rates for the land, fixity of

tenure, security of improvement, refusal to allow great men to seize forests for their chase: under this people's law no Peasant Revolt ever arose, nor any rising of the poor against their lords. Rights of inheritance, due solemnities of election, were accurately preserved. The authority and continuity of Irish law was recognised by wondering Englishmen—"They observe and keep such laws and statutes which they make upon hills in their country firm and stable, without breaking them for any favour or reward," said an English judge. "The Irish are more fearful to offend the law than the English or any other nation whatsoever."

The tribal system had another benefit for Irishmen—the diffusion of a high intelligence among the whole people. A varied education, spread over many centres, fertilized the general life. Every countryside that administered its own affairs must of needs possess a society rich in all the activities that go to make up a full community—chiefs, doctors, soldiers, judges, historians, poets, artists and craftsmen, skilled herds, tillers of the ground, raisers and trainers of horses, innkeepers, huntsmen, merchants, dyers and weavers and tanners. In some sequestered places in Ireland we can still trace the settlements made by Irish communities. They built no towns nor needed any in the modern sense. But entrenchments of earth, or "raths," thickly gathered together, mark a site where men lived in close association. Roads and paths great and small were maintained according to law, and boats carried travellers along rivers and lakes. So frequent were the journeys of scholars, traders, messengers from tribe to tribe, men

gathering to public assemblies, craftsmen, dealers in hides and wool, poets, men and women making their circuit, that there was made in early time a "road-book" or itinerary, perhaps some early form of map, of Ireland.

This life of opportunity in thickly congregated country societies gave to Ireland its wide culture, and the incredible number of scholars and artificers that it poured out over Europe with generous ardour. The multitudinous centres of discussion scattered over the island, and the rapid intercourse of all these centres one with another, explain how learning broadened, and how Christianity spread over the land like a flood. It was to these country settlements that the Irish owed the richness of their civilisation, the generosity of their learning, and the passion of their patriotism.

Ireland was a land then as now of intense contrasts, where equilibrium was maintained by opposites, not by a perpetual tending towards the middle course. In things political and social the Irish showed a conservatism that no intercourse could shake, side by side with eager readiness and great success in grasping the latest progress in arts or commerce. In their literature strikingly modern thoughts jostle against the most primitive crudeness; "Vested interests are shameless" was one of their old observations. In Ireland the old survived beside the new, and as the new came by free assimilation old and new did not conflict. The balance of opposites gave colour and force to their civilisation, and Ireland until the thirteenth century and very largely until the seventeenth century, escaped or survived