

A Popular History of Ireland V1 - From the earliest period to the emancipation of the Catholics

Thomas D'Arcy McGee

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A Popular History of Ireland: from the Earliest
Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics

by Thomas D'Arcy McGee

In Two Volumes

Volume I

PUBLISHERS' PREFACE.

Ireland, lifting herself from the dust, drying her tears, and proudly demanding her legitimate place among the nations of the earth, is a spectacle to cause immense progress in political philosophy.

Behold a nation whose fame had spread over all the earth ere the flag of England had come into existence. For 500 years her life has been apparently extinguished. The fiercest whirlwind of oppression that ever in the wrath of God was poured upon the children of disobedience had swept over her. She was an object of scorn and contempt to her subjugator. Only at times were there any signs of life--an occasional meteor flash that told of her olden spirit--of her deathless race. Degraded and apathetic as this nation of Helots was, it is not strange that political philosophy, at all times too Sadducean in its principles, should ask, with a sneer, "Could these dry bones live?" The fulness of time has come, and with one gallant sunward bound the "old land" comes forth into the political day to teach these lessons, that Right must always conquer Might in the end--that by a compensating principle in the nature of things, Repression creates slowly, but certainly, a force for its overthrow.

Had it been possible to kill the Irish Nation, it had long since ceased to exist. But the transmitted qualities of her glorious children, who were giants in intellect, virtue, and arms for 1500 years before Alfred the Saxon sent the youth of his country to Ireland in search of knowledge with which to civilize his people,--the legends, songs, and dim traditions of this glorious era, and the irrepressible piety, sparkling wit, and dauntless courage of her people, have at last brought her forth like Lazarus from the tomb. True, the garb of the prison or the cerements of the grave may be hanging upon her, but "loose her and let her go" is the wise policy of those in whose hands are her present destinies.

A nation with such a strange history must have some great work yet to do in the world. Except the Jews, no people has so suffered without dying.

The History of Ireland is the most interesting of records, and the least known. The Publishers of this edition of D'Arcy McGee's excellent and impartial work take advantage of the awakening interest in Irish literature to present to the public a book of _high-class history_, as cheap as _largely circulating romance_. A sale as large as that of a popular romance is, therefore, necessary to pay the speculation. That sale the Publishers expect. Indeed, as truth is often stranger than fiction, so Irish history is more romantic than romance. How Queen Scotia unfurled the Sacred Banner. How Brian and Malachy contended for empire. How the "Pirate of the North" scourged the Irish coast. The glories of Tara and the piety of Columba. The cowardice of James and the courage of Sarsfield. How Dathi, the fearless, sounded the Irish war-cry in far Alpine passes, and how the Geraldine forayed Leinster. The deeds of O'Neil and O'Donnell. The march of Cromwell, the destroying angel. Ireland's sun sinking in dim eclipse. The dark night of woe in Erin for a hundred years. '83--'98--'48--'68. Ireland's sun rising in glory. Surely the Youth of Ireland will find in their country's records romance enough!

The English and Scotch are well read in the histories of their country. The Irish are, unfortunately, not so; and yet, what is English or Scottish history to compare with Irish? Ireland was a land of saints and scholars when Britons were painted savages. Wise and noble laws, based upon the spirit of Christianity, were administered in Erin, and valuable books were written ere the Britons were as far advanced in civilization as the Blackfoot Indians. In morals and intellect, in Christianity and civilization, in arms, art, and science, Ireland shone like a star among the nations when darkness enshrouded the world. And she nobly sustained civilization and religion by her missionaries and scholars. The libraries and archives of Europe contain the records of their piety and learning. Indeed the echoes have scarcely yet ceased to sound upon our ears, of the mighty march of her armed children over the war-fields of Europe, during that terrible time when England's cruel law, intended to destroy the spirit of a martial race, precipitated an armed torrent of nearly 500,000 of the flower of the Irish youth into foreign service. Irish steel glittered in the front rank of the most desperate conflicts, and more than once the ranks of England went down before "the Exiles," in just punishment for her terrible penal code which excluded the Irish soldier from his country's service.

It was the Author's wish to educate his countrymen in their national records. If by issuing a cheap edition the present Publishers carry out to any extent that wish, it will be to them a source of satisfaction.

It is impossible to conclude this Preface without an expression of regret at the dark and terrible fate which overtook the high-minded, patriotic, and distinguished

Irishman, Thomas D'Arcy McGee. He was a man who loved his country well; and when the contemptible squabbles and paltry dissensions of the present have passed away, his name will be a hallowed memory, like that of Emmet or Fitzgerald, to inspire men with high, ideals of patriotism and devotion.

CAMERON & FERGUSON.

[Note: From 1857 until his death, McGee was active in Canadian politics. A gifted speaker and strong supporter of Confederation, he is regarded as one of Canada's fathers of Confederation. On April 7, 1868, after attending a late-night session in the House of Commons, he was shot and killed as he returned to his rooming house on Sparks Street in Ottawa. It is generally believed that McGee was the victim of a Fenian plot. Patrick James Whelan was convicted and hanged for the crime, however the evidence implicating him was later seen to be suspect.]

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HISTORY OF IRELAND

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST INHABITANTS.

Ireland is situated in the North Atlantic, between the degrees fifty-one and a half and fifty-five and a half North, and five and a quarter and ten and a third West longitude from Greenwich. It is the last land usually seen by ships leaving the Old World, and the first by those who arrive there from the Northern ports of America. In size it is less than half as large as Britain, and in shape it may be compared to one of those shields which we see in coats-of-arms, the four Provinces--Ulster, Connaught, Leinster, and Munster--representing the four quarters of the shield.

Around the borders of the country, generally near the coast, several ranges of hills and mountains rear their crests, every Province having one or more such groups. The West and South have, however, the largest and highest of these hills, from the sides of all which descend numerous rivers, flowing in various directions to the sea. Other rivers issue out of large lakes formed in the valleys, such as the Galway river which drains Lough Corrib, and the Bann which carries off the surplus waters of Lough Neagh (_Nay_). In a few districts where the fall for water is insufficient, marshes and swamps were long ago formed, of which the principal one occupies nearly 240,000 acres in the very heart of the country. It is called "the Bog of Alien," and, though quite useless for farming purposes, still serves to supply the surrounding district with fuel, nearly as well as coal mines do in other countries.

In former times, Ireland was as well wooded as watered, though hardly a tree of the primitive forest now remains. One of the earliest names applied to it was "the wooded Island," and the export of timber and staves, as well as

of the furs of wild animals, continued, until the beginning of the seventeenth century, to be a thriving branch of trade. But in a succession of civil and religious wars, the axe and the torch have done their work of destruction, so that the age of most of the wood now standing does not date above two or three generations back.

Who were the first inhabitants of this Island, it is impossible to say, but we know it was inhabited at a very early period of the world's lifetime--probably as early as the time when Solomon the Wise, sat in Jerusalem on the throne of his father David. As we should not altogether reject, though neither are we bound to believe, the wild and uncertain traditions of which we have neither documentary nor monumental evidence, we will glance over rapidly what the old Bards and Story-tellers have handed down to us concerning Ireland before it became Christian.

The first story they tell is, that about three hundred years after the Universal Deluge, Partholan, of the stock of Japhet, sailed down the Mediterranean, "leaving Spain on the right hand," and holding bravely on his course, reached the shores of the wooded western Island. This Partholan, they tell us, was a double parricide, having killed his father and mother before leaving his native country, for which horrible crimes, as the Bards very morally conclude, his posterity were fated never to possess the land. After a long interval, and when they were greatly increased in numbers, they were cut off to the last man, by a dreadful pestilence.

The story of the second immigration is almost as vague as that of the first. The leader this time is called Nemedh, and his route is described as leading from the shores of the Black Sea, across what is now Russia in Europe, to the Baltic Sea, and from the Baltic to Ireland. He is said to have built two royal forts, and to have "cleared twelve plains of wood" while in Ireland. He and his posterity were constantly at war, with a terrible race of Formorians, or Sea Kings, descendants of Ham, who had fled from northern Africa to the western islands for refuge from their enemies, the sons of Shem. At length the Formorians prevailed, and the children of the second immigration were either slain or driven into exile, from which some of their posterity returned long afterwards, and again disputed the country, under two different denominations.

The Firbolgs or Belgae are the third immigration. They were victorious under their chiefs, the five sons of Dela, and divided the island into five portions. But they lived in days when the earth--the known parts of it at least--was being eagerly scrambled for by the overflowing hosts of Asia, and they were not long left in undisputed possession of so tempting a prize. Another expedition, claiming descent from the common ancestor, Nemedh, arrived to contest their supremacy. These last--the fourth immigration--are depicted to us as accomplished soothsayers and necromancers who came out of Greece. They could quell

storms; cure diseases; work in metals; foretell future events; forge magical weapons; and raise the dead to life; they are called the Tuatha de Danans, and by their supernatural power, as well as by virtue of "the Lia Fail," or fabled "stone of destiny," they subdued their Belgic kinsmen, and exercised sovereignty over them, till they in turn were displaced by the Gaelic, or fifth immigration.

This fifth and final colony called themselves alternately, or at different periods of their history, Gael, from one of their remote ancestors; Milesians, from the immediate projector of their emigration; or Scoti, from Scota, the mother of Milesius. They came from Spain under the leadership of the sons of Milesius, whom they had lost during their temporary sojourn in that country. In vain the skilful Tuatha surrounded themselves and their coveted island with magic-made tempest and terrors; in vain they reduced it in size so as to be almost invisible from sea; Amergin, one of the sons of Milesius, was a Druid skilled in all the arts of the east, and led by his wise counsels, his brothers countermined the magicians, and beat them at their own weapons. This Amergin was, according to universal usage in ancient times, at once Poet, Priest, and Prophet; yet when his warlike brethren divided the island between them, they left the Poet out of reckoning. He was finally drowned in the waters of the river Avoca, which is probably the reason why that river has been so suggestive of melody and song ever since.

Such are the stories told of the five successive hordes of adventurers who first attempted to colonize our wooded Island. Whatever moiety of truth may be mixed up with so many fictions, two things are certain, that long before the time when our Lord and Saviour came upon earth, the coasts and harbours of Erin were known to the merchants of the Mediterranean, and that from the first to the fifth Christian century, the warriors of the wooded Isle made inroads on the Roman power in Britain and even in Gaul. Agricola, the Roman governor of Britain in the reign of Domitian--the first century--retained an Irish chieftain about his person, and we are told by his biographer that an invasion of Ireland was talked of at Rome. But it never took place; the Roman eagles, although supreme for four centuries in Britain, never crossed the Irish Sea; and we are thus deprived of those Latin helps to our early history, which are so valuable in the first period of the histories of every western country, with which the Romans had anything to do.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST AGES.

Since we have no Roman accounts of the form of government

or state of society in ancient Erin, we must only depend on the Bards and Story-tellers, so far as their statements are credible and agree with each other. On certain main points they do agree, and these are the points which it seems reasonable for us to take on their authority.

As even brothers born of the same mother, coming suddenly into possession of a prize, will struggle to see who can get the largest share, so we find in those first ages a constant succession of armed struggles for power. The petty Princes who divided the Island between them were called _Righ_, a word which answers to the Latin _Rex_ and French _Roi_; and the chief king or monarch was called _Ard-Righ_, or High-King. The eldest nephew, or son of the king, was the usual heir of power, and was called the _Tanist_, or successor; although any of the family of the Prince, his brothers, cousins, or other kinsmen, might be chosen _Tanist_, by election of the people over whom he was to rule. One certain cause of exclusion was personal deformity; for if a Prince was born lame or a hunchback, or if he lost a limb by accident, he was declared unfit to govern. Even after succession, any serious accident entailed deposition, though we find the names of several Princes who managed to evade or escape this singular penalty. It will be observed besides of the _Tanist_, that the habit of appointing him seems to have been less a law than a custom; that it was not universal in all the Provinces; that in some trib

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