

all historical

BOOK III.

THE LITERATURE OF IRELAND.

CHAPTER I.

THE IRISH OR CELTIC LITERATURE OF IRELAND.

A.D. 432 to 1700.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

"In no nation in the world are there found so many old histories, annals, chronicles, etc., as among the Irish; and that fact alone suffices to prove that in periods most ancient they were truly a civilized nation, since they attached such importance to the records of events then taking place among them."—*Thebaud*.

1. A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF ANCIENT IRISH HISTORY.—Some idea of ancient Ireland is necessary in order to have a better understanding of its Celtic literature, and of the unhappy Ireland of the eighteenth century and that of our own age. It is only quite recently that English has become the speech of the majority of the Irish people—a people whose history, language, and literature are the most ancient in Europe.

2. PAGAN IRELAND.—Ireland is a beautiful island on the western extremity of Europe. It is 306 miles long and 182 miles broad, and its area is about 32,-

700 square miles. Thirteen centuries before Christ an expedition of Celts from Spain, led by the sons of Milesius, approached this island.

"They came from a land beyond the sea,
And now o'er the western main
Set sail, in their good ships, gallantly,
From the sunny land of Spain.
'Oh, where s the Isle we've seen in dreams,
Our destined home or grave?'
Thus sung they as, by the morning's beams,
They swept the Atlantic wave."

They landed, conquered the country, and identified themselves so completely with their new possessions that they have come to be regarded as the true type of the Irish race. The Milesians were the Normans of that age—a brave, trained, enlightened people. They did not destroy the natives, but reduced them to subjection. After the conquest the island was named *Scotia*,* and was divided between *Heber* and *Heremon*, the sons of Milesius, to one or other of whom all the native families of ancient blood delight to trace their pedigree; and to this day the favorite name for an Irishman in poetry and romance is a Milesian.†

* It was so called, it is said, after *Scota*, the mother of *Heber* and *Heremon*; and her grave is still pointed out in the county of *Kerry*. Ireland was named at various times *Erin*, *Hibernia*, and *Scotia*. It has been called *Ireland* since the English invasion. It is the true *Scotia*, and the Irish are the true Scots of antiquity. The name *Scotia* was applied exclusively to Ireland until the eleventh century, when it was transferred to Scotland, called *Alba*, *Scotia Minor*—and sometimes *Caledonia*—before that period. As early as the third century the ancient Irish or Scots established colonies in *Alba*, or Scotland; and in course of time their descendants became the kings of North Britain, and called their country *Scotia Minor*, or *Lesser Scotia*, after the mother-country Ireland, or greater *Scotia*. When the term *Ireland* supplanted that of *Scotia*, *Scotia Minor* alone retained the name, which finally became *Scotland*. The *MacDonalds*, *Campbells*, and other Highland clans are lineal descendants of the ancient Irish who conquered and colonized North Britain.

† Sir C. G. Duffy.

The rule of the Milesians over Ireland continued unbroken down to the English invasion in the twelfth century—a period of over 2400 years. Among the most noted in a long line of pagan monarchs, most of whom pass before us like shadows in a dream, were *Ollamh* Fola, Connary the Great, Conn of the Hundred Battles*, and *Cormac MacArt*.

Ollamh Fola, who began to reign 918 B.C., was a famous legislator. It is said he established a national assembly or congress which met at Tara every third year. This representative body was composed of the druids, bards, brehons, princes, and the four provincial kings, and was presided over by the supreme monarch in person.† It regulated the public affairs of the whole island. Connary the Great reigned when our Blessed Redeemer came into this sin-stained world. Conn of the Hundred Battles was a warrior of renown who died A.D. 183.

But the greatest of the pagan monarchs was the Irish Solomon, Cormac MacArt, who came to the throne in A.D. 244, and reigned for twenty-three years. He revised, purified, and condensed the ancient laws of the nation and formed them into a code of jurisprudence—the *Brehon Laws*—which remained in force for more than a thousand years.‡ He had the annals of the country from the earliest period collected into a work called the *Psalter of Tara*. He encouraged learning by establishing a military academy and two colleges—one for the study of law, and another for history. He reconstructed the famed pa-

* Pronounced *olláve*.

† Ireland was anciently divided into five states or kingdoms. The supreme monarch was styled *Árd-ri* in the Irish language.

‡ In some parts of Ireland it regulated the dealings between man and man as late as the reign of James I. of England.

lace at Tara, and just before his death this wise and brilliant man wrote an *Advice to Princes*, a work addressed to his son and successor. To this day the reign of Cormac remains in the Irish mind as a beautiful memory; and the intelligent peasant, in contrasting it with his own unhappy time, will give a snatch from an old poem the first stanza of which begins—

“In the reign of Cormac, the son of Art,
A life of joy and plenty cheered each heart;
For ninescore nuts in a fair cluster grew,
And with ninescore clusters the branch bent too.”

3. CHRISTIAN IRELAND.—But the most important event in the early history of Ireland is the introduction of the Christian religion in A.D. 432 by the great St. Patrick. Years before he had been a shepherd on the hills of Antrim, but now he came as an apostle with the staff of Jesus in his hand. He was sent to the Irish by Pope St. Celestine, just as, over a century and a half later, St. Augustine was sent to the Anglo-Saxons by Pope Gregory the Great. St. Patrick's mission was blessed with marvellous success. The nation cast away its heathen prejudices. King and prince, bard and brehon, bowed to the cross. It was a peaceful and glorious revolution that placed Ireland on the road to true greatness. Countless churches and monasteries sprang up, schools and colleges were founded, and in less than a century after the death of St. Patrick Ireland was known as the light of Europe, “the holy isle of saints and sages.”

The Irish golden age covered the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. “It has been said,” says the Count de Montalembert, “and cannot be sufficiently repeated, that Ireland was then regarded by all Christian Europe as the principal centre of knowledge and

piety. In the shelter of its numberless monasteries a crowd of missionaries, doctors, and preachers were educated for the service of the Church and the propagation of the faith in all Christian countries. A vast and continual development of literary and religious effect is there apparent, superior to anything that could be seen in any other country of Europe."

4. THE IRISH SCHOOLS.—The most celebrated of the Irish schools were Armagh, Clonard, Derry, Durrow, Clonmacnoise, Lismore, Clonfert, and Bangor. The last-named school had 3000 students. Armagh at one time could boast of 7000 students. And Clonard, the *alma mater* of St. Columbkille, was the famous monastic school of which Ussher, the learned Protestant, wrote, "that saints came out of it in as great numbers as Greeks of old from the sides of the horse of Troy." "The science and Biblical knowledge which fled from the continent," says the English historian Green, "took refuge in famous schools which made Durrow and Armagh the universities of the West."

The Irish monastic schools were open to all. The poor and the rich, the slave as well as the freeman, the child as well as the old man, had free access and paid nothing. In them "were trained an entire population of philosophers, writers, architects, carvers, painters, calligraphers, musicians, poets, and historians; but above all, of missionaries and preachers, destined to spread the light of the Gospel and of Christian education, not only in all the Celtic countries, of which Ireland was always the nursing mother, but throughout Europe, among all the Teutonic races—among the Franks and Burgundians, who were already masters of France, as well as amid the dwellers of

the Rhine and Danube, and up to the frontiers of Italy."*

5. THE EARLY IRISH MISSIONARIES.—Among the famous Irishmen who carried the light of the Gospel and the blessings of Christian education and civilization over Europe were *St. Columbkille*, *St. Columbanus*, *St. Gall*, *St. Aidan*, *St. Maildolph*, *St. Cuthbert*, *St. Killian*, and *St. Donatus*. *St. Columbkille*, the great abbot of Iona,† was the apostle of Scotland. *St. Columbanus* became the apostle of eastern France, where he founded the famous monastery of Luxeuil. He afterwards passed to Italy, and established the monastery of Bobbio, where he died. *St. Gall* converted Switzerland, and his name yet blesses a Canton. *St. Aidan* founded the great monastery of Lindisfarne, and with his monks converted northern England. *St. Maildolph* established the celebrated Abbey of Glastonbury, where he taught *St. Aldhelm*, the first of the Anglo-Saxons, it will be remembered, that wrote in Latin. *St. Cuthbert* was an apostolic light in northern England. *St. Killian* died for the faith in Germany. He is honored as the apostle of Bavaria. *St. Donatus* became bishop of Fiesole in Italy. In short, the early Irish missionary traversed sea and land, carrying with him the sacred torch of religion. Germany honors one hundred and fifty-six Irish saints, thirty-six of whom were martyrs, who labored, lived, and died there. Forty-five Irish saints find a place in the calendar of France. Forty-four Irish saints are venerated in England. Belgium honors thirty Irish saints; Italy, thirteen; Norway and Iceland, eight—the last all martyrs.

* Montalembert.

† See quotation from Johnson about Iona, p. 225.

6. A PICTURE OF IRELAND IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY.—Ireland was then a happy, prosperous, and independent nation. It was the school of Europe. It was the *insula sanctorum*. Students flocked to it from all parts. "The Anglo-Saxons," says Camden, "went in those times to Ireland, as if to a fair, to purchase knowledge, and we often find, in our authors, that if a person were absent, it was generally said of him, by way of a proverb, that he was sent to Ireland to receive his education."* The best picture of Ireland in those bright ages has been left us by a royal Saxon student, Prince Alfred, who became king of Northumbria in 685. He spent several years in the schools of Ireland, studying philosophy and the sciences, and in travelling through the country; and he then wrote a famous poem in fifteen four-lined stanzas, giving an account of what he saw.† The following is a translation:

"I found in Innisfail the fair,
In Ireland, while in exile there,
Women of worth, both grave and gay men,
Many clerics and many laymen.

"I travelled its fruitful provinces round,
And in every one of the five I found,
Alike in church and in palace-hall,
Abundant apparel and food for all.

"Gold and silver I found, and money,
Plenty of wheat and plenty of honey;
I found God's people rich in pity,
Found many a feast and many a city.

"I found in Armagh, the splendid,
Meekness, wisdom, and prudence blended,
Fasting as Christ hath recommended,
And noble counsellors untranscended.

* Among those who were thus sent to Ireland was *Alfred the Great*.

† Alfred wrote his poem in Irish. It was first translated into English by the illustrious Irish scholar, Dr. John O'Donovan, in 1832. The foregoing version is a later one by James Clarence Mangan.

"I found in each great church more'er,
Whether on island or on shore,
Piety, learning, fond affection,
Holy welcome and kind protection.

"I found the good lay monks and brothers
Ever beseeching help for others,
And in their keeping the holy word
Pure as it came from Jesus the Lord.

"I found in Munster unfettered of any,
Kings, and queens, and poets so many—
Poets well skilled in music and measure,
Prosperous doings, mirth and pleasure.

"I found in Connaught the just, redundancy
Of riches, milk in lavish abundance;
Hospitality, vigor, fame,
In Cruachan's land of heroic name.

"I found in Ulster, from hill to glen,
Hardy warriors—resolute men;
Beauty that bloomed when youth was gone,
And strength transmitted from sire to son.

"I found in Leinster the smooth and sleek,
From Dublin to Slewmargy's peak—
Flourishing pastures, valor, health,
Long-living worthies, commerce, wealth.

"I found in Meath's fair principality,
Virtue, vigor, and hospitality;
Candor, joyfulness, bravery, purity—
Ireland's bulwark and security.

"I found strict morals in age and youth,
I found historians recording truth;
The things I sing of in verse unsmooth,
I found them all—I have written sooth."

7. THE DANISH INVASION.—The beauty of this matchless picture of peace and piety was soon to be sadly marred. Ireland was the only nation in Europe whose soil had never been pressed by the foot of a Roman soldier. But a wilder race of warriors were now roving the seas. About the year 800 the Danes made their appearance. Those barbarous new-comers burned monasteries, destroyed libraries, sacked churches, murdered women and priests, and obtained

a foothold on the sea-coasts. They were demons of destruction. At Bangor, for instance, they pillaged the celebrated abbey, and murdered the bishop and 900 monks. Before the dangers and troubles of a long period of such merciless warfare, the School of the West of Europe, the abode of learning and sanctity, dwindled away; and it had fallen into complete decay before *Brian Boru*, on Good Friday in the year 1014, finally subdued the Danish invaders, at the famous battle of Clontarf.*

Brian the Brave holds the same place in the memory of his nation that Alfred the Great won in England by similar services; and even to-day wherever enterprise and industry seek new homes—among the cities of New York or Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Mississippi, or among the gold-fields of Australia—you can recognize a settlement of Irish by the rude effigy of a royal warrior carrying in one hand a cross, and in the other the sword which scattered the northern pirates.†

8. THE ORIGIN OF IRISH SURNAMES.—In ancient times there were no *surnames*. But to preserve the more correctly the history and genealogy of the different clans, Brian Boru made a law that every family in Ireland should adopt a particular surname. Each family was at liberty to select a surname from some particular ancestor, and commonly chose for the pur-

* About 20 supreme monarchs reigned in Ireland from the introduction of the Christian religion to the battle of Clontarf. Many of them were true kings—men of worth, learning, and piety. Donald III. and Neill II. died monks at Iona. Six monarchs had the name of Hugh.

† Sir C. G. Duffy.—It is worthy of note that the English king Ethelred fled to Normandy in despair, and that the Danes took possession of England the very year that Brian Boru crushed their barbarous power in Ireland.

pose a chief of their race famous for his valor, wisdom, or piety. Some prefixed *Mac*, which means *son*, as MacMahon—that is, the son of Mahon; while others selected *Ua*, which has been Anglicized *O'*, and signifies *grandson* or *descendant*, as O'Neill—that is, the grandson or descendant of Neill. Thus, according to the old verse, the Irish have no surnames without the Mac and the O':

“By Mac and O' you'll always know
True Irishmen, they say;
But when they lack the O and Mac
No Irishmen are they.”*

9. THE ANGLO-NORMAN INVASION.—Centuries of warfare with the Danes had, it is sad to say, demoralized Ireland; and its political system had by degrees lost all cohesion. The idea of a common national interest or a central national authority came to be wholly discarded. Each provincial king fought for his own hand. The post of supreme monarch was claimed by various competitors in reckless and exhausting contests that bathed the island in blood.

As we have already learned in Book I, the Normans had become masters of England, and by the middle of the twelfth century they had consolidated their new kingdom, while Ireland had been steadily falling into fragments. At this very time, unhappily, an event occurred that presented an opportunity for English interference. A nation is like a house; and every house divided against itself shall fall. *Dermot MacMurrough*, the worthless king of Leinster, having been expelled from the country for his crimes and tyranny, fled to the king of England for assistance. The traitor threw himself at the feet of Henry II.,

* O'Hart.

and offered to hold his dominions as a vassal of the English crown if the needed aid were furnished for his restoration. Henry, who was then in France, gladly accepted the proffered fealty, and gave the Irish prince letters-patent to raise forces. Dermot beat up recruits. He was soon surrounded by a large band of needy Norman adventurers. The chief of these was *Richard de Clare*, Earl of Pembroke, commonly known as *Strongbow*; and to him Dermot promised his daughter Eva in marriage, on condition that he would raise an efficient body of troops and transport them into Ireland. It was done. Scenes of blood, butchery, and desecration followed. Waterford, Dublin, and other important places fell into the hands of the English.*

A few years later, in 1171, Henry II. followed with a large fleet and army. The Irish were divided among themselves. *Rory O'Conor*, the last supreme monarch of Ireland, was a brave man but a poor leader. He lacked clear-headed vigor and promptitude of action. Besides, many of the Irish princes imagined that Henry was irresistible; and without a master-spirit to subdue their tribal jealousies, to arouse their patriotism, and to cement the discordant elements together, united resistance was impossible.

* The death of the first Irish traitor is thus recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters*: "A.D. 1171. Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, by whom a trembling sod was made of all Ireland—after having brought over the Saxons, after having done extensive injuries to the Irish, after plundering and burning many churches—died before the end of a year of an insufferable and unknown disease; for he became putrid while living through the miracle of God, Columbkille, Finnian, and other saints of Ireland, whose churches he had profaned and burned some time before; and he died at Fearnamor without making a will, without penance, without the Body of Christ, without unction—as his evil deeds deserved."

The Munster princes and chiefs were the first to pay homage to the English king. O'Conor retired behind the Shannon. The Ulster princes would have no dealings with the royal new-comer.

The authority established by Henry was acknowledged in Dublin—where he fixed the seat of his government—and in a limited territory beyond it known as the *Pale*: which, as the name implies, was a rudely fortified camp on a large scale, whose boundary shifted with circumstances. Beyond the English Pale, however, there was little change. The native prince ruled his principality, and the native chief ruled his clan, as of old.

10. THE BEGINNING OF ENGLISH MISRULE.—The English had now a foothold in Ireland. Henry II., the murderer of St. Thomas à Becket, was one of the most unscrupulous ruffians that ever wore a crown. He introduced the feudal system—a handy system for royal robbers.* To it we may trace the origin of the "Land Question"—that unhappy question which has proved a stumbling-block to the peace of Ireland for over seven hundred years. He generously parcelled out the whole island—to which he had no more right than he had to the moon—among his prominent followers. He conferred Meath on Hugh

* The theory of the feudal system was that all the soil belonged to the king, who had accordingly the right to make grants of tracts of land in his discretion to his followers, to be held by them upon condition of their rendering him the services of themselves and their retainers in the field whenever he should require them. . . . This system could not be applied to Ireland, where the tribal system prevailed, without revolutionizing the whole structure of society; and its application was, in the eyes of the Irish, nothing but a high-handed invasion of the rights of property, and an act of shameful injustice.—*C. G. Walpole*.

"Under the Celtic tenure," says Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, "a chief was only joint owner with the clan."

de Lacy. He gave all Connaught to William Fitzaldhelm de Burgo. He presented Ulster to John de Courey, if he could take it;* and, finally, he made the magnificent grant of all Ireland to his worthless son John. And thus opens the sad story of English misrule and robbery in the land of St. Patrick—the once famous *insula sanctorum*.†

Henceforth the state of Ireland was more or less one of chronic wretchedness. The seeds of discord were sown broadcast. There was constant warfare between the Irish and the Anglo-Norman settlers, and often between the Irish princes themselves. But slow was the progress of conquest. One hundred years after the English invasion scarcely a third of the island was in the hands of the invaders. The Irish, as is the case with all superior races, had the magic power of absorbing and assimilating the new-comers to themselves. The Anglo-Norman lords and their followers intermarried with the natives, adopted their language, laws, and customs; and, in the course of time, their descendants, it is said, became “more Irish than the Irish themselves.”

11. THE STATUTE OF KILKENNY.—The English authorities resolved to crush out such a promising state of things. It was dangerous to their amiable “divide-and-conquer” policy in Ireland; and the infamous

* This John de Courey thought he would try his fortune in Ulster in 1178, and the Irish annals tell the result: “John and his English were defeated with great slaughter, but he himself escaped, and arrived in Dublin covered with wounds.” Later on, however, he had better success.

† The death of *Strongbow* is thus recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters*: “A.D. 1176. The English Earl, Richard, died of an ulcer that broke out on his foot. This was attributed to the miracles of St. Bridget and St. Columbkille, and of the other saints whose churches he had plundered, and he was heard to say that he saw St. Bridget killing him.”

code known as the *Statute of Kilkenny* became a law in 1367. Among its enactments were: (1) Any alliance with the Irish by marriage was to be punished as an act of high treason; (2) Any Englishman taking an Irish name, or using the Irish dress or language, should forfeit all his land; (3) The English were forbidden to admit any Irish into their convents and monasteries. The result of this unchristian code was to fill Ireland with hatred, riots, and civil war. The “mere Irishman” was to be dealt with as one who had no rights in his own country. He was to be exterminated.*

But while the Irish might be insulted, they could neither be conquered nor exterminated. Several Irish princes led their hardy legions to victory, and punished the bigoted, brutal creatures who had enacted the Statute of Kilkenny. Years passed on. English power diminished. Castle after castle and town after town, as Sir Charles Gavan Duffy well remarks, pulled down the banner of St. George. When Henry VIII. was jousting in the Field of the Cloth of Gold within the English Pale in France, the English Pale in Ireland, which had once embraced six counties and stretched its offshoots deep into the South and deep into the North, was a territory which might be conveniently inspected in a morning’s ride from Dublin Castle.

12. THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION.—The blackest clouds of misfortune arose, so to speak, from the

* Donald O’Neill, King of Ulster, and other Irish princes, bore witness to the truth of the following in 1318:

“They [the English] heretically maintain, not their laymen or seculars merely, but even some of their ecclesiastics, that it is no greater sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute beast.”

sea of religious corruption in England, and their fateful shadows fell upon Ireland. The so-called Reformation came. But Henry VIII. utterly failed to introduce *his* new religion into the land of St. Columbkille and Brian Boru. In 1535, however, he appointed George Brown, an apostate priest, *first* Protestant Archbishop of Dublin. The royal robber seized many abbeys, convents, and monasteries; but the faithful Irish regarded his irreligious schemes with horror.*

The religious quarrel now added a new element of bitterness and brutality to English misrule in Ireland. One of the first acts of Elizabeth was to order all persons, under pain of fine and imprisonment, to attend Protestant places of worship. This was a high-handed outrage on the faith and freedom of the Irish people. It was manfully resented. The outcome was rebellion, massacre, and a series of wars unparalleled for barbarity in the annals of history. Shane O'Neill, of Ulster, was crushed, and his territory confiscated. The old plan of planting the country with English settlers was revived. The Earl of Desmond was easily goaded into rebellion, and then defeated by an appalling system of armed ferocity. The southern portion of the island was reduced to a wilderness. Fire and sword left nothing untouched or undestroyed. Half a million acres of land were confiscated, and handed over to needy English adventurers. † The soldiers of Elizabeth spared no human being. "Many women," says Lombard, "were found hang-

* It was the apostate Brown that burned the most celebrated religious relic in Ireland—the crozier of St. Patrick, known as the Staff of Jesus.

† Among these were Edmund Spenser, the poet, who got 3000 acres; and Sir Walter Raleigh, who got 42,000 acres.

ing on trees with their children at their breasts, strangled by the mother's hair." Nor did this murderous warfare cease during the whole reign. O'Neill, O'Donnell, O'Kane, Maguire, and other princes of Ulster—the last stronghold of Irish independence—made a noble stand, and battled with the heroism of true patriots for their faith and fatherland. In short, the reign of Elizabeth was one long effort to root out the Catholic religion and to exterminate the Irish race. Did she succeed? It is true that thousands of Irish perished. The island was drenched in the blood of its best and bravest sons; but at the death of Elizabeth, "after nearly one hundred years of Protestantism, only *sixty* Irishmen of all classes had received the new religion."*

James I., it must be said, governed Ireland like a Turk, and like a true Turk he attempted to ram the odious new creed down the throats of the Irish people at the point of the sword. He laid the hand of a robber on the soil. He confiscated six counties in Ulster, containing 3,800,000 acres. The land was thus stolen from the original Irish proprietors, who had been there since the Redemption of man, and given to a horde of hungry thieves, Scotch and English, who were "well affected in religion." † One of the king's chief agents in this gigantic piece of iniquity was Sir Arthur Chichester, the scoundrel that wrote: "It is famine that must consume the Irish, as

* Not one of the sixty "converts" was a clansman—all belonged to the titled classes, or were ecclesiastics.

† Those Scotch and English colonists were styled "undertakers," and the name was very appropriate, as they were anxious to make a national funeral and bury the Irish race.

"The colonists in Ulster," says Walpole, "were in a great measure the *scum* of both nations—debtors, bankrupts, and fugitives from justice."

our swords and other endeavors work not that *speedy* effect which is expected."

Charles I. continued the work of plunder and persecution. The Catholics were hunted down like wolves, and Protestant new-comers were planted in their homes. Cromwell passed over Ireland like a demon of destruction. After butchering over 3000 persons at Drogheda, this merciless fanatic writes to England that it was done by "the spirit of God." The work of uprooting and exterminating the native inhabitants was continued with unspeakable ferocity. By an act of the English Parliament, the people of Ulster, Leinster, and Munster were ordered, under the penalty of death, to cross the Shannon and "go to h ll or Connaught" before May 1, 1654. "The order," says Walpole, "was proclaimed by beat of drum in the middle of harvest." The Irish were to be plucked out of the soil root and branch. Over 15,500,000 acres, or three-fourths of the island, were confiscated.* It is well known how the unfortunate James II. added to the calamities of Ireland. Then came William III. of Boyne celebrity, the violated Treaty of Limerick, the exile of the flower of Irish manhood, and the woful exhaustion of a crushed and hapless nation.

13. REMARKS ON THE IRISH LANGUAGE.—What we term the Celtic Period of Literature in Ireland extends from the introduction of Christianity to the year 1700; and from the dawn of history to the year 1700 there was but *one* national language, and that was the Irish language.

"The language which grows up with a people,"

* Ireland contains 20,800,000 acres.

says Thomas Davis, "is conformed to their organs, descriptive of their climate, constitution, and manners, mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, and is fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way."

"The Saxon and Norman colonists," continues the same writer, "melted down into the Irish and adopted all their ways and language. For centuries upon centuries Irish was spoken by men of all bloods in Ireland, and English was unknown, save to a few citizens and nobles of the Pale."

The following record in the *Annals of the Four Masters* is suggestive, as it refers to the head of a famous Anglo-Norman house: "A.D. 1398. Gerald, Earl of Desmond, a cheerful, polite man, who had excelled all the English of Ireland, and many of the Irish, in his knowledge of the Irish language, poetry, and history, and also in all the other literature of which he was possessed, died after the victory of penance."

In those times, and even at a later period, according to Stanhurst, the Irish held the unformed English tongue in contempt. They are unwilling, he adds, as they say in derision, "to distort their chins by speaking English." When *Shane O'Neill* visited the court of Elizabeth, his interpreter was asked by a citizen of London why the Irish prince did not speak English. "Think you," he replied, "it would become the O'Neill to twist his mouth with such a barbarous jargon!"

The Irish language, however, suffered immensely with the decay of national independence. English law made it a crime to speak Irish. We have seen

how it was proscribed in 1367, under Edward II., by the Statute of Kilkenny. Another hostile law was framed against it in 1537, under Henry VIII. By destroying the Irish schools and monasteries, the ruffians of the Reformation drove it from the seats of learning. When the last of the Irish princes perished it was left without a patron; and thus the most ancient and venerable language of Europe sought refuge in the souls of a brave, faithful, and persecuted people.

An acquaintance with the following short list of Irish words will prove useful:

- MAC, *son*; as, *MacDonald*, that is, the son of Donald.
 UA, anglicized *O'*, *grandson*, and by an extension of meaning any descendant; as, *O'Brien*, that is, the grandson of Brien.
 MÓR (*more*), *great*; as, *Dunmore*, the great fort.
 BEAG (*beg*), *small, little*; as, *Ardbeg*, the little height.
 ARD, *high, a height*; as, *Ardmore*, great height.
 CLANN, *children, descendants, race*; as, *Clann-na-Gael*, or the race of Gael—the Irish race.
 RI (*ree*), *king*; as, *Ard-ri*, high king.
 LIS, *habitation*; as, *Lismore*, the great habitation.
 BAILE (*bally*), a *town*; as, *Ballymore*, the great town; *Ballykillbeg*, the town of the little church.*
 GAEL (*gail*), an Irish Celt, or a Scottish Highlander of Celtic origin.
 GAELIC (*gá'-lik*), the Celtic language of the Irish and the Highland Scotch.†

* The plural of *baile* is *bailte* (pronounced *balty*); now, we find in the two Irish words *bailte* and *mór* the key to the meaning of the name of one of our famous cities—*Baltimore*—that is, *great towns*. Sir George Calvert derived his title of Lord Baltimore from the little seaport of Baltimore, in the south of Ireland. It has been rendered famous by Davis in his *Sack of Baltimore*, when

“The yell of *Allah* broke above the prayer, and shriek, and roar—
 Oh, blessed God! the Algerine is lord of Baltimore!”

† The *Irish* language may also be called the *Gaelic* language and the *Celtic* language. The term *Celtic*, however, has commonly a wider meaning than Irish or Gaelic. The Celtic language is divided into the *Irish* and the *British* branches. The Irish is subdivided into three dialects—(a) the Irish proper, (b) the Scottish Gaelic, and (c) the Manx, or Irish dialect spoken in the Isle of Man. The British branch is divided into three dialects—(a) the Welsh, (b) the Cornish, and (c) the Armorican, or language of Brittany. The Irish of

- CILL (*kill*), a *church, a cloister*; as, *Kilpatrick*, or Patrick's church; *Kilmore*, the great church.
 DUN, a *fort, a fortified residence*; as, *Dunmore*, the great fort.
 CLON, a *plain, a meadow*; as, *Clonard*, the high plain; *Clonmel*, the vale or plain of honey.
 CNOC (*knoc*), a *hill*; as, *Knocklayd*, the broad hill.
 TIR or TYR, a *territory*; as, Tyrone, or Owen's territory.*
 L'ABHAR (*lèv'ar*), a *book*; as, *Leabhar Breac*, the Speckled Book.
 BARD, a *poet*.
 BRE'HON, a *judge, a professor of law*.

14. REMARKS ON ANCIENT IRISH LITERATURE, A.D. 432 TO A.D. 1700.—The Irish possessed a peculiar literature, art, music, and poetry in which their very soul is portrayed, and which belongs exclusively to them. The literature was a perfect expression of the social state of the people. Each clan had its historian to record the most minute details of every-day history, as well as every fact of importance to the whole clan, and even to the nation at large; and thus we may see how literature with them grew naturally out of their social system. Each clan also had its bard and its brehon.† History, poetry, and music entwined themselves about everything in ancient Ireland.‡

The golden age of Irish literature opens with the introduction of the Christian religion, and closes with the Danish invasion. Then began a decline. The fearful struggle with the fierce northern pirates covered a period of over two hundred years. “The

Ireland is the oldest and purest form of the Celtic. Irish proper and Scottish Gaelic are practically the same language; and an Irishman and a Scottish Highlander find no difficulty in conversing together in Celtic. But it is different when we come to the British branches. A Welshman cannot understand a Highlander or an Irishman. The Welsh language has an extensive literature.

* The names of places in Ireland “are purely Celtic, with the exception of a thirteenth part, which are English and mostly of recent introduction.”—*Joyce, Irish Names of Places*.

† Bardism and Brehonism, like many other offices in Ireland, were hereditary in certain families; and each of the kings, princes, and chiefs had his own bards and brehons.—*O'Hart*.

‡ Thébaud, *The Irish Race*.

Danes," says O'Curry, "made it a special part of their savage warfare to tear, burn, and *drown*—as it is expressed—all books and records that came into their hands, in the sacking of churches and monasteries, and the plundering of the habitations of the chiefs and nobles."

— Armagh, the renowned ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, was burned and sacked fully a dozen times between the year 800 and the battle of Clontarf. The great schools of Clonfert and Clonmacnoise bore four or five such terrible visitations during the same stormy period; in short, every distinguished monastic town in Ireland was plundered and burned by the Danes. The destruction of Irish literature must have been immense.

It is said misfortune never comes alone, and the proverb finds a sad illustration in the history of Irish letters. The Anglo-Norman invasion followed soon after the expulsion of the Danes. "The protracted conflicts between the natives and their invaders," remarks Prof. O'Curry, "were fatal not only to the vigorous resumption of the study of our language, but also to the very existence of a great part of our ancient literature. The old practice of reproducing our ancient books, and adding to them a record of such events as had occurred from the period of their first compilation, as well as the composition of new and independent works, was almost altogether suspended. And thus our national literature received a fatal check at the most important period of its development, and at a time when the mind of Europe was beginning to expand under the influence of new impulses." *

* *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History,*

But the crowning calamity for Irish literature was the Protestant Reformation and the diabolical penal laws that followed. The monasteries and their precious libraries were ruthlessly destroyed. The Irish bards were hunted like wild beasts in the reign of Elizabeth, because they were true to their faith and their country. They could neither be bribed nor bought by English gold. That was their crime. They sang the hopes of Ireland in strains of misty song which the circumstances and shrewdness of the people rendered transparent. When the sword of O'Neill was broken, the minstrelsy which had made it start from its scabbard still lived and moved the pulse of the nation. The warrior's strength dies with him; but the poet's power ever stirs like an immortal prophecy. The days of the bards, however, were numbered. And thus when Shakspeare was stamping the seal of his bright genius on the English language and literature, the language and literature of unhappy Ireland were withering away under the deadly shade of persecution.

The destruction of Irish literature in the seventeenth century was truly lamentable. "Precious manuscripts," says Father Thébaud, "were every day given to the flames and wantonly destroyed, seemingly for the mere pleasure of the destruction. A very few years would have sufficed to render the former history of the country a perfect blank. In no spot of the same size on earth had so many interesting books ever been written and treasured up."

But at this period the hand of God raised up a race of learned and patriotic Irishmen, who toiled like giants to save the scattered remains of Irish literature from wholly perishing in the wreck of ages