

THE TRUTHFULNESS OF ANCIENT IRISH HISTORICAL
RECORDS: BEING THE OPENING ADDRESS OF THE
HISTORICAL SECTION IN DUBLIN.¹

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Of Irish Historical Records there are many classes, three of which I will notice here:—Historical Tales; Annals; and Genealogies. These, along with Biographies, are the ultimate authorities on which all modern writers of the Ancient History of Ireland have mainly to depend; and it is important to inquire how far they may be regarded as trustworthy guides, and what corroboration they receive from independent testimonies.

It is to be observed at the outset that modern writers of Ancient History, that of England as well as of other countries, have to depend largely on statements of writers of the middle ages, which, so far as testimony is concerned, are of much the same character as our Irish Historical Tales, a mixture of truth, exaggeration, and fable. Those old writers, like the people in general of those times, believed in magic, charms, witchcraft, and preternatural agencies of various kinds; and they everywhere mixed them up with their narratives, and magnified the deeds of their favourite characters. Hume, Lingard, and other modern writers of the Ancient History of England had to wade through whole volumes of half fabulous matter, and select truth from fable, and reduce exaggeration to reason, as best they could, before they produced these narratives that we now read, and that seem to us so precise and so free from doubt or fiction.

Historical Tales.—Our Ancient Literature includes a vast number of Historical Tales of various dates, from the eighth or ninth century down to recent times,² in which truth and fiction are mixed up in varying proportions, fiction being often brought in to embellish the

¹ Read in Dublin, July 21st, 1900.

² They will be found described in

O'Curry's *MS. Materials*, and in Dr. Hyde's *Literary History of Ireland*.

dry historical record. Some are almost purely historical, as the "Wars of the Gaels with the Galls." Some may be set down as half and half, as the Battle of Moyrath, the Battle of Moylena, and the story of *Borumha* or Leinster Tribute; while others again are either unmixed fiction or rest on a thin substratum of fact, such as the three tragedies called the "Three Sorrows of Story-telling," the Battle of Ventry, and the *Tain*, or Cattle-spoil of Quelna with its accompanying tales, about thirty in number. The Historical Stories belonging to all three classes form part of our authorities for the Ancient History of Ireland; and we use them exactly as Hume and Lingard used their materials, sifting out, testing, and setting forth the truth by all the means at our disposal.

But Irish historical investigators have an all important additional help in their Annals and Genealogies, which are more extensive and accurate than those of any other nation in Europe, and which, with little exception, may be regarded as trustworthy from and after the fourth or fifth century of the Christian era.

Annals.—Among the various classes of persons who devoted themselves to Literature in Ancient Ireland, there were special Annalists, who made it their business to record, with the utmost accuracy, all remarkable events simply and briefly, without any ornament of language, without exaggeration, and without fictitious embellishment. The extreme care they took that their statements should be truthful is shown by the manner in which they compiled their books. As a general rule they admitted nothing into their records except either what occurred during their lifetime, and which may be said to have come under their own personal knowledge, or what they found recorded in the compilations of previous annalists, who had themselves followed the same plan. Those men took nothing on hearsay; and in this manner successive annalists carried on a continued chronicle from age to age, thus giving the whole series the force of contemporary testimony. Of course it is not claimed that they are infallible; but that they took great care to be accurate. We have still preserved to us many books of native annals, which need not be set forth here as they are fully described in several well known works.

Most of the ancient manuscripts whose entries are copied into the books of annals we now possess have been lost ; but that the entries were so copied is rendered quite certain by various expressions found in the present existing annals. The compiler of the *Annals of Ulster*, for instance, Cahal Maguire, an eminent divine, philosopher, and historian, who died of smallpox, A.D. 1498, often refers to the authorities that lay before him in such terms as these :—"So I have found it in the Book of Cuana" ; "I state this according to the Book of Mochod" ; "This is given as it is related in the Book of Dubhdaleith," and such like ; but nearly all the authorities he refers to have disappeared.

As an example of what manner of men the annalists were I will instance one of the earliest of those whose books are still extant :—Tigernach O'Breen, who died in 1088. He was abbot of the Monasteries of Clonmacnoise and Roscommon, and was one of the greatest scholars of his age. He was acquainted with the chief historical writers of the world known in his day, and it is clear that he had the use of an excellent library in Clonmacnoise. He quotes the Venerable Bede, Josephus, St. Jerome, Orosius, and many other ancient authorities, and of course he made use of the works of all previous Irish historians and annalists. Like most of the other books of annals, his work is written in Irish, mixed with a good deal of Latin. One very important pronouncement he makes, which has been often referred to and discussed, that all the Irish accounts before the time of Cimbaeth King of Ulster (B.C. 305) are uncertain : a statement that shows his critical and upright turn of mind.

Genealogies.—The genealogies of the principal families were most faithfully preserved in ancient Ireland. Each king and chief had in his household a *Shanachie*, or Historian, whose duty it was to keep a written record of all the ancestors and of the several branches of the family. There were several reasons for their anxiety to preserve their pedigrees, one very important one being that in case of dispute about property or about election to a chiefship, the decision often hinged on the descent of the disputants ; and the written records, certified by a

properly qualified historian, were accepted as evidence in the Brehon Law Courts. We have many books of Genealogies, the most important of all being the great *Book of Genealogies*, compiled in the middle of the seventeenth century from older books, by Duaid Mac Firbis, the last and most accomplished native master of the History, Laws, and Language of Ireland. The authenticity of the Genealogies, as of the Annals, dates from a period not long after the beginning of the Christian era. The Genealogies are very valuable as tests of the accuracy of other parts of Irish history.

TESTS OF ACCURACY.

There are many tests by which we are enabled to determine the degree of correctness of the three classes of records just mentioned, but I will notice only three here:—Physical phenomena, such as eclipses and comets; the testimony of foreign writers; and the consistency of the records among themselves.

Whenever it happens that we are enabled to apply tests belonging to any one of these three classes—and it happens very frequently—the result is almost invariably a vindication of the accuracy of the records. I will give instances here; but they are not selected with a view to a foregone conclusion: that is to say, I have not brought forward the favourable cases and held back those that tell unfavourably. I take them as they come; and those I give may be considered types of all.

PHYSICAL PHENOMENA.

Let us first instance the records of physical phenomena: and of these I will set out with one very instructive and impressive example—the solar eclipse of A.D. 664, a year rendered memorable by the ravages of the terrible Yellow Plague, which swept over all Europe. The Venerable Bede, writing fifty or sixty years after the eclipse, records it as he found it mentioned—vaguely as regards time—in some written record, or perhaps from the reports of some old persons who had seen it. At any rate he calculated the date backwards, using the

only means then known for such calculations—the Dionysian Cycle—which was a little incorrect. This led him to the 3rd May, 664, as the date of the eclipse—two days wrong. The Annals of Ulster in their brief and simple record, copied from an older document, give the correct date, 1st May, and even the very hour : a striking proof that the event had been originally recorded by some Irish chronicler who actually saw it, from whose record—or perhaps from a copy—or a copy of a copy—the writer of the Annals of Ulster transcribed it.

The Irish annals record about twenty-five eclipses and comets at the several years from A.D. 496 to 1066, which are collected from various books by Cahal Maguire in the Annals of Ulster, and which will be found set forth in one list by O'Donovan in his Introductory Remarks to the Annals of the Four Masters. The dates of all those, as entered in the Annals of Ulster, are found, according to modern calculation, to be correct. This shows conclusively that the original records were made by eye-witnesses, and not by calculation in subsequent times : for any such calculation would be sure to give an incorrect result, as in the case of Bede.

A well known entry in the Irish account of the battle of Clontarf, fought A.D. 1014, comes under the tests of natural phenomena. The author of the *History of the Wars of the Gaels with the Galls*, writing early in the eleventh century, soon after the battle, states, in his detailed account, that it was fought on Good Friday, the 23rd April ; that the battle commenced in the morning at sunrise *when the tide was full in*, that it continued the whole day till the tide was again at flood in the evening, when the foreigners were routed :—“They [*i.e.* the two armies] continued in battle array, fighting from sunrise till evening. This is the same length of time as that which the tide takes to go and to fall and to flood again. For it was at the full tide the foreigners came out to fight the battle in the morning, and the tide had come to the same place again at the close of the day, when the foreigners were defeated.” So the Irish record.

The time of high water, it is to be observed, is noticed incidentally here in order to account for the great

slaughter of the Danes in the evening during the rout; for as the tide was at height at the time, they were not able to reach their ships, which were anchored in the bay, and which they might wade to at low water. Their only other means of escape—the single bridge that led to their fortress in Dublin, at the other side of the Liffey—was cut off, partly by the tide and partly by a detachment of Irish: so that the chronicler goes on to say:—"An awful rout was made of the foreigners, so that they fled simultaneously, and they shouted their cries for mercy; but they could only fly to the sea, as they had no other place to retreat to seeing they were cut off from the head of Dubgall's Bridge."¹

As soon as Dr. Todd, the translator and editor of the *Wars of the Gaels with the Galls*, came across this passage, in the year 1867, it struck him at once that here was an obvious means of testing—so far—the truth of the old narrative; and he asked the Rev. Dr. Haughton, a well known eminent scientific man, a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, to calculate for him the time of high water in Dublin Bay on the 23rd April, 1014. After a laborious calculation, Dr. Haughton found that the tide was at its height that morning at half past five o'clock, just as the sun was coming over the horizon, and that the evening tide was at 55 minutes past 5: a striking confirmation of the truth of this part of the narrative. It shows, too, that the account was written by, or taken down from, an eye-witness of the battle.

We must not omit a corroboration of the general truthfulness of the Irish account coming from a very different source. All the Irish chronicles state that a general rout of the Danes took place in the evening: which is fully corroborated in the Norse records. There is a brief description of "Brian's Battle," as the Danes called it, in the Danish saga or story "Burnt Nial," in which this final rout is recorded by the Norse writer—the best possible authority on the point under the circumstances—in language much more simple and terse than that of the Irish chronicler: it is merely this short sentence:—"Then flight broke out throughout all the [Danish] host."

¹ Dr. Todd's translation in his edition of the *Wars of the Gaels with the Galls*.

TESTIMONY OF FOREIGN WRITERS.

Events occurring in Ireland in the middle ages are not often mentioned by British or Continental writers: they knew little of the country, which was in those times a very remote place. But in the few cases where they do notice Irish affairs, they are always—or nearly always—in agreement with the native records. A few of these corroborations, moreover, may serve as a warning to us not to be too ready to reject ancient narratives as unworthy of notice because they happen to have about them an air of romance or fiction.

Irish bardic history relates in much detail how the Picts, coming from Thrace, landed on the coast of Leinster in the reign of Eremon, the first Milesian king of Ireland, many centuries before the Christian era: that they aided the King of Leinster to defeat certain British tribes who had given great trouble; that when, after some time they proposed to settle in the province, Eremon refused to permit them, advising them to cross the sea once more, and make conquests for themselves in a country lying to the north-east, *i.e.*, in Alban or Scotland, and promising them aid in case they needed it. To this they agreed; and they requested Eremon to give them some marriageable women for wives, which he did, but only on this condition, that the right of succession to the kingship should be vested in the female progeny rather than in the male. And so the Picts settled in Scotland with their wives.¹

Now all this is confirmed by the Venerable Bede, but with some differences in detail. His account is that the Picts, coming from Scythia, were driven by wind on the *northern* coast of Ireland. The Irish refused them land on which to settle, but advised them to sail to a country lying eastward, which could be seen from Ireland, and offered them help to conquer it. The Picts obtained wives from the Scots (*i.e.*, the Irish), on condition that when any difficulty arose they should choose a king from the female royal line rather than from the male; “which custom,” says Bede, “has been observed among them to this day.”²

¹ See Irish version of Nennius (Irish Arch. Soc.), 121 *et seq.*; and O'Mahony's *Keating*, 216.

² Bede, *Ecl. Hist.*, I, i.

Coming down to more historic times, there are in Irish Records detailed accounts of migrations of Irish to Alban, or Scotland. The first colony of which we have distinct mention was that led by Carbery Riada (first cousin of Cormac Mac Art, king of Ireland, in the third century): a large following of fighting men with their families, who settled among the Picts. Carbery Riada was one of three brothers who were intimately connected by blood with the reigning families of Ireland, and from him all that western district of Scotland was called *Dal-Riada*, i.e., Riada's *dal* or portion. Other and still more important colonisations followed, which need not be noticed here; it is enough to say that those enterprising Irish people ultimately mastered all Scotland, which received its name from them; for at that time the Irish were known by the name of Scots. Now, possibly some might look on all this as fiction if the Venerable Bede did not step in and confirm it in its main features. Here are his words.¹ In course of time Britain, besides the Britons and Picts, received a third nation, the Scots, who, migrating from Ireland under their leader Reuda, either by friendship or force secured for themselves settlements among the Picts, which they still possess (i.e., in the beginning of the eighth century). From the name of their leader they are to this day called Dalreudini; for in their language *dal* signifies a part. I may add that this word *dal* or *dail* is still a living word.

All the Irish annals, as well as the *Wars of the Gaels with the Galls*, record a great defeat of the Danes near Killarney, in the year 812, which so deterred them that many years elapsed before they attempted to renew their attacks. This account is fully borne out by an authority totally unconnected with Ireland, the well-known book of Annals, written by Eginhard, the tutor of Charlemagne, who was living at this very time. Under 812 he writes:—"The fleet of the Northmen, having invaded Hibernia, the island of the Scots, after a battle had been fought with the Scots, and after no small number of the Norsemen had been slain, they basely took to flight and returned home."

¹ Bede, *Eccl. Hist.*, I, i.

Sometimes confirmation comes from the most unexpected quarters. In one of the historical Tales of the *Tain*, or Cattle-spoil of Quelna, which took place in the first century of the Christian era, we are told that King Concobar Mac Nessa conferred knighthood on the great hero Cuculainn (or as the Gaelic writers express it, Cuculainn "took valour") at seven years of age, and that during the ceremony he broke many weapons by sheer strength. We find this event also mentioned in the Annals of Tigernach, in the simple record that Cuculainn took valour at seven years of age. This appears to have established a precedent, so that the fashion became common of knighting the sons of kings and great chiefs at the age of seven years.

Now all this looks shadowy, romantic, and mythical; yet we find it recorded in the pages of Froissart that the custom of knighting king's sons at seven years of age existed in Ireland in the end of the fourteenth century, having held its place, like many ancient Irish customs, for at least fourteen hundred years. When Richard II. visited Ireland in 1394, he entertained the Irish Kings and Chiefs in a magnificent manner, and proposed to confer the honour of knighthood on the four provincial kings, O'Neill, O'Connor, MacMurrough, and O'Brien. But they told him they did not need it, as they had been knighted already; for they said it was the custom for every Irish King to knight his son at seven years of age. The account of all these proceedings was given to Froissart by a French gentleman named Castide, who had lived seven years among the Irish. The narrative goes on to describe the Irish manner of conferring knighthood; that a shield was set up on a stake in a level field; that a number of little spears were given to the youthful aspirant; that he thereupon hurled them against the shield: and that the more spears he broke the more honour he received; all closely corresponding with the ancient Irish romantic narrative.

CONSISTENCY OF THE RECORDS AMONG THEMSELVES.

. Testimonies under this heading might be almost indefinitely multiplied, but I will here instance only a few.

The names of fifteen abbots of Bangor who died before 691 are given in the Irish Annals at the respective years of their death. In the ancient Service Book, known as the *Antiphonary of Bangor*, which is still preserved on the Continent, brought away from Ireland in the early ages by some Irish missionary to save it from destruction by the ravages of the Danes, there is a hymn in which, as Dr. Reeves says,¹ "these fifteen abbots are recited in the same order as in the Annals; and this undesigned coincidence is the more interesting because the testimonies are perfectly independent, the one being afforded by Irish records which never left the kingdom, and the other by a Latin composition which has been a thousand years absent from the country where it was written."

References by Irishmen to Irish affairs are found in numerous volumes scattered over all Europe:—Anna-listic entries, direct statements in tales and biographies, marginal notes, incidental references to persons, places, and customs, and so forth, written by various men at various times, which, when compared one with another, hardly ever exhibit a disagreement. Perhaps the best illustration of this is Adamnan's *Life of Columba*. Adamnan, like Columba himself, was a native of Tirconnell, or Donegal: he was ninth abbot of Iona, and died in 703. He wrote his *Life of Columba* between the years 692 and 697, which is admitted to be one of the most graceful pieces of Latin mediæval composition in existence, and has been exhaustively edited by Dr. Reeves. Adamnan's main object was simply to set forth the spiritual life of St. Columba, who lived about a century before him, to describe as he expressly tells us, the miracles, the prophecies, and the angelic visions of the saint. But in carrying out this ideal, he has everywhere in his narrative to refer to persons living in Ireland and Scotland, mostly contemporaries of Columba, as well as to the events and customs of the time, references which are mostly incidental, brought in merely to fix the surroundings of the saint and his proceedings. Beyond this Adamnan was not at all concerned with Irish history, genealogy, or social life. But

¹ Reeves, *Eccl. Antiq.*, 153.

when we come to test and compare these incidental references with the direct and deliberate statements in Irish annals, biographies, tales and genealogies, which is perhaps the severest of all tests in the circumstances, we find an amazing consensus of agreement, and never, so far as I can call to mind, a contradiction. It is not necessary to enter into details; and even if I desired to do so, this short address would afford neither space nor time; but it would be easy to give scores of striking instances.

It may be said without fear of contradiction that the more the ancient historical records of Ireland are examined and tested, the more their truthfulness is made manifest. Their uniform agreement among themselves, and their accuracy, as tried by the ordeals of astronomical calculation and of foreign writers' testimony, have drawn forth the acknowledgments of the greatest Irish scholars and archæologists that ever lived, from Ussher and Ware to those of our own day, and especially of Dr. Reeves, the learned editor of Adamnan's *Life of Columba*. These men knew what they were writing about; and it is instructive, and indeed something of a warning to us, to mark the sober and respectful tone in which they speak of Irish records, occasionally varied by an outburst of admiration as some unexpected proof turns up of the faithfulness of the old Irish writers and the triumphant manner in which they come through all ordeals of criticism.