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 William O'Connor Morris
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IRELAND.

CHAPTER I.

IRELAND BEFORE THE ANGLO-NORMAN CONQUEST.

Prehistoric Ireland. The Milesian conquerors. The Irish an Aryan Celtic race. Pagan Ireland. The island cut off from the Empire. First traces of Irish history. The mission of Patrick and its results. Ireland little affected by the consequences of the barbarian conquests and the fall of Rome. Splendid achievements of the Early Irish Church. State of society in Ireland before subsequent invasion and conquest. The Monarchy. The inferior kings. The chiefs and other orders. The tribes, clans and septs. The settlement of the land. The Church. The organisation and features of society. The arts of war and peace in Ireland. The Brehon laws. History. Poetry. Music. Architecture. Sculpture. The characteristics of the Irish. The Danish invasions. Brian. Decline of the Monarchy, and of civilisation. Proximity of England to Ireland. The island exposed to Anglo-Norman conquest.

THE traces are faint of the prehistoric race which spread over Ireland in remote antiquity. The island is rich in stone monuments. It contains numerous "Cyclopean" remains; but it has nothing like Stonehenge in extent and grandeur. Tradition indicates that it was peopled from the East; the Fomorians have been called a Turanian tribe; the Firbolgs were probably

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of the stem of the Belgæ; the Tuatha-na-Danaans, “adepts in Druidical and magical rites”—not impossibly a sacerdotal caste—are said to have been of Pelasgic origin. The evidence of language, however, admirably sifted by Zeuss, proves that the main body of the Irish people, of which History takes account, was an Aryan community of the great Celtic stock, once dominant in Britain, in Gaul, in Spain, and scattered over other parts of Europe. It seems probable that it belonged to the tribes of the Gael rather than of the Cymry,—these last perhaps the Cimmerii of Greek story, the Cimbri, at one time the terror of Rome, and the fathers, almost certainly, of the Celts of Wales. A migration of warlike Celts from Spain, after long wanderings through the Scythian wastes, overran Ireland before the Christian era; the Milesian settlement seems to point to a real conquest. Heber, Heremon, and Ir, the sons of Milesius, are as mythical perhaps as Romulus and Remus, as Arthur and Modred, as Hengist and Horsa; but the families of the leading Irish chieftains, tradition affirms, sprang from their loins; and the Milesians seem to have been an aristocratic order. They are described as “bold, honourable, daring, prosperous, bountiful, and not afraid of battle or combat.” [See note on p. 384.]

The land inhabited by the Irish race is widely separated from the rest of Europe, and is surrounded by Atlantic waves and tempests. Phœnician and Spanish traders seem to have reached its shores, as far back, perhaps, as the day of Carthage; but the Celts have never had a turn for the sea; and Ireland assuredly was, to Roman eyes, even more cut off from the world than Britain. Cæsar scarcely alludes to the island at all; Agricola thought it not worth invading, though a single legion and a few auxiliaries would, in his judgment, have made the conquest certain. The Celts of Ireland were left to themselves, and to their primitive life and usages, long after Gaul had fallen under the power of Rome, Britain had

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known the presence of Roman colonies, and the Celt of the Iberian Peninsula had felt Roman bondage. They, therefore, had no experience or taste of the civilisation that followed the march of the legions; and the peculiarities of the land they dwelt in, divided by forests and immense peat-mosses, swept by torrents of rain from the West, and with a climate, then and long afterwards, injurious to health, would naturally have kept them in a state of backwardness. Yet in the first centuries succeeding the birth of Christ, we perceive in Ireland, if, no doubt, faintly, the image of an Aryan people established everywhere, and possessing the characteristics of the great Aryan family. A dim shadowy monarchy was in existence; the names of Conn of the Hundred Battles, of Feredach the Just, of Felim the Lawgiver show that Ireland had her mythical Tullus, and her mythical Numa. A gradation of noble orders appears, in which probably great fighting men, Druids, and poets held a prominent place; and traces are found of a growing tribal system. Erin was pagan, and given to idolatry, like Paul's Corinth, but its paganism seems to have been more akin to nature-worship and the cult of the Sun, than to the horrid superstitions of the Cymric race—half thralls of the Druidic priesthood—which had their chief seats in Anglesea and in parts of Gaul, and which terrified even the trained Roman soldiery. The land seems to have been not divided: there was “not a ditch, nor fence, nor a stone wall,” ran an ancient legend, until long afterwards; and the population was, probably, still largely nomade. But agriculture, and all that this implies, was common; parts of the community were certainly seated on the soil, under the system of common ownership, and of patriarchal custom, which forms a distinctive mark of an Aryan race. [See note on p. 384.]

Ireland remained completely outside the track of the first great barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire, and of the influences which these brought with them. The decline of the

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Imperial power in Britain is attested by a raid on the sea-board of Wales led by Niall of the Nine Hostages, a warrior king of the great Milesian stock, and with difficulty repelled by Stilicho, the conqueror of Alaric, and the friend of Claudian. "The ocean foamed with the oars of the Scots," the poet wrote; this was perhaps the first instance of the descents of the Pictish and Scottish races on the decaying settlements of Roman Britain. The kingship of Ireland was held almost continuously by the Hy-Niall—the fathers of the O'Neills of History, the most illustrious of the Irish chiefs—for nearly five hundred years; and, doubtless, as nomade life disappeared, the archaic organisation of the Aryan races developed itself more thoroughly on the land, in the village community, the sept, and the clan. But, as has always been the case with Aryan peoples, in certain stages of their growth and progress, and has been especially the case with the Celt, Ireland was a land of incessant strife and war; like the Hindoos, the Hellenes, the Latins, and the Teutons, the Irish Celts were in a state of perpetual tribal discord. Light breaks first on Ireland in the fifth century, when this chaos of rude and wild heathendom was gradually made a Christian body of men united in some measure by a living and common faith. Patrick is a grand historical figure, surrounded though he is by a halo of legends; the success of his mission was slow but complete. Irish Paganism, possibly for some time in decline, yielded gradually to the influence of the Saint; "the lights of the Druids were quenched and their spells were broken"; the pagan chiefs bowed before the man of God; not impossibly what was worst in Irish pagan usages—still conspicuous in ancient Indian law—was swept away by his amending hand. And Patrick was the founder of that noble Church, which from Ireland sent the everlasting light through a world convulsed by the death-throes of Rome, and overspread, for ages, by ever increasing gloom. [See note on p. 384.]

We leap over four stormy centuries, in which the mould of

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modern Europe was cast, in the fusion of barbarism and the wreck of the Empire. Fierce and wild races from the deserts of the East poured over the provinces of that Imperial state, which for centuries had held the world at peace, and had been deemed eternal in its majestic structure. Rome was sacked over and over again ; the new Rome on the shores of the Bosphorus was threatened by conquering Semite hordes ; Attila and his Huns were, with difficulty, expelled from Gaul ; Charles of the Hammer just saved the West from the arms of the Saracæn. Meanwhile the Teuton had founded settlements in Italy, in France, in Spain, and in England, destined to become the beginnings of mighty kingdoms ; and at last the genius of Charles the Great constructed a new Empire in the midst of the Continent, extending from the Elbe to the Ebro ; and this, though girt round by still untamed tribes, was to be the fruitful germ of the civilisation yet to come. To this source we may largely ascribe monarchic government, the feudal system, the medieval Church, the conception of the state, and the organisation of the land in Europe ; the arrangement everywhere bearing the mark of rude and general conquest, and of the ideas of Rome, blending with those of the old Aryan communities. As had been the case before, Ireland was not affected directly by these stirrings of the world, and by the immense consequences following in their train, though indirectly she had a part in them. She continued isolated, to a great extent, so far as regards her secular life, her political existence, and her social usages. The loose supremacy of the Hy-Nialls went on ; but it does not seem to have acquired strength, or to have possessed the character of a real Monarchy. The country fell under the rule of four or five houses of chiefs, lords of dominant and powerful tribes, which had more or less subdued the inferior septs and clans ; and these were nearly always at feud with one another. The peculiar organisation of the land had become, doubtless, less archaic

than it had been; collective ownership, the growth of the patriarchal idea, extremely strong in the Aryan races, still prevailed, but had become less general; agriculture had created separate ownership, and that to a very great extent; and the chiefs of the different tribes, septs, and clans, had gained increased power, and enlarged landed possessions, by processes curiously like those of the feudal system.

But if the History of Ireland, in those ages, does not, for causes plainly to be traced, show much political or social growth, it discloses one of the grandest and most remarkable religious movements the world has beheld. St Patrick, we have seen, made Ireland Christian; the island, enclosed by the great sea of the West, was beyond the sphere of the gigantic movements which, north, east, south, and west, overthrew the Empire. The intellect, too, of the Irish, like that of all Celts, is keen, vivid, and especially skilled in communicating its ideas wherever it extends; and the Irish and Celtic nature is strongly emotional, and vehement in its enthusiastic fervour. These facts explain the astonishing part Ireland played in the extension of the Christian faith, from the sixth until nearly the tenth century. Torn as the land was by intestine broils, the Church maintained a vigorous life of its own; it had its scores of bishops, a great array of clergy, hundreds of holy men in its religious orders; its monasteries, schools, and colleges were many and flourishing. Learning and piety spread from these centres of light happily not disturbed by the shock of falling Rome; Ireland became a seat of Christianity of a peculiar type; and she diffused the sacred influence over many lands, doing great things to uphold Christendom, and to preserve the Word in the ages of barbarian conquest. This, indeed, was the most glorious work of the Early Irish Church, a “lasting possession” for the family of man. The zeal of Columba and his successors raised the lamp of life on the shores of Iona, and sent its rays over heathen Scotland. It burned in the

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Holy Isle of Lindisfarne; the Saxons of Northumbria felt its influence, soon after Augustine had landed on the plains of Kent. Irish missionaries preached in Wales, and beyond the Severn; their glory shone in many lands of the Continent. Their voices were heard along the Jura; in the Alpine ranges of wild Switzerland; beside the banks of the Maine and the Rhine; telling the tidings of great joy to savage conquerors, who still bowed down before Thor and Woden. It is a most significant fact that Charles the Great—the embodiment of civilisation in his age—had a singular esteem for holy men from Ireland; they were often guests at his Imperial table. And as Ireland sent forth her teachers of the Faith, so she received within her borders thousands of Christians flying from the savagery and turmoil of the dying Roman world. One Merovingian king received his education in Ireland; monks, bishops, and priests sought a peaceful refuge from lands watered by the Nile, the Seine, and the Danube, in the crypts of Armagh, and where the Shannon flows beside the lonely churches of Clonmacnoise.

We may now glance at the state of primitive Ireland, at her institutions, her social structure and her laws, and at the progress she had made in the arts of life, before she felt the effects of invasion and conquest, that is, after the beginning of the ninth century. The ideas that were to prevail in most parts of Europe, and that flowed largely from barbarian dominion, mingling with the influences of Imperial Rome, had not had much power over her people, because she had been little in contact with them. The conceptions of monarchy, with a strong central government, of a church modelled on the Roman type, of aristocracy strictly ordered, of assemblies which were to enact laws, of land stamped with the feudal system, of cities with municipal rights—the conceptions, in a word, that appear in the medieval state, were not in existence or were very weak, for Ireland had been nearly a stranger to them. Ireland, nevertheless, presented the image of an Aryan community,

as yet backward, but progressing to a state of higher development. A monarchy existed, and though in name elective, it had become as nearly hereditary in the Hy-Niall line, as the Empire was in the House of Habsburg. The monarch had little sovereign power; he was not, in any sense, the Head of a state; he had no Parliament, no Army, no Courts of Justice. But he was the acknowledged superior of every other chief; he seems to have had a right to demand their services, and the armed forces of their tribes in time of war; he had a claim to something resembling a national tribute. He had a Court, and all that pertained to it; a nobility like the feudal Companions; a retinue of Bards and Judges of high degree; and he perhaps assembled the chief men of Ireland, and possibly representatives of the different tribes, at Tara, the place of royal gatherings. He was regularly crowned with solemn rites; his coronation had much in common with the coronations of the German Cæsars. The King of Ireland received the crown, after religious ceremonies, august and striking; in the presence "of the Princes of the Land," of "the Bishops," of the "free states," and possibly of men chosen from the people¹.

Four or five lesser kings held the chief rule in Ireland, under their suzerain, the supreme Monarch. These were the heads of the most powerful tribes, which gradually had become dominant; they were akin to the great sovereign nobles of France, and to the Princes of Imperial Germany, dependent in name, but in their own "countries" rulers. Their state resembled that of their overlord; they had their Courts, their noblesse, and their bands of retainers; they exercised authority over inferior chiefs; they commanded the forces of the leading tribes, and of the communities included in them; and their influence had been for ages increasing. Their kingship, too,

¹ See a most interesting account of the coronation of a king of Connaught in the thirteenth century, in *The O'Conors of Connaught*, 83 seq.

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ran in the royal lines, if subject to a kind of election ; the Tanist, the successor of the dead king, was not necessarily of his own family, though, in all instances, of his blood ; he was sometimes really chosen by the tribe ; and this mode of succession, which seemed so barbarous to Tudor lawyers, was in truth akin to many successions in medieval monarchies, and possibly is a source from which primogeniture arose. These lesser kings probably had the chief power in Ireland ; like the great lords and princes of the Middle Ages they kept the land in a state of petty war and trouble. Beneath these kings were the minor chiefs, masters of subject tribes, clans, and the lowest units, the septs ; their condition doubtless in some respects resembled that of their immediate superiors. But they were bound to them by many ties of dependence, analogous to those of the feudal system ; and while their influence over the classes below them was growing, they were falling more and more under the control of the kings. The chiefs of the septs seem to have widely differed in many points from the other chiefs ; the succession to their lands at least—though this is a difficult subject—was different from that of the acknowledged kings. It was more archaic, and bore the trace of the patriarchal idea of the Aryan family ; but it was a mode of succession like that of the Gavelkind of Kent, though denounced as “sluttish and lewd” by the Cokes and the Spensers.

Under the chiefs, high and low, there seems to have been a local aristocracy of some kind, differing from the personal noblesse of the kings. The position of this order is, however, obscure ; it may have had something in common with the Anglo-Saxon freeholder. There was a series of classes of inferior grade, but separated by well marked distinctions ; they corresponded in some respects to the free tenants, the villeins, and the serfs of the feudal manor. These orders of men were dependent on the chief, his vassals, in fact, in

different degrees; they owed him allegiance, and probably supplied a large part of his forces in war. But the Ceile of substance, with herds of his own, was in a far better position, and more free, than the Saer stock or the Daer stock tenants, kept in subjection, though not to the same extent, by loans of cattle from the chief, which made them his debtors, as in the case of the Plebeians and Patricians of Rome. The subjection was in proportion to the amount of the debt, but these various classes, holding land, as they did, with concurrent rights in it, as joint owners, were liable, it would appear, "to a just rent" only, though the chief's power over them had long been growing. Outside the pale of these were the Fuidhir tenants, composed largely of broken men, of captives in war, and of landless outcasts; these were also followers of the chief in battle; and they were bound to all kinds of degrading services. The chiefs multiplied this class by a variety of means, for this tended to augment their influence; they had a right to quarter retainers on them, "the coyne and livery" of a later day; and they seem to have had a free hand to oppress them. The Fuidhir had no protection against "a rackrent," or indeed against any kind of exaction; his lot was, doubtless, miserable and hard. But Tudor lawyers and many writers are wholly in error, when they confound the free and other tenants of the Irish chief, with the order of the despised Fuidhirs, and describe the chief as simply a cruel lord of down-trodden serfs; the assertion is not only false, but absurd. Beside the land-holding classes, there were classes of slaves, the lowest certainly in the social scale; and as the towns were very few and small, an urban population scarcely existed.

This organisation of society—still archaic but presenting features like those of feudalism—as in the case of all Aryan races, had stamped its peculiar character on the land, on which it had been established for ages. The Monarch, the lesser kings, and perhaps all the chiefs, had appropriated large tracts