

**HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCHES OF THE PRINCIPAL
EVENTS AND CHARACTERS IN THE
ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF
THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES**

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Historical and Biographical Sketches of the Principal Events and Characters in the ecclesiastical history of the first four centuries by John Mac Hale

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PRINCIPAL EVENTS AND CHARACTERS IN THE
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FIRST FOUR CENTURIES

BY THE LATE

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P R E F A C E .

ONE who attempts to compress the most important events of an entire century into one chapter must feel the difficulty of the task. By an injudicious selection he may omit what is most worthy to be remembered, or give an undue importance to some trifling occurrence, to the exclusion of other topics more worthy of our attention.

The histories of the Church and of the Empire are so blended together that it would be difficult, nay, impossible, to point out the line of demarcation. Whoever undertakes to sketch the history of the one, cannot close his eyes on those scenes that have been acted in the other. The only difference between civil and ecclesiastical history is this—that, while the civil historian treats ecclesiastical affairs with a subordinate reference to that of the State, he who would write the history of the Church should make it the centre, casting an oblique glance at the transactions of the world as far as they had any influence on its fortunes.

Following this plan in a miniature scale, the Archbishop attempts to sketch the principal events of the history of the Church during the first four ages, in which he chiefly comprises the errors by which it has been assailed, the councils in which those errors have been condemned, together with some biographical views of the illustrious men who have exemplified its discipline in their lives, as well as illustrated its doctrine by their learning. He occasionally adverts to any momentous facts that occurred within the same period, which may serve as so many landmarks to guide our memories, directing principally our attention to Rome, on which the eye of every writer must be fixed as a meridian, by which alone the historical map of the world may be regulated.

By the promotion of the Archbishop from his position as Professor in the College of Maynooth to the dignity of titular Bishop of Maronia and Coadjutor of the Bishop of Killala, in the year 1825, these sketches were, it is to be regretted, permanently interrupted.

Historical and Biographical Sketches.

CHAPTER I.

IN the stillness of the universal peace which was diffused over the Roman world towards the close of the reign of Augustus, Christ descends upon earth, preaches His doctrine, selects His Apostles, and erects the foundations of His Church on the ruins of the Synagogue. The seventy weeks of Daniel were now filled up, the promised Angel of the Lord appeared on the banks of the Jordan, the sceptre, which was defended by the valour of the first princes of the Asmonean line, dropped at length out of the feeble hands of their degenerate descendants, and Judea, weary of war and revolution, settled at length under the quiet dominion of Rome. The world was then divided between the religion of the Jews and the superstition of the Gentiles, and Christ, without attaching Himself to the feelings or prejudices of either, achieves a lasting victory over the combined opposition of both. From the commencement to the completion of His life, we contemplate a singleness and uniformity of character, which clearly demonstrates the divinity of His mission. Whilst He inveighs against the personal vices of the Pharisees and Sadducees, He enforces

respect for the public authorities, thus showing that His reproofs sprung from no other feeling but that of zeal for the glory of His Father. After preaching a doctrine which, from its sublimity, might startle human reason, and from its austerity be revolting to human passion, after fulfilling the ancient prophecies through the instrumentality of His enemies, who strove to elude their fulfilment, and deprive the Redeemer of the argument which their evidence could supply, He gives them their last accomplishment by His death, and seals His Divinity by the glory of His resurrection.

Scarcely is Christ risen from the dead when the Apostles come forward to attest the stupendous miracle. Numbers are converted by their first instructions; and from Jerusalem they gradually spread themselves over the neighbourhood of Judea, until "their sound went over the whole earth."¹ In the commencement of their career they encountered opposition: but opposition only enflamed their zeal and gave fresh vigour to their exertions, and the stream which might have flowed with a feeble and placid course, if unresisted, became loud and impetuous, and gradually gathered strength from the obstacles that were thrown in its way. It was thus that St. Paul, who had at first resisted, was borne down by the tide of Christianity, and became himself most instrumental in its diffusion. From one of the most fiery persecutors of the infant Church he became its warmest champion; and the natural vehemence of his temper, which, under the influence of nature, amounted to fury, when subdued and mitigated by the

¹ Ps. xviii. 5.

Spirit of grace, was transformed into a pure and unconquerable zeal. To the Jews and to the Gentiles he unfolded the mysterious doctrines of justification and election, and surely none could better illustrate by his own example the lofty precepts which he taught.

The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles, for which we are indebted to the pen of St. Luke, is almost exclusively devoted to the lives and labours of St. Peter and St. Paul. Whilst the former, as became his privilege as Head of the Church, preached to the Jews, who were the first-born, the latter invited the Gentiles to a share in the covenant, and engrafted the wild branches on the fatness of the olive. St. Peter was soon, however, associated to the labours of St. Paul, being assured by a heavenly vision that the wall of separation between the Jews and the Gentiles was now levelled, and that the blessings promised to the seed of Abraham were to be extended to the whole earth.

The labours of the two Apostles were crowned with incredible success. In Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Macedon, and the Islands of the Ægean Sea, flourishing Churches were established. From the Acts of the Apostles it appears that St. Paul successively visited all those places, sometimes animating them by his presence, and in his absence illustrating and fortifying their faith by his written correspondence.

Of the writings and character of this Apostle an adequate idea can scarcely be conveyed but by viewing the original of the one through the powerful medium of the other. For him no mystery was too sublime, no peril too appalling, no adversary too for-