THE HISTORY OF THE INVASION OF IRELAND BY THE ANGLO-NORMANS

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CHAPTER I.

WHO THE IRISH WERE.

WHEN the first Norman invaders looked out eagerly from their galleys at the south-eastern coast of Ireland, which they were approaching, they beheld the shores low and the country generally level. Ireland, which on her three Atlantic sides rears lofty cliffs against the fury of the ocean, and lifts between it and her great central plain a further broad barrier of mountains or hills, is tame on her Leinster coast, where the districts are with one exception flat, and the margin of the sea only a strand. Leinster appeared to the over sanguine gaze of the followers of Fitz-Stephen, to kneel to England and invite

country, viz. the Fir-Bolg, the Tuatha-Danaan, and the Milesian, the first named must have been Celts, since we have abundant proof that they continued to form the bulk of the population after the arrival of the other two races. They may have come hither from Gaul or Britain, or even Spain, in which country the Celts had early pushed the aboriginal Iberians from some of the northern provinces. From all those countries Ireland was easily accessible even in that remote age. The date of the Fir-Bolg arrival is entirely conjectural, for it is lost in the haze of antiquity; but it may have been some twelve or fourteen centuries before Christ. They were conquered by the Tuatha-Danaan, a race whose civilization excited so much wonder in the people they subdued, that the traditions speak of them as wizards. The story of their arrival, and the description of their leader, display to us at once their skill in arts unknown to a primitive state of society, and the astonishment which such created among the rude aborigines. They approached the shores in a mist raised by their enchantment, and their leader was "Nuadh of the Silver Hand," which contrivance was supplied by two of his people as a substitute for the member which he had lost. Credne

the goldsmith wrought the silver hand, and the chirurgeons Diancecht and his son Miach fitted it on.* Those Tuatha-Danaan were, in all likelihood, Phœnicians, of whose visits at a very early period to the neighbouring island of Britain there is accredited proof.

The third race which came to conquer and settle in Ireland was Miledh, or Miledh Espaine (the warrior of Spain), and his sons and followers, or the Milesians, as they are now popularly called. The most reasonable investigations set down this invasion at a few centuries before the Christian era. From the coming of the Fir-Bolg and from that of the Tuatha-Danaan to this date, there must have been many accessions to the population of Ireland from the kindred nations of the neighbouring countries; for instance, such was a settlement of the Cruithne, or Picts, of North Britain. But the numbers of these colonists were probably too few, and their ambition not sufficiently offensive to occasion permanent record. We have only the three great tides of settlement and conquest taken marked note of by the annalists. The Milesians, or Scots—they subsequently invaded North Britain, and gave it the name of Scotland—overthrew both of the

* O'Flaherty's "Ogygia."

preceding races, and reduced them to serfdom. Who the Milesians were is not established; but their own traditions say that they came hither from Spain, and that they were originally Scythians. Others hazard the opinion that they arrived here direct from the Baltic. There is abundant proof that the Milesians did not constitute more than a section or class of the inhabitants of this island, where they became the rulers. In the year 90 of the Christian era the Fir-Bolg serfs rose in rebellion, and seized for a short time the supreme authority, which was restored to the Milesians by one of the insurgents, who is made favourably known to us for that action and subsequent ones, by the race whom he served, as "Moran, the Just Judge." So late as the fifth century, St. Patrick, in his Confession, speaks of the Hiberionaces, or native population, and the Scots, or Milesians, as though they were still distinct in the land. In fact, the Fir-Bolg in Connaught appear to have long maintained a sort of independence; and even in modern times, O'Flaherty, in his "Ogygia," mentions two contemporary families of handsome estate,—O'Layn, in the county of Galway, and O'Beunachan in Sligo,—who claimed to have sprung from this stock.

It will be seen, then, that the popular impression that all the ancient Irish are of Milesian origin must necessarily be an error. How such a delusion arose is intelligible enough. The Milesians, having conquered the preceding races, constituted themselves a warlike nobility. The Fir-Bolg and Tuatha-Danaan, reduced to serfdom, lost their pride and individuality, and in time were gradually amalgamated with their conquerors, whose traditions, and perhaps even family names, they adopted.*

At the arrival of the Normans in the twelfth century all native Irish claimed to be Milesian, excepting, as we have seen, some few of the clans of Connaught. Whatever people the followers of Miledh sprung from—whether they had been Celts, Celtiberians, Goths, or Scythians—by the twelfth century they were Celticized; and when

* We find in the old records far fewer and fainter traces of the separate existence of the Tuatha-Danaan after the Milesian arrival, than of that of the Fir-Bolg. The Fenian hero, Goul Mac Morni, was said to be of this stock. When reduced to subjection with the Fir-Bolg, or the mass of the population, the Tuatha-Danaan obviously were amalgamated with and lost among them; and this circumstance is a proof that their position had extended no deeper in the land than that of the dominant caste—the same as their conquerors, the Milesians, then assumed.

Fitz-Stephen disembarked near Bannow, the Irish nation was essentially and unmistakably Celtic, and of the great branch of the race which called itself Gael.

CHAPTER II.

SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE IRISH.—CAUSES OF THEIR WEAKNESS AT THIS PERIOD.

THE Milesians were a warlike people; and, in contrast to the Tuatha-Danaan, who preceded them as natives of the land, they despised trade, and detested a civic life and the restraint of walled towns. They preferred the patriarchal existence in clans, and lived chiefly on the great flocks and herds which the luxuriant meadows of the island reared in such abundance. They dwelt in "raths;" for those circular earthen mounds, which still remain with their subterranean storehouses, were then surmounted by wooden habitations. King Henry's mail-clad knights beheld with contempt these primitive dwellings, and then turned to gaze in astonishment on the stately and beautiful abbeys and churches, which, like those of Tuam and Cashel