

THE ANCIENT IRISH CHURCH

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The Ancient Irish Church by John Healy

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JOHN HEALY

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56, PATERNOSTER ROW; 65, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD
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1892

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER I.	
EARLY CHRISTIANITY	11
CHAPTER II.	
THE ARRIVAL OF SAINT PATRICK	17
CHAPTER III.	
MISSIONARY LABOURS OF SAINT PATRICK	26
CHAPTER IV.	
CHARACTER OF THE ANCIENT IRISH CHURCH	38
CHAPTER V.	
SAINT COLUMBA	52
CHAPTER VI.	
SAINT COLUMBANUS	70
CHAPTER VII.	
ASCETICS AND ANCHORITES	82
CHAPTER VIII.	
THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN	89
CHAPTER IX.	
CHURCH OFFICERS PECULIAR TO IRELAND	99

	PAGE
CHAPTER X.	
SAINTE AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY AND THE IRISH CHURCH	109
CHAPTER XI.	
POINTS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IRELAND AND ROME	115
CHAPTER XII.	
CONCLUSION OF THE EASTER CONTROVERSY	126
CHAPTER XIII.	
THE EIGHTH CENTURY	130
CHAPTER XIV.	
THE DANISH INVASIONS	141
CHAPTER XV.	
INFLUENCE OF THE DANISH INVASIONS ON THE CHURCH	148
CHAPTER XVI.	
CONVERSION OF THE DANES	156
CHAPTER XVII.	
RISE AND PROGRESS OF THE ROMISH PARTY . . .	162
CHAPTER XVIII.	
THE SYNOD OF KELLS	170
CHAPTER XIX.	
THE ANGLO-NORMAN INVASION.	181
CHAPTER XX.	
CONCLUSION	187

INTRODUCTION.

THE History of the Ancient Irish Church has an importance of its own. It concerns not merely the Irishman who naturally desires to learn how Christianity came to be preached in his own land, for the subject is of scarcely less interest to the dweller in England or Scotland. The former finds in Ireland the counterpart of the old British Church, and traces to that island, besides, the source whence much of the Christianity of the Anglo-Saxon was first derived. As he marks how from time to time the English Church struggled for liberty—how, long before the time of the Reformation, the authority of the Pope was resisted or rendered only a grudging recognition—he will rightly trace this independent spirit to the tone originally given to the Church by the Celtic missionaries. The latter looks to the Church of Ireland as the parent Church of his own. The story of Iona, and of the conversion of the tribes of Caledonia, is as much Irish as it is Scotch. But to the student of general Church History, Ireland is also important. Just as, in some unfrequented islands, types of animal and vegetable life exist which have become extinct elsewhere, and by study of these we may learn much of the former fauna and flora of places where all the conditions of life have changed; so Ireland retained rites and ceremonies and forms of

government long after they had ceased to exist in every other country. In this way we may learn much of the general state of the Church in the fifth century from the state of Ireland as late as the twelfth.

Perhaps the greatest interest of all will be felt by those who, rejoicing in the liberty of a reformed faith and an emancipated Church, will see in Ireland the last of the Western Churches to acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope. When all other parts of Western Europe had already for centuries acknowledged his sway, Ireland was still independent.

In the following short sketch I have endeavoured to present as true a picture as I could make. I have consulted histories written by men of all shades of opinion, but for the facts I have relied almost entirely on the original authorities themselves. Of the Lives of Patrick and the other saints I have made but sparing use. They are too full of the marvellous to be of much value in ascertaining mere sober fact. I have therefore preferred, where possible, the older and more authentic works of Patrick himself.¹ Bede has been largely drawn upon for the incidents of the Irish missions in England. He was devoted to the Roman interest, but he is not unfair to his opponents. Much use has also been made of the works of Giraldus Cambrensis; but he is so prejudiced against everything Irish, and at the same time so credulous, that his work is to be used with caution. The Life of Malachy, who was the great instrument in bringing Ireland under the sway of the Pope, has been written by Bernard of Clairvaux, and I have made much use of it; but the discrepancies between Ber-

¹ A convenient edition of these works has lately been issued by the Religious Tract Society.

nard and the Irish Annals are so numerous and important that the two cannot be reconciled; and the latter have seemed to me in general the more worthy of credence, for the simple reason that Bernard's work is written with a purpose, whereas the Annals are pure unadorned records of the events.

The other sources of information are for the most part indicated in the text or the notes.