

A SHORT HISTORY OF CELTIC PHILOSOPHY

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A short history of Celtic philosophy by Herbert Moore Pim & Eoin Mac Neill

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HERBERT MOORE PIM & EOIN MAC NEILL

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BY
HERBERT MOORE PIM

NOTES BY PROF. EOIN MAC NEILL.

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INTRODUCTION.

IT seems desirable that a few words should be offered to explain how this book came to be written. I had spent about seven years in the study of philosophy ; and during a part of that time I was engaged in writing in dialogue form a work on the Problem of Pain which was entitled *The Pessimist*. This work, after many revisions, was eventually published, and was received with great kindness by the Press. Its main theory was somewhat of a novelty—the placing of a doctrine regarding the response of the inanimate upon a logical basis. This doctrine may be set forth as follows :—

When one is ill, or even at other times when consolation is much desired, may not the visit of a friend be productive of consolation ? It may.

The friend may not experience any unusual degree of emotion, but his presence produces in the one visited, a feeling of comfort, does it not ? It does.

And this one who is visited can describe his feeling of comfort by saying that he received sympathy, can he not? It is usual so to describe it.

But could he not receive the same 'sympathy' from a favourite and affectionate animal? He could.

Or from the contemplation of a gift? Certainly.

Or from the observation of some beautiful flowers? Certainly.

Or from an observation of nature? Yes.

Then this feeling of comfort is an emotion within himself? It is.

And the 'sympathy,' as we call it for convenience, is a property common to man, animal, flowers, and the world? It seems to be.

But the man, animal, flowers, and the world must be in a friendly mood, as it were? They must.

It would be reasonable, therefore, to say that 'there is the same sympathy in beautiful things that are silent, as there is in beautiful souls that speak?' So it seems.

Immediately after the publication of *The Pessimist* I was asked to undertake the construction of a history of philosophy; but this task I declined. It was then put to me that my *Pessimist* exhibited certain characteristics which proved my competence to undertake the discovery of what was suspected to have been done by various Celtic peoples in the domain of philosophy. I protested that the task was beyond my powers; but eventually I agreed to make an attempt at a history of

Celtic Philosophy which would exhibit philosophical development among the alert and original minds of that remarkable race.

It was pleasing to discover, after the accumulation of an immense quantity of material, that much might be said on behalf of the existence of a science which had not hitherto been attributed with much seriousness to the Celts. Classical evidence existed to the effect that the Celts had produced original philosophy; but the existence of any particulars as to the working out of such Celtic systems was another matter.

When I had satisfied myself as to the discovery of two of Plato's doctrines, which unquestionably were developed by the Druids without any knowledge of Plato, I placed this portion of my research before the learned world in two articles which appeared in the *Scottish Review* for the winter quarters of 1915 and 1916. Up to the present no scholar has challenged my claims as set forth in these articles, though they have been freely discussed in the press. This in itself is encouraging. But more intimate encouragement had been forthcoming, when I submitted the first six chapters of my work to Professor Eoin MacNeill. No man, as *The Times* recently admitted, can speak with greater authority on ancient Celtic matters than Professor MacNeill; and it was most gratifying to discover that he raised no objection to my work. Indeed, he did me the great service of writing notes for the first six chapters, and two notes for this Introduction. To him I am deeply indebted.

At the outset, and in addition to the classical comments on the Druids which will be found in this work, the

following statements about these remarkable and learned men of the ancient Celtic community may be offered for the consideration of the reader. The Druids are generally supposed to have been priests ; but recent research has put an end to this misconception of their functions. Diodorus says:—" They predict the preferable things *through the sacrifices* of the priests." And the following passages may be offered to the reader as valuable classical evidence. They are here translated as literally as possible. Strabo says :—" The Druids profess to know the form and magnitude of the earth and of the world, the motions of the heavens and of the stars, and the wishes of the gods. They teach the noblest of the people *secretly* and *daily* for twenty years at a time." Is it to be supposed that, during this academic course of twenty years, no system of philosophy was taught ? MacNeill had said plainly enough in his *Celtic Religion*, which was published long before I looked into these matters, that the Druids were not priests.

Clement of Alexander* says :—" The Gauls have their Druids ; but the Celts have philosophisantes." He uses the aorist which is rather significant. Origen says :—" Zamolxis, the *oiketes* of Pythagoras, was said to have taught the Druids among the Celts to philosophise on the Pythagorean method." He was endeavouring to

* There is more in this than meets the eye. Outside of Gallia Transalpina, Britain and Ireland, no Druids were ever found. Consequently Clement means that where the Transalpine Gauls have Druids, the Celts elsewhere have their philosophisers. Pokorny has shown that the Druids were not of Celtic origin, but were taken over by the insular Celts (Irish or British) from the island aborigines.