

**SOME PASSAGES IN THE
EARLY
HISTORY OF CLASSICAL
LEARNING IN IRELAND**

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Some Passages in the Early History of Classical Learning in Ireland by Mr. Justice Madden

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MR. JUSTICE MADDEN

**SOME PASSAGES IN THE
EARLY
HISTORY OF CLASSICAL
LEARNING IN IRELAND**

Richard Ussher
SOME PASSAGES IN THE
EARLY HISTORY
OR
CLASSICAL LEARNING IN IRELAND.

*An Address delivered at the Inaugural Meeting
of the Trinity College Classical Society,*

Revised, with Notes and an Appendix,

BY
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PREFACE.

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THE Address which is printed in this volume was delivered at the inaugural meeting of the Trinity College Classical Society, held in the month of November, 1907. This Society is not as yet in a position to follow the example of the older Historical and Philosophical by printing the proceedings at its opening meetings. I have undertaken to publish this Address on behalf of the Society, with the understanding that should any profit be realized, it shall be applied in aid of the foundation of a classical library for the use of members.

It was necessary to omit a good deal of what I have here printed in order to bring the delivery of the Address within reasonable limits. I have revised what I had then written, adding notes, and printing in an Appendix some extracts from writers whose works are not easily obtainable.

Such information as is to be found in these pages on the subject of classical learning in the

early monastic schools of Ireland was collected from the works to which I have referred ; all of which are accessible to the ordinary reader. This part of the Address was intended as introductory to a subject of inquiry to which I had been directed in the course of holiday rambles, during many years, in the by-ways of Elizabethan literature. In this way I had come to learn many things which the writers of Histories and Treatises had failed to teach me, particularly as regards the conditions of life and the degree of education and literary culture which existed up to the commencement of Elizabeth's reign among the upper classes in the part of Ireland which lay outside the boundaries of the English Pale.

Some years ago I added to a Shakespearian library a copy of the edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* which was published in 1586. I was led to an examination of Holinshed's ponderous tomes by the knowledge that they had furnished Shakespeare with the plots of some of his greatest works ; and I was naturally attracted by the description of Elizabethan Ireland contributed by Richard Stanyhurst. Here I found much interesting information in regard to the schools within the English Pale, and the classical learning which was to be found in that

part of Ireland before the foundation of Trinity College.

From the same writer I learned also that among the "meer Irish," without the Pale, Latin was not only taught in schools, but generally spoken "like a vulgar tongue." Following up a subject that was new, to me at all events, I learned from other contemporary writers that the Irish outside the Pale were at that time a bilingual people; that the languages taught in the native schools were Irish and Latin; that to be a reader of Latin was regarded as the ordinary accomplishment of a gentleman; and that the Latin language was commonly spoken in the huts of the peasants and the castles of the chieftains. It also became apparent that this knowledge and use of Latin must be attributed to an origin earlier in date than the Revival of Learning, and that it was a survival of the classical learning cultivated in the ancient monastic schools of Ireland.

The period of time to which attention is directed in this Address, extending beyond the advent of Sir Henry Sidney in 1565, is included within the range of Modern History. And yet there was to be found during that period, within the narrow limits of this island, and side by side

with the Feudal organization of the Pale, a state of society based on the Tribal system, and retaining many characteristics the origin of which is of extreme antiquity. The Tribal system of jurisprudence, which was not finally abolished until the beginning of the seventeenth century, had no affinity either with Roman Law or with the customs in which the Feudal system had its origin. This system of jurisprudence supplied to Sir Henry Maine the foundation of his *Early History of Institutions*. The Bardic literature cultivated in the native schools, and patronised by the chieftains, was also of native growth, and, so far as I am aware, retained its original character, substantially uninfluenced by the study of the ancient classics. This feature of the age is not in danger of being overlooked or neglected; but sufficient attention has not been directed to another feature of this age, not, indeed, of native growth, but traceable to the early years of the Christian era—the permanence in Celtic Ireland of the influence of the early monastic schools, and of the classical learning for which they were famous throughout Western Europe.

It is not surprising that this bygone state of society should have failed to attract the attention of writers who were concerned rather with

military operations and political movements, and who lived in an age which cared little for archæological investigation. The incessant wars by which this part of Ireland was devastated during many years of the reign of Elizabeth, the subsequent abolition of the Tribal system, and the ensuing convulsions of the seventeenth century, swept away all visible traces of a state of society which presented many features of special interest. In the age in which we live, when archæological studies and investigations are engaging the attention of students in every part of the world, it seemed worth while to bring the result of my reading before the recently formed Trinity College Classical Society. What I have written is not intended as a serious contribution to the investigation of this period of our history. The facts which I have brought together lie near the surface; but a superficial outcrop, of no particular value in itself, may be useful as evidence of a rich mine beneath the surface, ready to repay the labour of the patient worker.

A monograph on the early history of classical learning in Ireland would be a fitting outcome of the foundation of a Classical Society associated with Trinity College. During the long years in which the study of the history, language, and