

# IRISH READINGS

(Edited by A. M. SULLIVAN, M.P., and T. D. SULLIVAN, M.P.)

## SOCIAL LIFE IN ANCIENT IRELAND.

From *The Confiscations of Ulster.*

(By Thomas Macnevin.)

If we were to judge by the modern historians, the Irish people at the accession of James—nay, some have said from the earliest periods—were buried in the most profound barbarism, even though from the fifth century they had enjoyed the light of Christianity, and though the priests and missionaries of the country had preserved, through mediæval gloom, both Faith and learning, and propagated them through the world. In the tenth century, ere the history of England had well begun, and when the greatest part of Europe was involved in darkness, a steady light of piety and learning continued to shine in this island, and shed its rays over the neighboring countries. In the schools of the continent the Irish scholars continued "to retain their former superiority, and amongst the dwarf intellects of that time towered as giants." In France and Germany the monasteries of the Irish, the only retirements for piety and learning in an ungodly age, were flourishing, and the fame of Irish scholars was joyfully recognised. Irish monks founded a school at Glastonbury, England, where St. Dunstan imbibed under their teaching "the very marrow of Scriptural learning." There that distinguished ornament of the English Church was learnedly accomplished, according to the acquisitions of the time, in astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry; and there too he cultivated that sweet taste for music in which he indulged through all his life.

And so did piety and learning continue to flourish in Ireland, until by the constant intercourse, both peaceable and warlike, with the Danes, and by their employment as mercenaries of those barbarians in local feuds, the Irish had become familiar with rapine and all turbulent crimes, and a national degeneracy had been thereby produced, which continued increasing up to the time of the English invasion. Then it may, without disparagement to our country, be admitted that the Irish were matched against a people possessing at that time superior civilisation, greater refinement, and a more compact and better system of government. A nation governed by innumerable princes and chiefs, was to meet in battle, and struggle with, in policy, a country having but one centre of power, one head, one recognised source of government. It is no shame that with such unequal odds they were worsted in the long contest of ages, and it is a matter of national pride that so noble and unceasing a resistance could have been made with such discordant materials.

But much as Ireland had degenerated since the English invasion, she still enjoyed at the accession of James a great degree of civilisation, when compared with other countries at the same period. Under the rule of her native chieftains religion had been protected, and the country was covered with the noblest architectural monuments of princely piety, of many of which, subsequently, she

was stripped by the sacrilegious fury of the English. Laws had been propounded with solemn sanctions—laws repugnant to later notions and to the refinement of modern ages, but suited to the wants, the genius, and the feelings of the people. Amongst the chieftains had been men, and still were men, of high accomplishment, courtesy, and valor. The Scotie chronicle of Fordun supplies us with a letter written in the reign of Edward the Third, by O'Neill, King of Ulster, and, as he proudly says, "rightful heir to the monarchy of all Ireland," and addressed to the Pope John the Twenty-second, and a more impressive and eloquent document will scarcely be found in the pages of history, indicating a degree of high refined feeling that could not be surpassed, if it could be equalled, in the Court of Edward. It is a history of English rule in Ireland from the beginning, told with grave and earnest simplicity, but in language the most eloquent and graceful. There is little evidence in it of that perennial barbarism which Hume attributes to the chiefs and people of ancient Ireland.

The deterioration which took place has been attributed to many causes; to the Danish invasions, to the Brehon laws—yet in days of acknowledged splendor and civilisation these Brehon laws formed the national code; but, however that degeneracy was produced, it was signally accelerated by the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. They came "like ravening wolves, and more cunning than foxes"; they drove the inhabitants from their houses and their lands, "to seek shelter like wild beasts in woods, marshes, and caves; they sought out the miserable natives even in those dreary abodes"; they seized on the noble endowments of the Church, and destroyed the buildings devoted to piety and education. O'Neill pathetically laments that by the intercourse of the Irish with the English his countrymen had lost the fine features of the national character, "for, instead of being like our ancestors, simple and candid, we have become as artful and designing as themselves."

Moryson, in writing the time of Elizabeth, says that an Irish chieftain sat round the fire with his family in a state of nakedness. But, not to dwell upon the requisitions of a climate not tropical, this will appear a mere gratuitous misrepresentation, when we consider that sumptuary laws to prevent extravagance in dress were very frequent from an early period in Ireland, and that even English writers have minutely described the gorgeous garments of the chiefs and clansmen—the ornamented vest, the trowse, the flowing mantle, the vast sleeves of finest linen dyed in saffron—and that the ornaments of the women were of gold, and are duly recorded in bardic rhymes and soberer annals. A people so well supplied with, and so fond of using, a costly wardrobe, would scarcely

be reduced to a barbarous nakedness even in the recesses of their dwellings.

It must be confessed, however, that the residences of the Irish, contrasting strangely with the splendor of their ecclesiastical architecture, were in most instances mean and temporary, and suited only for a loose pastoral people. They were slight, and composed of hurdles. But this is not to be taken to support the charges of barbarism made against the nation, which are completely belied by the course of education in the management of cattle, in husbandry, in navigation, and in letters, which was administered to their youth, the early commercial dealings with foreign nations, and the long possession of letters. But the social habits in almost every country in Europe were of a low nature, and their standard of social comfort was mean. Great contrasts—noble castles, splendid edifices of piety, looking down upon mean structures of hurdles—were not unusual in England at the time of the first Anglo-Norman monarchs.

Hume sums up the character of the Anglo-Saxon race—and doubtless they were at the time of Henry the Second not much ameliorated by the Norman invasion—in this manner: "They were in general a rude, uncultivated people, ignorant of letters, unskilled in the mechanic arts, untamed to submission under law and government, addicted to intemperance, riot, and disorder. Their best quality was their military courage, which yet was not supported by discipline or conduct. Their want of fidelity to the prince, or any trust reposed in them, appears strongly in the history of their later period. Even the Norman historians, notwithstanding the low state of arts in their own country, speak of them as barbarians when they speak of the invasion made upon them by the Duke of Normandy. The conquest put the people in the way of receiving slowly from abroad the rudiments of science and cultivation, and of correcting their rough and licentious manners." The Normans brought with them their habits and their tastes, and some refinement—which was, as Hume says, slowly imparted to the Saxons; and the composite nation, when its adventurers first invaded the shores of Ireland, had achieved a certain degree of civilisation. Settled there, however, they made no exertion to extend this to the natives; they acted merely as needy adventurers, seeking to make easy fortunes, and reckless of the ruin they wrought in the pursuit of wealth and power.

In every other recorded case the disasters of conquest have been followed by social amelioration to the conquered people. But the Anglo-Norman invasion was an unrelieved and unatoned-for calamity to the Irish people; the conquest up to the reign of James never having been completed, the policy of division, and the practices of petty and incessant warfare, were adopted from the first. Whatever superior civilisation was enjoyed by the invader was never imparted to the invaded people; he gave nothing but his vices to his new country. Entrenched within the stunted boundaries of the Pale, his only security was in the weakness of the "enemy"; and this was effectually secured by the divisions which the institutions of tanistry and chieftainship enabled him to

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