

Triumph of Brian Boru

Ireland and the Celtic Church, a history of Ireland from St. Patrick to the English Conquest in 1172

George T. Stokes D.D.

1888

PREFACE.

I HAVE often been asked to recommend a history of Ireland, embodying the result of the latest investigations, and telling a very chequered story in an interesting way. I have been unable to name any work fulfilling these conditions. Mr. Skene's learned volumes embody the result of modern investigations, but they deal as much with Scotland as with Ireland ; while the older historians, such as Lanigan, King, and Todd, though very learned and accurate, are largely controversial and most certainly not light reading. I have endeavoured in the following pages to avoid controversy as far as possible, and have necessarily been obliged to make the story as interesting as I could. The form of the book explains the reason why. The lectures contained therein were originally delivered as public prelections in the Divinity-school of Trinity College. As Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Dublin I am bound to lecture twice a week during two terms of the academic year, but no one is obliged to attend my classes. If I wish, therefore, to have an audience, I must attract one. I have had no cause for complaint on this head so far as the following lectures were concerned, and, therefore, I presume they were found interesting by those who attended. I can only hope they may not be found dull and uninteresting by the wider audience to which they are now submitted. I have done my best to improve them by the addition of notes, which will direct the student to the sources whence I have drawn my material, much of which has hitherto lain buried in *Proceedings* and *Transactions*, specially those of the Royal Irish Academy.

Publishers do not want ideal histories, complete in form, exhaustive in matter, but histories which will interest the public. Exhaustive histories are sometimes very exhausting to their readers. Again, I wished to give a picture of ascertained facts, and therefore made it a rule to deal with subjects which have been thoroughly discussed by specialists or illuminated by the publication of great works like Bishop Reeves' *Adamnaris Cohunba*, and Dr. Todd's *Wars of the Gaedhil*.

GEORGE T. STOKES.

28, TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN,
October 2nd, 1886.

Brian Boru and The Triumph of Christianity.

BRIAN BORU is one of Ireland's national heroes. Some of these heroes are mythical characters. Some of them had little claim when in the flesh to the title of heroes. But as for Brian Boru, he is a truly historical personage, and his heroic character is as firmly grounded as that of Alfred the Great, whom he resembles in many respects. We shall take his career after the manner of old-fashioned sermons, under three great heads or divisions, (1) His youth ; (2) His conquest of Ireland ; (3) His final struggle with the Danes of Dublin. You may, indeed, naturally ask the oft-repeated query, What documents have we throwing any historical light on these topics ? My reply would simply be this. I should point you to the Master of the Rolls' great series of English and Irish texts illustrating the early history of these kingdoms.

There you will find Dr. Todd's work on the wars of Brian, Mr Hennessy's editions of the *Chronicles of Lough Cé* and of the *Chronicon Scotorum*. Compare them then with the independent Icelandic Sagas, and you will have abundant contemporaneous evidence illustrating the career of the great Brian. Let us then apply ourselves to our task of tracing the history of one who finally destroyed paganism as a power in Ireland.

Brian was descended from one of the royal families of southern Ireland, possessing a hereditary claim to the throne of Cashel or of Munster. I do not think, indeed, it would enlighten you much were I to give you his full genealogy as the Irish historians trace it, through twenty-two generations back to Cormac Cas and Olid Olum, who divided Ireland in the second or third century with Conn of the hundred battles. [1] Brian was the son of a chief named Kennedy, who had also an elder son named Mahon. These children were born about the time when the Danes established the kingdom of Dublin, that is, somewhere about the year 930. Their earliest memories were of Danish rapine and plunder. Their position naturally marked them out as objects of attack by the Danes of Limerick, for it was with the Danish colonies which occupied the southern ports of Waterford, Wexford, Cork and Limerick the O'Briens first came into conflict. Limerick was essentially a Scandinavian town. Scandinavian names still linger round it, just as a Scandinavian castle, called Reginald's tower, still exists in Waterford, while again the very names Water-fiord and Wex-fiord testify to the Norwegian origin of the first settlers. [2] The kingdom of Limerick was specially powerful, and carried on perpetual and deadly conflict with Brian's family and kindred. Let me quote you a brief passage from the historian whom Dr. Todd translated, picturing the scenes of Brian's youth. "Now when Brian and Mahon saw the bondage and the oppression and the misrule that was inflicted on Munster, and on the men of Erin in general, they would not submit to it. They therefore carried off their people and all their chattels over the Shannon westwards, and they dispersed themselves among the forests and woods of the three tribes that were there. They began to plunder and kill the foreigners immediately after that. Neither had they any termon or protection from the foreigners. But it was woe to either party to meet the other or come together, owing to the plunders, and conflicts, and battles, and skirmishes, and trespasses, and combats that were interchanged between them during a long period." Let us now translate the historian's poetical expressions into the language of sober fact. Mahon and Brian, when they set their hearts upon freeing their country, recognised, like Alfred the Great under similar circumstances, their own weakness and inability to cope with the armour-clad and stalwart foreigners. They saw that guerilla warfare was their true game, a wearing out of the enemy by hanging on his flanks, cutting off his supplies, destroying him in detail. They had made their first attempts in the district covering the counties of Tipperary and Limerick. Then they crossed the Shannon to their native territory of Thomond, and buried themselves in the woods and forests which at that time covered the present County of Clare. Mahon soon grew weary of this rough and dangerous life ; but Brian displayed the true spirit of a national leader and deliverer. He never despaired of the cause, no matter how desperate its state—and it was desperate at times. The Danes recognised the absolute necessity, for their own safety, of crushing this determined antagonist. They crossed the river in pursuit of him, and proved their engineering skill by raising the fortress of Bunratty, whence they might overawe the whole neighbourhood. I say they proved their engineering skill by doing so, because when the Normans, under Thomas de Clare, came to conquer this district, they selected the very same spot, where they erected a castle which stood many a vigorous siege down to the wars of the seventeenth century. Brian, however, was nothing daunted either by the defection of his brother or the nearer presence of his enemies. He acted like David when he fled from the face of Saul, and maintained a similar kind of warfare. David dwelt in the caves of Engedi and of Adullam, and the woods of Gilead, and in the hill of Hachilah which is before Jeshimon. Brian hid himself in the caves of the O'Bloods in the north-east of Clare, and in the Boughta mountains, near Gort in the County Galway, and there maintained himself

till he was well-nigh reduced to the condition of Alfred when he became a goatherd, for Brian's army was at last reduced to the scanty number of fifteen men.

His brother now reappears on the scene. Mahon sought an interview with Brian, who reproached him for deserting the national cause. A poetical dialogue in one manuscript tells us of the interview. Mahon asks Brian where he had left his followers, as he had arrived almost alone and unattended. Brian answers that he had left them on the field of battle, cut down by the foreigners ; that they had followed him in hardships over every plain, " not" (he adds) " like thy people, who remained inactive at home." He then recounted their achievements, and reminded his brother that neither their father Kennedy, nor their grandfather Lorcan or Laurence, would have sanctioned his cowardly truce with the Danes. Brian's reproaches took effect on his brother. He summoned his tribe, submitted to them the question of peace or war, which they naturally decided in favour of war, and then at once raised an insurrection against the dominant Danes. Mahon, as the elder brother, now becomes the prominent personage, though of course Brian remained the guiding and the moving spirit behind the scene. The Danes had conquered Kerry. Mahon flung himself upon them and routed them with the assistance of the inhabitants. Munster was now divided into two great sections. The curse of Ireland and of Irish action followed it on this as on every occasion. Jealousy and envy begat disunion and treachery. The chieftains took opposite sides. Ivar, Danish Prince of Limerick, summoned his allies. To him resorted every one who worshipped success and desired personal ease as opposed to national honour and freedom. The O'Mahony and the O'Donovan, two of the most powerful Munster chieftains, joined their forces to Ivar's ; while Mahon and Brian rallied to their side the national spirit of southern Ireland. They drew their forces to a head in the neighbourhood of Cashel and Tipperary. The Danes attacked them at a place called Sulcoit, about two and a half miles north-west of Tipperary. Sulcoit means a sallow or willow wood ; a name, by the way, still preserved in the designations Solloghod-beg and Solloghodmore, by which the neighbouring parishes are still known. The Scandinavians made one great mistake. They allowed Mahon to choose his ground, and under Brian's guidance he chose it so as to afford his light-armed troops every advantage. The whole neighbourhood was covered with dense woods of willows, whence its name. To this day the upper reaches of the Suir, which flows through these parts, is marked by plantations of willows, offering materials for a local industry. The Danes were unable to cope with the Irish in such a position. Their superiority in heavy armour hindered rather than assisted them, and as the result they were utterly routed, pursued to Limerick, and massacred there without mercy, a small remnant only, headed by Ivar their king, making good their retreat to Scatterry island in the Shannon estuary, whence they sought shelter among their kindred in Dublin and in England. Mahon was now triumphant, and universally recognised as King of Cashel and of Munster. The fatal curse of division and of jealousy soon, however, displayed itself among the victors. The Molloy and the O'Donovans had allied themselves with the Danes, as I have already stated. Mahon seems to have forgiven their treachery, but they themselves could not forget it. They plotted against him, invited him to a conference, and then in the pass of Bearna Dhearg (red or bloody gap) through which the road from Kilmallock to Cork now passes, these treacherous chieftains assassinated the deliverer of their country. They murdered Mahon indeed, but they removed him only to make way for the stern avenger of his brother's death and a more vigorous champion of his country's cause. The fall of Mahon made Brian King of Munster, and placed him in the front rank against the Danes, who once again were raising up their heads. Let me give you a date or two. The battle of Sulcoit, which for the time annihilated the Danish kingdom of Limerick, happened in 968. Mahon reigned for eight years. He was murdered in 976, leaving the throne to his brother, who was then about forty-five years of age. The second period of Brian's life now opens upon us, when we have to trace his career of conquest till he stood as a victor, Emperor of

Ireland, as he calls himself, before the high altar of Armagh, and indited by the hand of his chaplain the words you can still see in the *Book of Armagh*, in our own library. [3]

Brian's first duty was the punishment of his brother's foul assassination. This led him at once into fresh conflict with the Danes. The Irish historian from whom I have so often quoted, grimly notes that the murderers gained nothing by their crime. "For Brian who succeeded Mahon was not a stone in place of an egg, nor a wisp of hay in place of a club, but he was a hero in place of a hero, and he was valour after valour. He then made an invading, defying, rapid, subjugating, ruthless, untiring war, in which he fully avenged his brother."

Let me briefly sketch the steps by which Brian steadily raised himself to supreme power. He did not attain his end at once. He ascended the throne of Munster in 976. In 1002 he was recognised as supreme King of Ireland, a space of twenty-six years. Brian, as I have said, first applied himself to punish his brother's murderers. O'Donovan and his tribe summoned Harold, King of the southern Danes, to his assistance. Brian attacked the combined forces in O'Donovan's fortress and defeated them, slaying O'Donovan and his ally Harold. A more dangerous enemy remained behind. Molloy, [4] the other murderer, was himself a rival claimant to the throne of Munster, and had assumed its title. Brian formally declared war against him, defeated and slew him at a battle fought on the borders of Cork and Limerick. Within two years of Mahon's death, Brian had punished both his murderers. After the year 978 Brian advanced by rapid steps. He conquered the Waterford Danes. He defeated the chief of Ossory, Gillpatrick by name, an ally of the Dublin Danes, [5] and in 984 received the submission of the King of Leinster at his residence near Leighlin Bridge, in the County Carlow. Connaught and the North of Ireland as yet remained free from his attacks. He was a wise general. He took his foes in detail. He established himself at his favourite residence, Kincora near Killaloe. This gave him a commanding position. He could thence watch Limerick and the Danes. He could also attack the King of Connaught from the great Lakes of the Shannon, Ree and Derg, while Lough Ree again would help him to assail the rear of the kingdom of Meath. Brian's plans completely succeeded. Between 984 and 998, Connaught was conquered, while Malachy himself, who claimed to be supreme King of Meath, of Ulster, and of all Ireland, was compelled to make a treaty on the shores of Lough Ree, by which he yielded the supreme rule over the southern half of Ireland to Brian, retaining, however, his own authority over the northern half of the country. [6] But this treaty did not stand for long. Brian was determined to be supreme king. It was easy, therefore, to frame a pretext for a quarrel; a powerful and aggressive foe never has wanted one since the time the wolf of the fable sought an excuse for devouring the lamb. Malachy was accused of plundering Leinster, and challenged to war. He sought assistance in vain on every side. His own kinsmen, the O'Neills of Ulster, declined to help. The Celtic character recognised in Brian one made to rule and one determined to rule, and bowed before him as the corn bows before the wind. Malachy paid the southern conqueror the tribute demanded, and the year 1002 beheld the aged Brian universally acknowledged as King of Ireland. I shall close this section of his life by just noting that Brian proved his right to power by his exploits, not merely in the region of war, but also in that of peace, some of which remain and are even still in use. He erected or restored the cathedral of Killaloe, the churches of Inis-Caltra in Lough Derg, the round tower of Tomgraney in county Clare. He built bridges over the Shannon at Athlone and Lanesborough, he constructed roads, he strengthened the forts and island fortresses or Crannoges (the Swiss Pfahlbauten) of Munster. [7] He dispensed a royal hospitality, he administered rigid and impartial justice and established peace and order through all the country, so that, as the historian puts it, "a woman might walk in safety through the length of Ireland, from Tory Island in Donegal to Glandore Harbour in Cork, carrying a ring of gold on a horse-rod," a state of affairs so seldom realised in those troublous ages, that it is no wonder it has been immortalised in the famous though probably overdrawn stanzas which sing :

“ Rich and rare were the gems she wore,
And a bright gold ring on her wand she bore ;
But oh ! her beauty was far beyond
Her sparkling gems, or snow-white wand.

“ On she went, and her maiden smile
In safety lighted her round the green isle,
And blest for ever is she who relied
Upon Erin’s honour and Erin’s pride.”

We have now arrived at the third great period into which Brian’s life and work may be divided. He had conquered the Danes of Limerick in youth. He had conquered Ireland in the prime of life. But the toughest conflict remained behind. He conquered the Danish kingdom of Dublin in extreme old age. I have several times noted the genius of a true general and conqueror displayed by Brian. He used his opportunities with skill and judgment and prudence. He defeated his enemies in detail, and then, by kindly treatment, won them over to his side. He avoided above all things provoking his opponents into one grand united effort. Leinster, Connaught, Meath, Ulster, were all conquered in succession. But hitherto he had avoided conflict with the Scandinavians of Dublin, certain as they were of support from their allies in Man, Scotland, Northumbria, and York. His conquest of Meath in 998 brought him into contact with them, as his boundaries now marched side by side with those of the Danes, from the sea near Drogheda to the Curragh of Kildare and the waters of the Liffey. The Danes recognised their danger and boldly faced it. They sought allies among the Irish, and, as usual, sought them not in vain. Treachery was once again the deadly enemy of Ireland. The Leinster men rebelled against Brian, and, headed by their king and allied with the Danes, marched against Brian. Brian’s old age was rendered splendid by two great victories over the Danes. The battle of Clontarf marked his death scene. The battle of Glenmama marked the year 1000. Of this latter battle nothing is commonly known, and yet it was in its way just as important as the more celebrated struggle by the sands of Clontarf. The battle of Glenmama was a great struggle with the Danes organised by the same sovereign, Sitric of Dublin, who commanded at the battle of Clontarf. He is no mythical character. We have his likeness still remaining stamped on the coins minted by him at Dublin, which you can see depicted in Worsæ, *Danes and Norwegians*, p. 339. There we behold the features of a determined man, covered with a helmet and clad round the shoulders with a royal robe. He was a nominal Christian too, for his coins bear the sign of the cross upon them, though like many a Christian his religion sat very lightly upon him, and as the struggle grew fiercer would seem to have been entirely discarded. And now let us give our whole attention to Brian’s first great struggle against the Dublin Danes aided by their treacherous Leinster allies. Brian, as soon as he learned their designs, collected his forces and marched towards Dublin. The allies on their side boldly advanced to meet him, and the hostile armies joined battle at Glenmama, the Glen of the Gap, near the ancient but rather backward town of Dunlavin, where the Wicklow mountains begin to sink into the rich plains of Kildare. Fortune as usual favoured Brian, and the Danes were defeated with the loss of King Sitric’s eldest son and four thousand of his mail-clad warriors.

This battle was a crushing defeat for the allies. The Leinster men were dispersed in every direction. Accustomed to the bogs, they escaped more easily than the Danes ; but their chiefs were so hard pressed that one prince was fain to take refuge in the branches of the ancient and majestic yews which to this day enclose the Church of St. Kevin at Holywood. [8] There he was captured by Morrogh, Brian’s eldest son, an incident of which we shall soon hear more. I may just remark, that no ancient Irish battle-field has been more completely identified and followed in all its details than this one. In Dr. Todd’s book, preface, p. cxliv., you will

find the site of the battle and the various lines of flight accurately determined by the investigations and local knowledge of the late Rev. J. F. Shearman, formerly Roman Catholic curate of the parish, affording, indeed, an interesting instance how the clergy may profitably utilise rural leisure and life in the most backward localities, for the purposes of historical research.

[9] Mr. Shearman traced most carefully the various routes by which the Danes sought safety, and was successful in gathering up relics of this most momentous struggle, which was indeed a complete victory for the Irish king. Brian was a thoroughly modern general in spirit. He did not commit the mistake of the English and French after the Alma. He left his defeated enemy no time to organise fresh resistance. Aged as he was, he pursued them across rivers, bogs, and mountains, till he entered with the fugitives the gates of Dublin, and made himself master of the fortifications. Brian used his triumph as victors have ever used them. He plundered the city, he destroyed the fortress, he enslaved so many of the Danes that, as the historian (cap. Ixix.) tells us exultingly, “No son of a soldier deigned to put his hand to a flail or any other labour on earth ; nor did a woman deign to put her hands to the grinding of a quern, or to knead a cake, or to wash her clothes, but had a foreign man or a foreign woman to work for them.”

Here again, however, Brian pursued his usual policy. He did not push his victory too far. He weakened his foes, but did not destroy them. He even formed a league with the Danes, and strove to secure the all glance of the Leinster men by dethroning the king who had organised the revolt, and substituting for him Maelmordha, the prince whom Brian’s son had dragged down from his hiding-place amid the branches of the yew trees of Holywood.

Now we come to the crowning victory of Brian’s chequered and lengthened career, the battle of Clontarf ; but before I proceed to describe it, I must trace the events which led up to it. Fourteen years separated the battle of Glenmama from that of Clontarf. These fourteen years were a period of comparative repose for Brian. Yet the Danes had only been waiting an opportunity to renew the struggle for their lost sovereignty. A chance circumstance gave them the desired occasion. A woman, as so often has been the case, was the cause of quarrel. The Irish kings and the Danish princes were perpetually inter-marrying, notwithstanding their frequent and vigorous warfare. The dark-eyed Irish women captivated the Northmen. The King of Leinster had a beautiful daughter, named Gormflaith. Her face was very fair, but her temper and character were very different. She was a handsome virago. She first of all married Olaf or Anlaffe, King of Dublin, by whom she had a son Sitric, the hero of Clontarf. Olaf, however, could not put up with Gormflaith, and so he divorced her. Then she married Malachy, King of Ireland. He, too, after a little time dissolved the marriage bond, which seems to have hung very lightly upon these ancient Irish kings. Then, thirdly, she married Brian Boru himself, when he was now an old man. But neither could Brian endure her, and so a third time she was repudiated. She was, however, a woman who could not be insulted with impunity, and she had her revenge. Brian was living at peace in the year 1013, at his favourite palace of Kincora, near Killaloe. It is a beautiful and well-known spot. To the north lie the wide-spreading and island-studded waters of Lough Derg, in another direction rise the mountains of Clare and Galway, while in another Keeper Mountain, and the Slieve Bloom and Devil’s Bit range bound the horizon. Though Brian had dissolved his marriage with Gormflaith, yet, by some curious arrangement, he permitted the rejected wife to reside in the palace which once had owned her as mistress ; a bad device surely to secure his own peace and comfort. To this palace of Kincora, the King of Leinster, Gormflaith’s brother, now arrived bringing a tribute imposed upon him by Brian. That tribute consisted of three large pine-trees suited as masts for shipping, cut in the great forests of Leinster, which existed till three centuries ago in the neighbourhood of Portarlinton and Tullamore.

This tribute was the spark which caused the explosion. As the Leinster men were approaching Killaloe, they had to cross a boggy mountain, where the waggon carrying the trees stuck fast. Oliver Cromwell when crossing the same range to attack Limerick met with the same fate. His artillery stuck fast in the bog, and I have heard, on good authority, that some landholders in that district can show the title-deeds to their estates, graven in copper plates, granted for help rendered on that occasion. [10] The King of Leinster was an energetic man. He acted like the younger Cyrus in his famous expedition, described by Xenophon. When his baggage carts stuck fast, the historian tells us how Cyrus jumped into the mud, clad in his royal vestments, and stirred his men to exertion by his vigorous efforts. So did Gormflaith's brother. He leaped from his horse, clad in a silk tunic embroidered with gold thread and decorated with silver buttons, the gift of Brian himself, and applying his shoulder to the work soon extricated the waggon. In doing so he knocked off one of the silver buttons. When he arrived at Killaloe he applied to his sister to sew it on. She took the tunic and flung it, silk, silver buttons and all, into the fire, bitterly reproaching her brother for accepting such a present, and accusing him of cowardice in submitting to the foolish old man who now ruled Ireland. She had a vicious, a vigorous, and a dangerous tongue. She reminded him of the deeds of his forefathers, and her words sank deep into the mind and heart of the Leinster prince. Still he was not prepared to revolt. He had once felt Brian's heavy hand, and did not care to incur the danger a second time. A trivial incident decided him. Brian's eldest son Morrogh was playing a game of chess with one of his cousins. Maelmordha, the Leinster king, was looking on. He suggested a move to Morrogh which lost him the game. [11] Angered at this, Morrogh said to his adviser, "That was like the advice you gave to the Danes, which lost them Glenmama." The king, moody and bitter as he was, sharply replied, "I will give them advice now, and they shall not be again defeated." "Then," said Morrogh, tauntingly touching his uncle on his sorest point, "then you had better remind them to prepare a yew tree for your own reception." The King of Leinster would have been no true Irishman had he endured this. He took horse at once, swearing to be terribly avenged. Brian, weary of war and strife, strove to stop the quarrel. He despatched messengers, entreating his brother-in-law to return and listen to an explanation. The messenger overtook him at the bridge of Killaloe, as he was mounting his horse. But his blood was up and he would listen to nothing. He became violent even. He struck Brian's messenger a blow on the skull, "and broke all the bones of his head," and then fled three days' journey to his own tribe. They at once revolted, and uniting themselves with the O'Neills, and the Danes of Dublin, they attacked Malachy, King of Meath, as Brian's representative and chief ally. Malachy at first was victorious, and ravaged the territory of his opponents as far as Ben Edair or Howth. But the tide soon turned. The Scandinavian mail-clad warriors of Baldoyle and Dublin hurled Malachy back, and pursued him as far as the celebrated sanctuary of St. Fechin at Fore, in the county of Westmeath.

It is now that Brian appears for the last time on the scene. Malachy despatched messengers imploring aid in the quarrel, which was really Brian's own. The aged king at once responded, and proceeded to act with his usual vigour and skill. He divided his army into two parts. Morrogh, his eldest son, commanded one division which took the enemy in the rear, advancing from Ossory along the line of the Barrow, and, penetrating by the vale of Imail, plundered the whole country as far as St. Kevin's monastery at Glendalough. Brian himself advanced by the great southern road, leading the forces of Munster and of Connaught, till he united with his son at the green of Kilmainham. There they formed an encampment, and proceeded to blockade the city from the feast of St. Kieran in harvest, September 9th, to Christmas, when, their provisions being exhausted, Brian was obliged to retire to Munster to recruit his exhausted stores.

Things remained quiet during the winter, but in spring war was resumed. About the festival of St. Patrick, March 17th, Brian organised another expedition and advanced against Dublin. The Danes on their side had not been inactive during the winter. Gormflaith, who escaped from Killaloe as soon as mischief was afoot, had been the moving spirit. Nothing could tame or satisfy her vengeful soul. She compelled her son Sitric, the Danish King of Dublin, to send emissaries in every direction, soliciting aid from his Norwegian and Danish kinsmen. She sent to the Kings of York and Northumbria, and they sent help in the shape of two thousand soldiers, who are described as all pagans, hard-hearted, ferocious mercenaries, having no veneration, respect, or mercy for God or man, for church or sanctuary ; and, says the Irish historian, whose language waxes stronger as he remembers their appearance and their deeds, “ there was not one villain of that two thousand who had not polished strong triple-plated armour of refined iron, or of cool uncorroding brass, encasing their sides and bodies from head to foot.”

She sought assistance in more distant regions still. She sent an embassy to the Orkneys, [12] where she induced Sigurd, Earl of Orkney, to join the Scandinavian league. He promised to send troops and to be present himself, on condition, however, that Gormflaith should become his wife, and the crown of Ireland be his portion in case of victory. Gormflaith, whose vanity and vengeance were alike flattered, readily consented. She had not, however, as yet exhausted her resources. She received intelligence that two pagan Vikings were then lying at the Isle of Man, Brodar and Ospak by name. She sent Sitric to them, bidding him engage their assistance at any cost. They received her offer with diverse feelings. They were brothers, indeed, but brothers who had followed very opposite courses. Brodar had been baptized and taken deacon's orders, but had relapsed to paganism ; while Ospak was inclined heartily to accept Christianity. Brodar, delighted at the prospect of striking a blow at his old faith, agreed to Sitric's proposals, stipulating, however, that, if victory fell to his side, he should be King of Ireland and Gormflaith should be his wife.

To this again Gormflaith consented, notwithstanding her prior engagement, requesting merely that the treaty and its conditions should be kept secret, and, above all, that Sigurd of Orkney should know nothing of it. Ospak, however, Brodar's brother, refused Sitric's advances, escaped by stratagem from Man, and, sailing for Limerick, joined Brian's forces, accepted Christianity, and fought on Brian's side at Clontarf. Gormflaith's efforts were indefatigable, and were so far crowned with success that a formidable array of allies, including a body of Icelanders, promised to assemble at Dublin by the following Palm Sunday. The confederacy now assumed a distinctly pagan aspect. The little Christianity ever possessed by the Danes was flung to the winds. A pagan standard, a black raven, worked by the hand of Earl Sigurd's mother, “ with mickle hand cunning, and famous skill,” led the troops to battle, which was joined on Good Friday, April 23rd, 1014. We have many details of that fierce struggle left on record by eye-witnesses or actors therein. Let us strive to gather them together, and thus gain a definite idea of the last struggle on Irish soil between paganism and triumphant Christianity. The battle was fought all over the ground now occupied by the north side of Dublin, from the wood of Clontarf to the site of the present Four Courts, where stood the only bridge then spanning the river Liffey. It began early in the morning, at sunrise, soon after five o'clock. A strong north-east wind was blowing, as the inhabitants of Dublin still so often experience in April to their bitter cost. The Danish inhabitants of Dublin crowded the walls of the town, which clustered thick round the hill now crowned by Christ Church Cathedral, whence a splendid view of the fight presented itself. The immediate occasion of battle seems to have been an attempt on the part of Brian's forces to prevent the landing of some Danish reinforcements, or else to crush them just when landed. Brian was a pious prince according to his lights, and as such did not wish to select the most solemn day of the Christian year for a deadly struggle. [13] This attempt, however, brought on a general

engagement, which lasted the whole day, from sunrise till close on sunset. The opposing armies fought in three divisions, drawn up in line four deep. Morrogh, eldest son of Brian, commanded the Irish, while Sigurd, Earl of Orkney, and Brodar, the apostate deacon, headed the pagan forces. The Irish historian whom Dr. Todd has translated bestows thirty chapters on his account of the battle array and the varied incidents of the fight. A full narrative of it would be wearisome. I shall just mention its leading features. It was a thoroughly Celtic fight, without any skill or plan or manoeuvres, consisting merely of a series of individual encounters, which are told in a very Homeric style. The battle opened with a fight between two rival champions, who had challenged one another the night before as they were drinking together ; for the hostile armies seem to have been on very free-and-easy terms. The battle then became general. The O'Tooles of the Dublin mountains, who were allied with the Danes on the one side, and the O'Rourkes and O'Bryans from Leitrim and Westmeath on the other, separated from the main body of their supporters, and joined battle on their own account ; which they waged so fiercely that they well-nigh exterminated one another.

The historian delights in recounting the achievements of Morrogh O'Brian, the commander, and of Torlogh, his son, which seem to have been met by equally brave deeds on the part of Earl Sigurd and Brodar among the Danes. The Raven Standard ever fluttered in front of Sigurd, who carried destruction with him wherever he went. Again and again the standard bearer was slain, till no one at last was found willing to carry a banner which, while it secured victory to the Danes, brought certain death to the bearer. So Sigurd seized it, wrapped round his body his mother's fatal gift, and then sought out Morrogh O'Brian. The historian cannot find Celtic epithets, plentiful as they are, sufficient to express the noble qualities of Morrogh, who seems indeed to have been a courageous and vigorous prince, and one whose career, had he survived the battle, might have changed the course of Irish history. He is compared to Hector, Samson, Hercules. " He was the gate of battle, the hurdle of conflict, the sheltering tree and the impregnable tower against the enemies of his fatherland and of his race during his time and his career" (ch. cvii.) Fortune, however, did not favour him. Morrogh and Sigurd met in single combat, and Sigurd went down before Morrogh, his head severed from his body. Another Dane, named Eric, then closed with Morrogh, determined to avenge his leader's death. Morrogh's sword being shivered to pieces upon Eric's armour, he seized the Dane with his hands, flung him beneath his feet, wrested his sword out of his grasp, and passed it thrice through his body. Eric, however, had his revenge ; he summoned all his failing strength, drew his long skene or knife, plunged it into Morrogh's bowels, and laid them bare. Morrogh had sufficient strength to cut off Eric's head, and then fainted. He lived till next day, when he died, after receiving the Holy Communion and making his will. The rout then became general. A portion of the Danes sought their ships. The Irish pursued them into the sea, where vast numbers perished. Torlogh, grandson of Brian, distinguished himself in the pursuit, though only fifteen years of age, and met his death in doing so. He followed the beaten foe down to the strand of Clontarf, upon which the sea waves, raised high by the double influence of an easterly wind and a flowing tide, were now dashing themselves in those great foam- crested rollers which every Dublin man knows so well. One of those billows struck Torlogh, and drowned him at the weir of Clontarf, where he was found grasping the hair of two Danes with whom he had been fighting.

The flight of the pagans was marked by another and a crowning disaster for the Irish. Brodar, seeing that safety could not be gained seawards, fled towards the woods, which then crowned all the heights which bound Dublin on the north and north-west, the last remnants of which are now to be seen in the Phoenix Park. [14] Brian had taken his station on one of these hills to engage in prayer, like Moses, attended only by a few servants. The king was seated on a fur rug, where he prolonged his petitions from early morning till the afternoon, receiving occasional reports concerning the progress of the battle, from Latean, his attendant. As the

sun began to descend toward the west, the apostate deacon Brodar and two other warriors approached the king's station, seeking refuge in the woods. One of the three had been in Brian's service, and he called Brodar's attention to Brian. "The king, the king," said he. "No, no, a priest, a priest," replied Brodar. "By no means," said the soldier; "that is the great King Brian." Brodar then turned round with a battle-axe in his hand. The aged king gathered his remaining strength, aimed a blow at Brodar, which wounded his legs, while Brodar cleft Brian's head in twain. He then continued his flight to the woods, but was shortly afterwards taken and slain. Malachy, King of Meath, who had remained in reserve, now advanced upon the field and completed the work, routing the enemy on every side, thus terminating the domination, though not the presence, of the Danes in Ireland. [15]

- [1] This mythical genealogy is duly set forth in Keating's *History*, p. 563. Cormac Cas is regarded as the common ancestor of the clans O'Brien.
- [2] There are five Fiords in Ireland—Ulfreksfiord (Larne Lough), Strangfiord, Carlingfiord, Wexfiord, and Waterfiord—all exhibiting physical features similar to the Scandinavian fiords. Haliday, p. Ixvii. ; Reeves' *Antiq.*, p. 265.
- [3] O'Curry, MS. Materials of Ancient Irish History, vol. i., p 654, gives these words incorrectly. The Latin of the correct text is certainly not classical; the spelling is very rude : " Sanctus Patri[ci]us iens ad cœlum mandauit totum fructum laboris sui tam babtismi tam causarum quam elemosinarum deferendum esse apostolicœ urbi que Scotice nominatur Ardd Macha. Sic reperi in bebliothicis Scotorum. Ego scripsi, id est Calvus Perennis, in conspectu Briain, imperatoris Scotorum, et quod scripsi finiuit pro omnibus regibus Macerix." Which O'Curry thus translates : " Saint Patrick going up to heaven, commanded that all the fruit of his labour, as well of baptisms as of causes, and of alms, should be carried to the Apostolic city, which is called Scoticé Ardd Macha. So I have found it in the book collections of the Scots. I have written this, I Calvus Perennis, in the sight of Brian, Emperor of the Scots, and what I have written, he determined for all the kings of Maceria."
- [4] Maelmuaidh is the Celtic form of this name given by Keating, p. 544, ed. O'Mahony.
- [5] Ancestor of the Fitzpatricks, Barons Castletown of Upper Ossory.
- [6] Malachy has been rendered famous by Moore's Melody, " When Malachy wore the Collar of Gold which he won from the proud invader," referring to a battle gained by him over the Danes at Tara, A.D. 979. His character has been the subject of dispute. He is accused by Keating of meditating treachery at the battle of Clontarf. Dr. Todd vindicated him in a paper read before the Royal Irish Academy, *Proceedings*, vii., 500, 501.
- [7] The Crannoges of Ireland and Switzerland have attracted much attention, and been the subject of many communications to the Royal Irish Academy, to which the reader will find ample and accurate references in the Index attached to the *Proceedings* of that body, t. vii. I would specially call attention to the papers of Sir W. Wilde, vii., 147, and of Dr. Reeves, pp. 153 and 212, where the subject is exhaustively treated. The Crannoges are stockaded islands which, according to Wilde, p. 148, were occupied so lately as the reign of Charles II. In Switzerland they have been treated as pre-historic. In Ireland we have thus had pre-historic customs and habits surviving till almost living memory. See Dr. F. Keller's work, *Die Keltischen Pfahlbauten in den Schweizer Seen*, and a memoir on the same subject in the (Zurich) *Mittheilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft*, Bd. xii., Hft. 3. See Wilde's *Catalogue of the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy*.

- [8] A mountain parish of the diocese of Glendalough, situated between Dunlavin and Blessington, on the road to Dublin.
- [9] Mr. Shearman was a devoted archæologist. His enthusiasm at times led him into mistakes and visionary identifications. He did real work, however, and has left some interesting papers behind him ; see Todd's Wars, p. 145, note.
- [10] So I was informed twenty years ago by the late Mr. J. F. Rolleston, D.L., of Ffranckfort Castle, Roscrea.
- [11] Chess was a favourite game with the ancient Irish. See the Introduction to O'Donovan's *Book of Rights*. The whole of this story will be found in Dr. Todd's book, and in Keating's *History of Ireland*, O'Mahony's edition, p. 569.
- [12] Dasent's *Burnt Njal*, ii., 327 ; Todd's Wars of the Gaedhil, p.153.
- [13] The Icelandic story is that Brodar, who was a magician, found by his sorceries that, if the fight were " on Good Friday King Brian would fall, but win the day. If they fought before, they would all fall who were against him." (Dasent, ii., 333).
- [14] The oaks which roofed Westminster Hall were said to have grown in these woods.
- [15] The battle of Clontarf has been the subject of much investigation. The best works dealing with it are those of Dr. Todd, *Wars of the Gaedhil*, of Dasent, and of Haliday already quoted. The student should also consult John O'Donoghue's *Historical Memoir of the O'Brians* ; Torfœus, *History of the Orkneys*, chap, x; J. Johnstone's *Antiqq. Celto-Scandicæ*, pp. 110-127, where the Icelandic narrative is given ; Munch, *Norske Folks Historie*, vol. ii., 644 648, where the Icelandic and Northern authorities about the battle of Clontarf are investigated with great care. The Rev. Dr. Haughton has thrown the light of science on the subject in a paper, *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, vii., 495, where he shows that the time of high water in Dublin Dry, on April 23rd, 1014, exactly coincided with that reported in the Annals, viz., 5.30 A.M., and 5.55 P.M. ; see Dr. Todd's Paper on the Battle of Clontarf, *l. c.*, vii., 498 ; and *Wars of the Gaedhil*, *Introd.*, p. xxvi. It is not often that science so strikingly can firm the statements of history.

Ireland and the Celtic Church, a history of Ireland from St. Patrick to the English Conquest in 1172 (1888)

Author : Stokes, George Thomas, 1843-1898

Subject : Ireland -- Ecclesiastical history

Publisher : London, Hodder

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Robarts - University of Toronto

Collection : robarts ; toronto

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/irelandcelticchu00stokuoft>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

April 30 2013