

The Tercentenary of the Four Masters of Ireland

BY JAMES F. KENNEY

Ireland is the end of the world. Such was the accepted belief of the Middle Ages. Beyond was the expanse of the Great Ocean, which encompassed the habitable world. Of course the existence of Iceland, or Ultima Thule, was known to geographers and to fishermen who went there to catch cod-fish, and some doubtless had heard of a colony of Norsemen still farther in the depths of the Arctic in a land called Greenland, and in the wealth of European stories and legends were many of the mythical, or semi-mythical, Vinland, and Hy-Brasil, and St. Brendan's Isle, and the Isle of the Seven Cities. But for practical purposes of everyday knowledge and intercourse Ireland was the western limit of human habitation. St. Patrick was impressed with this fact, and especially with the realization that he himself had preached the Gospel of Christ right out to the lands overlooking the Western Sea, the limits beyond which no man dwelt.

Any person who today approaches that wild western coast of Ireland from the sea may well imagine that Nature has shared in the belief that here she was shaping the end of the world. It is, in the main, a high and rocky coast that has stood up and defied the tireless onslaught of the Atlantic breakers, sweeping on over an unbroken expanse of three thousand miles through unknown milleniums. Those who saw, a few years since, that remarkable cinema film "Man of Aran", will have received a vivid impression of both Nature and Man on this brink of the ancient and medieval world. The film gave a brief view of Dun Aenghusa, — that extraordinary megalithic fortress on the principal Aran island, where the defenders fought literally with their backs to the sea, for the rear was the sheer face of the cliff dropping 250 feet to the surface of the ocean.

Though its history is unknown, Dun Aenghusa may be regarded as in some respects a symbol of the Wild West Coast and even of Ireland itself. For here, the voice of the unhewn stones tells us some race precariously perched on the edge of the Western Sea, has turned at bay and defied its enemies. And so Ireland, and particularly its western extremity, has been the scene of many a last-ditch struggle. A little more than two thousand years ago Celtic peoples ruled all western Europe, from Bohemia and Hungary to the Atlantic Ocean. Then came the Romans and Scipio Aemilianus and Julius Caesar and Agricola, and the Celts were conquered right up to the Irish Sea. Agricola, governor of Britain, discussed the conquest of Ireland and thought that one

legion and some auxiliaries could do the job. But that legion never stepped on the shores of Ireland and on this western island alone a Celtic state and a Celtic civilization survived and flourished uncontaminated. Christianity came to Ireland, but Christianity came, not in the wake of any conquering battalions but as a purely missionary movement and it won its way as such right up to the Western Sea, as we have heard St. Patrick tell us. When the barbarians from the North swept rough-shod over the tottering Roman Empire they too stopped short at the Irish Sea and the Gaelic people successfully maintained their Christianized Celtic civilization, an unique heritage from that ancient world that had preceded the Teuton and the Hun. The last onslaught of the Northern barbarians, – that of the Scandinavian Vikings, – did reach the Irish shores, but was thrown back, at Clontarf in 1014. A few generations later and we have Western Europe dominated by the feudal system and those legal-minded gangsters, the Franco-Normans and the Anglo-Normans. This time the barrier of the Irish Sea was crossed. The Geraldines, the Burkes, the Butlers and the Powers carved out estates for themselves in the best lands of Ireland. But the Irish Gaelic states, though staggered, did not collapse. They turned and fought. For three hundred years they fought desperately, and at the end of that time they had reestablished their ancient polity, or had Hibernicised the invaders, or had driven them back to the narrow confines of the Pale, a few miles around Dublin. Then came the sixteenth century, and the most formidable of all these conquering movements, driving to the westward. It was a three-pronged onslaught: imperialistic nationalism, centralizing autocracy, the Protestant Reformation. Once more the forces of the old régime, their backs to the Western Sea, fought desperately – for a time almost hopelessly. Nevertheless today, after four hundred years the Irish still stand firm-footed on their domain at the End of the World. In five-sixths of the island Irish autonomy has defeated foreign imperialism. The old Celtic civilization has passed, like many another culture in the long cavalcade of history, but its offspring, the Irish language and Irish literature, have from their last refuge in “the Celtic fringe” of a few miles along the Western Coast turned on their foes in a vigorous counter-attack. Most remarkable of all, the ancient Catholic Church flourishes as perhaps nowhere else in the world, although at the time of which this paper treats it seemed that Church and Irish Nationality and Celtic Civilization were going down in one common welter of destruction. That which when Tom Moore wrote was still a partial prophecy is today the full swelling paean of victory:

“Sound the loud timbrel o’er Egypt’s dark sea,
Jehovah has triumphed, His people are free!”

We of the Irish race in Canada, in Ireland, throughout the world, are now celebrating one phase of this last and most desperate of the last ditch struggles that Ireland has so repeatedly fought against the powers – material and spiritual – that have swept against her from the Eastward. We are recalling the memory and honoring the achievement of four illustrious Irishmen who from their own time to the present are known by the preeminent designation of “the Four Masters”. These men lived about three hundred years ago. They lived in dark and evil days. It was the beginning of the seventeenth century, the era immediately following the Elizabethan conquest, the first complete conquest of the Western Isle. That conquest had been achieved by a war of attrition, and Ireland lay in poverty and ruins. For the first time since the coming of the invaders in 1169, the whole of Ireland was entirely at their mercy. Their government was now able to carry out a policy long contemplated of the Anglicisation of Ireland. That policy included the Protestantising of the Irish Church, the wholesale – confiscation of the lands of the Irish, and the destruction of the old social and political organization of the Irish people, including all institutions connected therewith. It was being carried out merrily at the very time that the Four Masters were doing their work.

That the Four Masters should obtain their fame in those days of disaster may seem strange to us, still more strange the achievement for which they obtained it. They were not Masters of the Art of War, although they were contemporaries of and perhaps personally acquainted with, at least two of the greatest warriors that Ireland ever produced. Neither were they Masters in the religious life, to which then, as ever since St. Patrick, Ireland was giving personages of extraordinary ability. One of the Four Masters was a lowly Lay Brother of the Order of St. Francis, the others were laymen.

Our Four Masters were eminent in a field that is even more peculiarly and characteristically Irish. They were Masters in the field of learning, of scholarship. It is the special glory of Ireland that from ages long preceding St. Patrick down through all the vicissitudes of her history right into the darkest of the penal days she has maintained her devotion to scholarship, has held aloft the torch of learning. Ireland's title is not only “Island of Saints”, it is “Island of Saints and Scholars”.

There never has been a great epoch of human society when pure learning was held in higher honor than it was in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Learning then was almost entirely in the hands of the Church and the Church in Ireland was particularly famous as the guardian of learning. In fact, there was a time in the early Middle Ages when the old Roman Empire had collapsed and the Barbarians from the North had come in and set up their kingdoms on its ruins, when the monasteries of Ireland were the most important refuge places in western Europe for the old Latin and Greek culture. Teachers and books went forth from these monasteries and played a

tremendous rôle in restoring civilization and learning in these barbarian kingdoms of Europe. By the sixteenth century, at the eve of the Elizabethan conquest, the Church in Ireland no longer held a position of preeminence in ecclesiastical scholarship, but it still shared the common heritage, and some of its institutions, particularly houses of the Franciscan Order, were important centres of education.

But Ireland was peculiar among the countries of the West in that, side by side with this ecclesiastical tradition, there was a wonderful secular tradition of learning. This secular system of scholarship was part of the ancient Celtic social system and had been described by Julius Caesar in Gaul half a Century before Christ. That system of secular scholarship, embodied in the Irish language, had been maintained unbroken in Ireland. As it existed in the sixteenth century, in the last age of Irish autonomy, it may be described as follows: In all parts of the country where an Irish organized society remained unbroken there were lands set apart for the maintenance of schools of secular learning, — schools of literature, of law, of history, of medicine, etc. Each of these schools was directed, and the lands attached to it were held by a family of hereditary savants, who handed down their schools and their books and their lore from generation to generation. Among the most famous of these families of professional and hereditary scholars were MacAedhagain, MacBruaidedha, O Dalaigh, O Cleirigh, O Maol-Chonaire, O Duibhennain, Mac an Bhaird, Mac Fir-Bisigh.

The Four Masters were sprung from certain of these families. Their chief was Tadhg O Cleirigh, — as a member of the Franciscan Order, Brother Michael, — of a famous family of historians in Tir-Connail, whose chief residence was at the Castle of Kilbarron on the Bay of Donegal, facing the Western Sea. He was born about 1590. He received the best education that the Irish secular schools could give. There is some reason to believe that he, like thousands of other Irishmen, served for a time in the Spanish army in the Low Countries. Not later than 1623 he entered the Order of St. Francis at the Irish College of St. Antony in Louvain, Belgium.

The other three Masters were Cucoigriche O Cleirigh, member of the same family of historians; Cucoigriche O Duibhennain, of a family of historians at Castlefore, in Leitrim; and Ferfeasa O Maol-Chonaire, of an outstanding Connacht family of scholars.

These four men, under the leadership of Brother Michael, formed themselves voluntarily into what we might call a National Historical Commission. They came together for the first time on 4 October, 1630, in what is called the Franciscan Convent of Athlone. For the next six years, with large intervals when work was suspended, they labored to produce a definitive compilation of Irish general history to the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The organization and work of the Four Masters was the direct outgrowth of another undertaking in history which had been begun from the ecclesiastical side of Irish scholarship. We have seen that at this very time the policy of wiping out the old Irish civilization and substituting an English type of society was in full swing. The Catholic Church and the secular schools still maintained a precarious existence, but the fate being prepared for them was staring them in the face. To insure the dying out of the priesthood, no Catholic colleges were tolerated in Ireland. The Church met this threat by establishing Irish colleges in many of the cities of Europe. Two of them still exist, or at least existed a few years ago, — those of Paris and of Salamanca in Spain. The most famous, probably, was the Franciscan College of St. Antony in Louvain, Belgium, founded in 1607. But it was evident that, with the destruction of the Catholic churches and communities and of the secular schools in Ireland, all Irish historical records might disappear within a few years. In the shadow of the impending ruin, a group of patriotic Irish exiles organized to salvage the records of the story of their country. Leaders were Father Patrick Fleming, Father Hugh Ward, and Father John Colgan, all connected with the College of St. Antony. It was planned to gather at St. Antony's the originals or copies of all manuscript documents of Irish history to be found on the continent of Europe or in Ireland itself and there collate, edit and publish them. The ecclesiastical antiquities of the country were to be treated first, and, later, the secular. A modern English scholar, Charles Plummer, of Oxford, who has done much in our day to publish those documents which the scholars of Louvain did not succeed in getting into print, says of them: "There is hardly to be found in the history of Literature a more pathetic tale than that of the way in which Colgan and his fellow workers strove, amid poverty, and persecution, and exile, to save the remains of their country's antiquities from destruction."

To these men at Louvain the entrance into their Order of Brother Michael O Cleirigh, trained historian, must have seemed providential. In 1626 he was sent back to Ireland to search the country exhaustively for all manuscripts relating to religious history and to make copies of them to be transmitted to Louvain. From his arrival in Ireland till his return to Louvain in 1637, except for the time that he spent in the work of the Four Masters, Brother Michael travelled the length and breadth of Ireland and transcribed an extraordinary mass of early Irish Church records, especially Lives of the Saints. These records, assembled at Louvain, are now divided between the Franciscan Convent in Dublin and the National Library of Belgium at Brussels, and form one of the most important collections of sources for early Irish history.

Brother Michael O Cleirigh has been called the most prolific of Irish scribes, but primarily he was a secular historian and soon after his return to Ireland he began to prepare for the secular side of the great undertaking of the preservation of Irish antiquities. Here it was decided not simply to make exact

transcripts, but to prepare huge reference works by a compilation of all known records. For such a task a combination of wide knowledge and good judgment was needed and to secure this the Brother called together his group of Four Masters. They produced three great works of reference, “The Succession of the Kings and the Genealogies of the Saints of Ireland”, prepared in 1630; “The Book of the Takings”, or Settlements, of Ireland, a gathering of the mythical stories of the early peoples who were believed to have settled in Ireland, prepared in 1631; and finally the *magnum opus*, “The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland”, or, as it was known almost from the beginning, “The Annals of the Four Masters”. This is the most extensive and in many ways the most important of Irish annals. It was compiled between 22 January, 1632, and 10 August, 1636. The work was made possible by the hospitality of the Franciscan convents of Athlone, Lisgoola and Donegal, that is, by the communities which still bore those ancient names, although actually they were located in groups of mud-cabins hidden away in obscure localities; and by the financial patronage of three members of the old Irish princely families who still retained a small amount of property, Toirdhealbach Mac Cochlain, Brian Roe Maguire, Lord of Enniskillen, and Farghal O Gadhra, of Coolavin in Sligo. Approbations of their work were obtained from leading Irish scholars, first among them being Flann Mac Aedhagain of Tipperary, who seems to have been regarded as the Dean of the Irish schools.

Brother Michael died at Louvain in 1643 or 1644. We do not know the dates of the deaths of the other Masters. The War of the Confederation of Kilkenny had begun in 1641, and ended with the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland. Irish historical scholarship came to an end, and was not revived till the nineteenth century. Then the Annals of the Four Masters was published in a great edition edited by John O’Donovan, who for patriotism and scholarship deserves to be ranked side by side with the Four Masters.

It is no disgrace not to know who were the Four Masters. But it is a disgrace for any man or woman of Irish blood and of reasonably good education not to feel and to accept the spirit that inspired the Four Masters three hundred years ago. Michael O Cleirigh gave expression to it when he wrote across the top of the first page of the Annals:

“Do chum gloire De agus onora na hEiraann”!

“For the glory of God and the honor of Ireland”.

That is the motto of the Irish race. For fifteen hundred years our people have lived and labored and suffered and triumphed for the glory of God and the honor of Ireland. That is the heritage that they have transmitted to us. It is for us, three hundred million people from Toronto to Cape Town, from Buenos Aires to New Zealand, to guard that heritage. That we can know what is the

honor of Ireland we owe in a very considerable degree to the work of the Four Masters. We can know our history; we can know, for example, that from the coming of St. Patrick in 432 A.D. to the present we of the Irish race have never, as a people, attacked any other people. We have never invaded their countries, we have never plundered their lands, we have never caused tears to their mothers. No other country in Europe, probably no other country in the world, can say that. But we have given the best of our blood to every country in the world. We have brought religion and learning wherever we have gone. Twelve hundred years ago we went to every part of western Europe. Men from Ireland were the apostles and the teachers of barbarized Europe. We 'snatched her heathen soul from hell,' and we 'taught her how to write her name.' And today our people over there in that little green isle of the West are showing the world what a true Christian democracy can be and are building up in Dublin a centre of learning which will maintain in the highest that tradition of our race which the Four Masters in their time so desperately upheld. Three hundred million men of Irish descent, scattered over the world, are looking on with sympathy and approval. We of the sea-divided Gael would say today, what an exile of Ireland who was a contemporary of the Four Masters said:

Beir beannacht o mo chroide go tir na hEireann
Ban-chnoic Eireann O!
'S chum â mairionn de sbiolrach Ir is Eibhear
Ar bhan-chnoic Eireann O!

Take a blessing from my heart to the land of Ireland,
To the fair hills of Eire O!
And to all that yet survive of the races of Ir and Eber,
On the fair hills of Eire O!
A fruitful clime is Eire's, through valley, meadow, plain,
And the fair land of Eire, O!
The very Bread of Life is in the golden grain
On the fair hills of Eire O!

Far dearer unto me than the tones music yields
Is the lowing of her kine and the calves in her fields
And the sunlight that fell long ago on the shields
Of the Gaels, on the fair hills of Eire O.