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# IRISH HISTORY

## FOR ENGLISH READERS:

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES

TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR 1885.

By WM. STEPHENSON GREGG.

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LONDON:

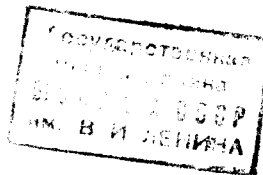
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# IRISH HISTORY FOR ENGLISH READERS.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE AGE OF LEGENDS.

IT is perhaps because there is so little that is pleasant in their modern history that the Irish cherish the traditions of olden times so deeply. We profess to know but little of the history of Britain before the Roman conquest, but Irish legends and mythology go back to two thousand three hundred and seventy-nine years before the Christian era: or thirty years before the flood, and two hundred years earlier than the supposed date of the building of Memphis.

Such early dates are naturally of no historic value, and refer to legendary events and legendary personages, but the fact that the gods and heroes of those bygone days are remembered proves that Ireland had reached a degree of civilisation very rarely attained so early in the world's history.

The legends tell us that Queen Keasair and her followers came to Ireland from the east of Europe about 2,380 years before Christ, and that the Keasaireans were driven from the island by Partolan three hundred years later; but the monks, taking advantage of the intermediate deluge, say that the Keasaireans were destroyed by the flood. Be this as it may, only one of the Keasaireans has left any impress on Irish history—that one is Fintan, the salmon god, the patron of poets and historians, who duly reappeared from time to time as long as any belief in fairies continued.

When the Keasaireans were drowned in the deluge, Fintan escaped by taking the form of a salmon, until the receding waters left him high and dry on Tara Hill, when he resumed his humanity. It was he who related the history of Ireland to St. Patrick, and some legends tell us that it is to Fintan that we owe our knowledge of these early times, he having visibly

appeared to the bards for their enlightenment. Others say that Amergin, the druid, collected the materials for this early history, but as he did not live till a thousand years after the Keasaireans, he may have been very glad of a little help from Fintan in his researches.

After the destruction of the Keasaireans, Partolán and his followers came to the island. These invaders came from some civilised country, and brought with them a knowledge of sowing and reaping and other agricultural arts, and began cultivating the island. But this was already owned by a savage race of giants called the Formorians, who, though they themselves cared nothing for the land, grudged the use of it to others, and exterminated the unlucky race of Partolán. The fate of those unhappy invaders seems to have remained unknown in the distant country whence they came, for Partolán was followed by his cousin Nemed, who, with his five sons, headed a large party of invaders, and landed on the coast of Leinster. The Nemedians fared no better than their forerunners; the Formorians gave them battle and conquered them, with such terrible slaughter that only three of their chiefs escaped. These were Briotan, who settled in Britain and became the ancestor of the British gods, Semeon Brac and Ibath, who escaped to the east of Europe. The descendants of both these latter were destined to return to Ireland; the children of Semeon Brac as the Firbolgs, and those of Ibath as the Tuatha-de Danān (people of the fairies), the last and greatest race of Irish gods. The Firbolgs were not deities; still, in the time of their last king, Eocha-Mac-Erc, Ireland was in a position almost without parallel in her history, for, say the bards, "Good were the days of the sovereignty of Mac-Erc, there was no wet or tempestuous weather in Erin, neither was there any unfruitful year." This happy state of things was, however, brought to a close by the Tuatha-de Danān, the descendants of Ibath, and therefore like the Firbolgs, of Nemedian descent.

These heroes landed on Wexford coast, and then, having burnt their fleet to cut off their retreat, they wrapped themselves in the black cloud of invisibility, and drifted like a mighty mist to the Iron Mountains on the borders of Leitrim. The Firbolgs were assembled on the neighbouring plains of Sligo, and there, for six days, waged the uneven fight between gods and men. At last the brave Mac-Erc fell on the coast near Ballysadare, where a mound of earth still marks the grave

of the last of the Firbolg kings. His people were reduced to the condition of a subject race, and the Tuatha-de Danān believed themselves masters of the soil. But the Formorians, though absentees, were still in possession, and yearly, after harvest-time, sent agents to sweep away the produce of the land, and the Tuatha-de Danān in their turn became a crushed and broken people, till they were freed from their bondage by Lu-Lam-Finn, a prince of mixed Formorian and de Danān descent, and from that time till the Scoto-Milesian invasion the de Danān people owned the land. Nor, say the legends, did they then utterly abandon it; but, drawing around them that cloak of misty darkness which had helped them to victory at their invasion, they retired to the mountains, whence from time to time they appear in the guise of Ban-Shees, for the Shees and Tuatha-de Danān are alike the people of the fairies.

The story of Ireland before the Milesian invasion is purely mythological, but it is probable that an invasion from the Spanish peninsula really took place about 1,000 years before Christ, when Solomon was king of Israel, and about 300 years before the foundation of Rome.

Milesius, or Miles, though a native of Spain was probably of Phoenecian descent, and from him and his wife, Scotia, all the royal and noble families in Ireland claim to be descended. A peaceable colonisation of Ireland was attempted during the lifetime of Milesius by his brother Ith, who was slain by the Tuatha-de Danān, and in revenge for this deed the eight sons of Milesius set out to conquer the country.

Many and terrible were the adventures of that invasion, in which five out of the eight sons of Milesius lost their lives, but at length Heber, Herēmon, and Amergin landed on different parts of the coast, and, attacking the Tuatha-de Danān from all sides, managed to subdue them.

Amergin, being a druid, could not reign, so Heber and Herēmon arranged to divide the country between them, but being unable to come to any agreement, they met for a decisive battle at Gaeshill, in King's County, where Heber and many of his followers were killed, and from then till the date of the Norman invasion the descendants of Herēmon ruled the island in an unbroken line of 197 Scoto-Milesian kings.

The first of these with whom we need concern ourselves is Ollav Fohla, the founder of that famous code known as the Brehon laws. These were administered by the Brehons or judges, and, having been revised by St. Patrick, were obeyed