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# THE IRISH REVIEW

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## LEARNING IN ANCIENT IRELAND \*

*By KUNO MEYER*

THE part played by Ireland in the transmission of letters during the seventh and following centuries is known to all. But neither the way in which letters first reached this country, nor the causes which led to that outburst of classical learning suddenly confronting us at the beginning of the sixth century, have as yet been definitely established.

Those who have read Zimmer on the Celtic Church will remember that one of his contentions, on which he dwelt more than once, is that the remarkable learning for which Ireland was celebrated during the sixth and following centuries could not have been the result of the labours of St. Patrick. Everyone familiar with the

\*A Lecture delivered before the School of Irish Learning on September 18th. Only the first part of the lecture is printed here. The whole will soon be issued as a separate pamphlet by the School.

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personality of the saint as revealed in his own writings will admit this. In the words of his latest biographer: "A rueful consciousness of the deficiencies of his education weighed upon him throughout his career; we can feel this in his almost wearisome insistence upon his *rusticitas*. Nor has he exaggerated the defect of his culture; he writes in the style of an ill-educated man. His Latin is as rustic as the Greek of St. Mark and St. Matthew."\* He, at any rate, was not likely to have introduced or promoted the study of Virgil or Cicero in Ireland. And yet during his lifetime the foundations must have been laid in schools and seminaries throughout large parts of the country of that erudition which soon drew the eyes of all Europe upon Ireland as the heiress of classical learning. Within a generation or two from Patrick's death, there sprang up those famous schools founded not by foreigners but by Irishmen, who must have received their own training within the fifth century. Then where had they received this training? Who had taught them? Whence came the books which stocked their libraries? These questions have hardly ever been clearly put and certainly never answered conclusively. Had they gone to the high schools of Gaul? Hardly; for Gaul in the fifth century was not the place for quiet study. "How can I compose six-foot verse," exclaimed Sidonius Apollinaris, "when I am surrounded by seven-foot barbarians?" In a vague and general way it was assumed that both Gaul and Britain exerted some influence upon Ireland, but what precisely took place, how Latin and Greek were transmitted from the Continent to Ireland, has not hitherto been established.

It is again to Zimmer that we owe the solution of this problem. He who has so often wielded the axe of the iconoclast has also done more by constructive criticism and research to lay the foundations of knowledge than any other Irish scholar. Ever on the look-out for new material, for new facts upon which he could raise his theories, the most difficult and apparently hopeless problems had a special attraction for him. During his last years, whenever the dread disease

\*See J. B. Bury, "The Life of St. Patrick," p. 206.

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undermining his life allowed him to work and to think, the early history of Western Europe, in which the Celts play so important a part, was the chief subject of his investigations. His plan of work, with notes and sketches of some chapters, which were found among his papers, will be published by me in the forthcoming number of the *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*.

In the course of his researches he had come to occupy himself more closely with the question with which we are concerned. Among other things he had studied the influence of the writings of the Gaulish grammarian calling himself Virgilius Maro upon Irish learning and literature. This curious writer had hardly before been taken seriously. Even his age was a matter of vague surmises. While some scholars put him as late as the ninth century, none placed him earlier than the end of the sixth. Zimmer proved beyond doubt that he lived in the fifth century, and was an elder contemporary of his countryman Ennodius (473-521), who wrote scathing epigrams upon him, which characterise him well as a *fatuus homullus* and censure him for having dared to usurp the name of the great Latin poet—*tam sanctum nomen*. Zimmer shows further that the works of Virgilius were well-known in ancient Ireland, and that his absurd theories as to the twelve different kinds of Latin, arrived at by clipping words, turning them upside down, or inserting syllables into them, were imitated by Irish scholars. Indeed they had a lasting vogue in this country, and led ultimately to the invention of a language which you may still hear spoken in the streets of Dublin—Shelta, an artificial jargon discovered by Leland and more fully described and traced to its Irish origin by my friend John Sampson and myself.

In the course of his reading Zimmer chanced upon a document, the importance of which for the early history of Ireland it is impossible to overrate. It is only one simple sentence, but a sentence so closely packed with information that it outweighs volumes. Though published so long ago as 1866, this document has escaped the notice of every writer on Irish history. The reason is probably that it is

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buried in a German periodical\* under a title ("Sammelsurien") which does not sound promising. Under that heading the late well-known German Latinist Lucian Müller, then professor at Leyden, published a number of late Latin texts, among others "quaedam excerpta utilium verborum," a glossary of useful Latin words, from a Leyden MS. of the 12th century. In the course of his excerpts the scribe abruptly introduces a note on the barbarian invasions of Gaul in the early fifth century, as follows:

*"Huni qui ex nephario concubitu† progeniti sunt, scilicet demonum, postquam praeheunte cerva viam invenerunt per Meotides paludes, invaserunt Cothos, quos nimium terruerunt ex inproviso mostro quod in illis erat. Et ab his depopulatio totius imperii exordium sumpsit, quae ab Unis et Guandalis, Gotis et Alanis peracta est, sub quorum vastatione omnes sapientes cismarini fugam ceperunt, et in transmarinis, videlicet in Hiberia et quocumque se receperunt, maximum profectum sapientiae incolis illarum regionum adhibuerunt."*

The Huns, who were infamously begotten, i.e., by demons, after they had found their way by the guidance of a hind through the Maeotic marshes, invaded the Goths, whom they terrified very much by their unexpectedly awful appearance. And thanks to them, the depopulation of the entire Empire commenced, which was completed by the Huns and Vandals and Goths and Alans, owing to whose devastation all the learned men on this side of sea fled away and betook themselves to transmarine parts, i.e., to Hiberia or whithersoever, and they brought about a great advance of learning to the inhabitants of those regions.

Zimmer regards this entry as originally written in the sixth century in the West of Gaul. The remark on the fabulous origin of the Huns and the terror they struck into the Goths is taken from Jordanis, who wrote about 550. The tenor of the passage on the depopulation of the whole Empire makes it probable that it was not written long after that date. But in a document of this far-reaching importance every detail must be carefully considered.

\*"Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie und Pädagogik," vol. 93, p. 389. So far as I know, Roger in his "Enseignement des Lettres Classiques," p. 203, note 2, is the only one who refers to this document, though without making any use of it.

†Concubitus MS.

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There is not the slightest reason to doubt the accuracy of the writer's statements, both as to the exodus of Gaulish scholars, the cause assigned for it, and the effect upon the learning of Ireland. It could have no other purpose than to convey an interesting piece of information. But the chief interest of the writer was evidently the account given by Jordanis about the Huns; everything else is added as it came to his memory in connection with the invasion of Gaul by these "unlooked-for monstrosities." He mentions the succeeding invasions in some chronological order: after the Huns, whose first appearance in Gaul took place quite early in the fifth century, come the Vandals and Alans, who overran Gaul on their way to Spain between 406 and 409; lastly, the Visigoths, who founded their kingdom in 418. So the exodus of Gaulish scholars must be placed in the first and second decades of that century. When he says "omnes sapientes" that is no doubt an exaggeration, but whatever deduction we may make, it was evidently an exodus on a large scale. The use of the form *Hiberia* for the usual *Hibernia* is perhaps not merely a scribal error. It is nearer the correct form *Hiberio* which St. Patrick uses, just as Columbanus uses *Iberi* for the Irish. At any rate, Spain cannot be meant; the use of "in transmarinis" alone forbids that.

The concluding part of the sentence on the great advance of learning (*maximus profectus sapientiae*) accruing to the inhabitants of Ireland from the settlement of the Gaulish professors among them must have been written at a time when the fame of Ireland as a home and centre of classical studies was well established.

Now, as by a flashlight suddenly let into darkness, a hundred things that were obscure and vague become clear. A flood of light is thrown upon one of the darkest as well as most important periods in the history of Ireland. It is not too much to say that this one short sentence will become the occasion and source of further research in many directions for years to come. We have at last firm soil under our feet, and can proceed with greater assurance. Not only the origin and early development of Irish learning and civilisation is now explained, but the influence of the newly acquired learning

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upon native literature will have to be examined. But, above all, we should consider what inferences may be drawn from this novel piece of information as to the state of Irish civilisation at that early period. And here the first question to consider is, why it was Ireland rather than any other country in which these fugitives sought an asylum. It is true that Ireland was not likely to be exposed to such invasions as those from which they were fleeing; but there must have been other reasons which directed the steps of these emigrants in the first instance to the distant island.

Ireland was not a *terra incognita*. As the researches of Mr. George Coffey, Zimmer and Mrs. A. S. Green have shown, intercourse and commerce between Gaul and Ireland had been constant and regular for centuries before the fifth. Again, the Irish were not outside the great unity of the Celtic world, which is one of the most remarkable facts in ancient Celtic history, so well illustrated—to mention only one of the most striking instances—by the Greek coins given by Alexander in the East to Celtic ambassadors becoming the model of the earliest coinage of Great Britain. It was a *Celtic* country to which these Gaulish fugitives came, inhabited by a kindred people of similar temper and character, speaking a closely related language. Nor were these Gauls the first of their nation to come to Ireland. Apart from the traders, there were Gaulish mercenaries in the service of Irish kings during the early centuries of our era. Again, Irishmen were even at that time familiar figures on the Continent. Zimmer contended that Pelagius was an Irishman. Whether this was so or not, his faithful henchman, Caelestius, he of the plausible tongue, certainly was. And there must have been others. The grammarian Virgilius was to a certain extent acquainted with Irish speech. In his chapter *de nomine*, where he deals with the order of words in the Latin sentence, he remarks that, while the Irish put the verb first in the sentence, both in the spoken language and in composition, in Latin the noun comes first. If he knew no Irish himself—and Zimmer, if he had known this passage, would no doubt have used it as a powerful argument for his contention that Virgilius had himself emigrated to Ireland—he must have known Irishmen



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who informed him on this point. One of these he actually mentions by name. It was a certain *Bregandus*, of the tribe of the Luceni, who were settled at that time on the south coast of Ireland, so Orosius, the well-known Christian historian of the 5th century, informs us. This Bregandus Lucenicus wrote Latin poetry, rhythmical hexameters, one of which Virgil quotes. I must not omit to mention in connection with this passage on the Irish verb that we may draw an interesting conclusion from it. If the verb had also held the first place in the sentence in Gaulish as it did and does in Irish, surely Virgil, a Gaul, and naturally familiar with Gaulish speech, would have drawn his example from that language. We may then conclude that in Gaulish, unlike Irish and Welsh, the verb did not begin the sentence.

If Ireland had been the barbarous country which so many Irish historians assume it to have been at this and later times, some indeed at all times, these scholars fleeing from the inroads of barbarians would hardly have selected it for a place of refuge. We see again that no one will understand the history of Ireland who does not once and for all dismiss this absurd barbarian theory, which Mrs. Green has lately exposed so eloquently. No history of Ireland based upon such an assumption can be true, or even intelligible. Froude with his "mob of armed savages," Mahaffy and others with their "Zulus or Redskins," prove and explain nothing. Our Gaulish scholars must have been assured of a friendly and hospitable reception, of obtaining in their new home the necessities and some at least of the decencies and comforts of the life to which they had been accustomed, and of being enabled to carry on their studies and to exercise their profession. They were the first of a long line of fugitives who, no matter what their nationality or creed may have been, were hospitably received by the Irish people: Britons fleeing from the Saxon invasion; Angles, to whose generous reception Bede bears such warm testimony; foreign students of all nations, and, in later times, Flemings, Quakers, and others.

Ireland was well-known on the Continent as a rich, fertile and prosperous country, with a salubrious climate. That has been its



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reputation abroad at all times, and the verses written by Donatus, the Irish bishop of Fiesole, 400 years later, in which he eulogises his native land as *optima tellus, dives opum, commoda corporibus, aere, putre solo*, etc., were no doubt as true at this earlier period as then.

Again, if Ireland had been wholly pagan it would hardly have been chosen by Christian men as a safe asylum. There were no doubt, as we shall see later on, pagans among these Gaulish scholars; but by the beginning of the 5th century paganism was rapidly disappearing in Gaul, where about A.D. 450, no position of trust or honour was any longer held by a pagan. The South of Ireland, then, cannot have been a country in which a Christian would be received with hostility or subjected to persecution. The Christians among the fugitives must have been assured of being allowed to follow undisturbed the practice of their religion and of finding Christian communities and places of worship.

The successive bands of these emigrant scholars would naturally cross to Ireland in the trading vessels plying between the mouths of the Loire and Garonne and the south and east coast of Ireland. They would be landed in one of those harbours of which Tacitus tells us that they were better known to commerce than those of Britain, and some of which Ptolemy enumerates.

Now sceptics might ask, if this influx of foreign scholars was on such a large scale and had such an influence upon Ireland, how comes it that we have no reference to it in early Irish records. We practically have no records going back to such early times. The Annals, of local origin and rarely referring in their oldest portions to national events, are very meagre in their information about the fifth century. If we had Lives of the early saints and founders of the oldest monasteries and schools, written soon after their deaths, we might reasonably expect to hear something about the training they had received. For men like Finnian, Buite, Kevin and many others, who founded schools early in the sixth century which turned out in the course of that century such accomplished scholars as Columbanus, must themselves have received their training well within the fifth. Unfortun-

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ately the lives of the early saints are mostly compositions of a much later age, and contain very little exact or trustworthy information on actual events and circumstances. However, it is not impossible that a closer critical study than they have as yet received may after all yield some positive results.

There is, however, *one* reference to these Gaulish scholars in Ireland in an early document of undoubted authenticity, known to most educated Irishmen. It is the passage in the "Confession" of Patrick, where the saint cries out against certain pagan "rhetorici" hostile to him: "You rhetoricians who do not know the Lord, hear and search who it was that called me up, fool though I be, from the midst of those who think themselves wise, and skilled in the law, and mighty orators, and powerful in everything." This passage has always hitherto been a difficulty to commentators. It is clear now that Patrick here refers to pagan rhetors from Gaul resident in Ireland, whose arrogant presumption, founded upon their superior learning, looked with disdain and derision upon the unlettered saint.

Having now planted our Gaulish professors safely on Irish soil, we are unfortunately left almost wholly to surmises as to what was their further career and fate among their new surroundings. We may assume that they settled mainly in the south and east—*i.e.*, in Munster and Leinster, the two provinces which by their position, facing the Continent and Great Britain, were undoubtedly always the chief centres of civilisation in Ireland. Perhaps a closer study of ancient Irish place-names will teach us something as to the districts where they chiefly settled. There was a place called *Bordgal* in ancient West Meath. This is the Irish form of the name of the chief university of Gaul, *Burdigala*, now Bordeaux, where perhaps some of these exiles had taught as professors until driven out by the Visigoths. The Irish Bordeaux in West Meath may have been one of their settlements, perhaps the seat of a school of learning named after their lost home. For one thing is certain, these men taught and found willing and eager pupils. Whatever they may have left behind in their flight, one thing they would be sure to have taken with them—their books. Here we come to the most important aspect

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of the whole subject. The Irish now became for the first time familiar with the arts of writing and reading books, which they soon applied to their own language. Palaeographers will have to investigate the origin and early history of Irish writing in this new light. The first libraries were now formed in Ireland, containing both Latin and Greek manuscripts. In the library of St. Gall, a monastery founded in 1610 by the Irishman Gallus, there is a fragment of Virgil dating from the 4th or 5th century. It is not written in Irish script, but in a Continental hand. Brought there by Irish missionaries, it may have been one of the books carried originally into Ireland by one of the Gaulish scholars. That it was the libraries of Ireland as much as the teaching to be got there which brought students here in the 6th and following centuries is shown, *e.g.*, by the remark of one of them, the writer known as Ethicus Ister, who says that he crossed from Spain to Ireland "ad volvenda volumina Hiberniae."

Now the most important thing with regard to the new learning brought to Ireland is to remember that it was still to the full extent the best tradition of scholarship in Latin grammar, oratory and poetry, together with a knowledge of Greek, the full Classical lore of the 4th century. For our fugitives must all of them have received their training well within that century. They had come just at the right time. For the decay of learning set in almost immediately after their departure. Indeed one wonders whether their flight and disappearance from Gaul may not have had something to do with this general decay of learning, may not have hastened it. In 470 Sidonius Apollinaris laments that owing to the terrible devastations of the barbarians he could only call to mind one person at Treves—Arvogastis was his name—able to speak and write Latin in its full purity.

The Irish Christian scholars having thus received classical learning at a time when it was still the natural study of every educated person were not like their Continental brethren troubled by any scruples as to the unfitness of that literature for the Christian, by that "lurking uneasiness of conscience which haunted the Continental monk who loved his Virgil." While John Cassian cursed and bemoaned himself that the devilish witchery of Virgil's lines inter-

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ferred with his pious meditations; while the Council of Carthage decreed that no bishop should read the books of the Gentiles; while Augustine and Ennodius laid it down that the liberal arts were but the handmaids of theology, the Irish continued to study and love the classics for their own sake. And when, in the early seventh century, they carried back this learning to the Continent, they found to their astonishment that they and their pupils were almost the only representatives of classical learning. Thanks to them Europe was never again plunged into intellectual darkness quite as profound as that of the Merovingian period. The schools and libraries of St. Gall and Bobbio, that home of letters, the very mention of which, says Norden, makes the heart of the classical scholar beat higher; Peronne, Corbie, St. Riquier, and scores of other centres, founded and conducted for a long time by Irishmen, the foundations of their pupils, Angles, Saxons and Franks, the palace school of Charlemagne of Aix-la-Chapelle under Alcuin, the pupil of Colgu of Clonmacnois, that of his own pupil, Hrabanus Maurus at Fulda, the school of Charles the Bald under John Scottus Eriugena—these are some of the stages by which the torch of learning was handed on from one generation to another.