

All Ireland Review

The Departure of King Dermot. An Incident of 12th Century Irish History

Author(s): Standish O'Grady

Source: *All Ireland Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jan. 12, 1901), pp. 12-15

Published by: [All Ireland Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20545142>

Accessed: 21/06/2014 15:15

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



All Ireland Review is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *All Ireland Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE DEPARTURE OF KING DERMOT.

AN INCIDENT OF 12th CENTURY IRISH HISTORY.

BY STANDISH O'GRADY.

"Farewell, friends, kinsmen, and you my mercenaries, most valiant and most faithful," cried the departing King. "Farewell, but for a while only. In early summer, ere the flowering of the hawthorn, I shall return. So assist me and mine, O Son of God! With the first swallow then look to see me, not alone, but leading a host; and many mouths wide now with laughter shall gape wider borne on the ends of spears, and many eyes lit now with triumph shall roll sightless balls to the sun. For I shall die as I have lived, McMurrough, Captain of I-Kinsella, and high King of all Leinster."

He stood on the sea's verge in the light of the rising sun and haragued for the last time the bloody remnant of his host, the old, white-bearded King, broad-browed, strong-featured, huge of stature, almost gigantic. Faint ripples of the ebbing tide licked his feet, for he stood where land and water met, with his broad back to the sea. His warrior voice, long since broken from overmuch pleading in the court of battle-axes, hoarse-quavering at its best, was hoarser now from passion. A low, fierce moan was the sole response of his auditory; they gripped their weapons tighter as they leaned forward, while they seemed to devour him with their silent, bright, feverish eyes. To hear the last words of their captain the army stood crescent-wise, its horns in the tide, and half enclosed the orator.

"With the first swallow, then, O Dermot, light of our eyes," murmured a man. The half-whispered word was taken up and repeated by the host, a low murmur of sound swelling and subsiding like the noise of the wind in the leaves on a still night.

"With the first swallow, then, O Dermot, light of our eyes."

The King was clad in a battle-dress of ring-mail, partly burnished, part rusted, over which he wore a torn linen tunic belted at the waist. In his right hand he carried a long battle-axe, dull in the blade. A straight short sword, in a sheath of red yew, hung by his side. From the front of his brazen helmet projected a single bar, the face-guard. His moustache and beard were white as snow, and white the straggling locks which, escaping from the helmet, fell upon his broad, unbowed shoulders; but his black eyes, unsubdued by time, glowed and flashed, and his huge and stalwart frame suggested a strength and energy which his white hairs would seem to belie. Passions such as afflicted the souls of our antique fighting Kings, in whose ears the war-storm, now loud, now low, never once ceased to sound, swept across his face; yet no one could fail to read in that countenance indomitable purpose and unconquerable will.

Behind him, sagging in the shallow tide, lay a long and beautifully shaped barge. Her stern, richly caparisoned with scarlet, was turned towards the shore. A little timber gangway, which stood higher and higher out of the water as the tide receded, ran from the King's feet to the barge. The crew sat negligently on the thwarts, in easy attitudes, holding the oargrips in their hands. They were fair-haired men, well-nourished, sound, and strong, with full, ruddy, faces, round or square, dressed in clean, fresh tunics, and contrasted strangely with the lean forms and hollow countenances long and dour of King Dermot's wild auditory—all rags and eyes and discoloured

bronze—and whom those fair-haired boatmen surveyed with faces of mild wonder, hardly of curiosity. They were Saxons, slaves of Robert FitzHarding, Reeve of Bristol, but slaves who seemed to have thriven upon slavery.

Further out lay moored a ship, or rather, galley, for her starboard, which faced the shore, showed a double row of black oar-holes. From her one mast a gay pennant rippled eastward, the ship's beak looking to the West, whence the wind blew. The deck was crowded with people. Women in bright attire, some holding infants in their arms, stood on the quarter-deck or poop, rising like a tower. The Queen of Leinster sat there. Beside her, on the right, stood a fair and slender girl, the Princess Eva. The fore-castle, which was high, too, terminated at the bows in a dragon's neck and head sublime, which gave a formidable and menacing emphasis to the whole. Just above the surface of the sea a great spike or ram projected from the cutwater. This ship was no merchantman but a ship of war. FitzHarding and the West-English Saxons of Bristol had sent their best ship to bring away their unsuccessful ally. For King Dermot was an old-time friend, warlike and commercial, of the commercial and warlike men of Bristol. He was also a near kinsman of Robert FitzHarding. The FitzHardings and McMurroughs had intermarried, and more than once. That shining galley is to bring Dermot to Bristol, where, it is believed by some, he will take the cowl and end his days in St. Austin's Monastery, for cowl and beads in these pious times are regarded as the natural and harmonious conclusion of his career for an aged and unfortunate King. The place is Corkeran, not so much a harbour as a broad bight or indentation of the coast line of Munster, and the time the "Kalends of August" (Aug. 1) in the year 1166 A.D., a memorable date, for its marks the departure for England of the Irish difficulty. Long coming, it has at last come, has taken form in that huge mailed figure, and is about to sail for England. God, or the Devil, or blind Destiny, is accomplishing here a great work—a work with worldwide issues and developments, whose end no man can even now see.

Further inland, but at a safe distance, on the slope of a droum, or rising ground, in relief against a dark forest, stood another body of men, horse and foot, quite as considerable as that which Dermot addressed. From this assembly arose ceaselessly cries suggestive of insult and contumely, quite unregarded by Dermot and his auditory. It was the van of the army of Ireland, a slight visible indication of the storm which was sweeping Dermot out of his kingdom across the salt sea. They would have killed him if they could. They tried to do so yesterday, but were not able, and scorn any further acquaintance with Dermot's haggard warriors. Autumn was beginning to redden the forest behind them. Further inland, distant hills showed purple, for the heather was beginning to bloom. The sun stood not a foot above the quivering line of the horizon—his disc of glowing fire. A million dancing wavelets sprang and laughed in the broad sunpath. Strong briny odours from the wet sand and soaking sea-weeds scented the pure air. Not so far away little flocks of red-legged noisy birds piped and chattered as they ran over the strand. Seagulls wheeled and hovered, or dropped flutteringly seeking their food. Curlews flew crying across the bay. Dermot's men neither saw them nor heard, but we, to whom the centuries are glass, mysteriously present and assisting, may witness both the tragedy and nature's sublime tranquility and indif-

ference. Their eyes were rivetted on the face of their dear captain, their souls rapt in his rude oratory. That voice, once clear as a trumpet, heard so often on the pale edge of battle, was now strong only, unmelodious, hoarse-quavering, hoarser to-day with grief and wrath and choking shame, but charged with a wild sincerity, and the hot words as they came straight from the heart of the speaker went straight to the hearts of his hearers.

It was ebb-tide, too, with these men; they had fought so much, suffered so much, and fought and suffered, as it seemed, in vain. Many faces were seamed with ancient scars, many showed signs of recent rude surgery. Many necks and foreheads were bound with cloths, many arms rested in slings. Some, too feeble or too severely wounded to stand, were upheld by their comrades. One, whose right arm was a stump, murmured in response to some word of the orator, "I have another hand for thee, still, O Dermot," for this King, though an object of deadliest hatred to many, was also passionately loved by not a few. Ere yon rising sun sinks in the Atlantic an unknown hand will write words which may still be read as the letters flowed from the pen of the mournful scribe: "O God! it is a great thing that has been done to-day. Dermot to be banished over-seas by the men of Ireland. Alas! Alas! What shall I do?"

These men had done all that men could do for their King. Their shields were bent and battered, showing many a hole and rent; the edges of their dull battle-axes were gapped; their raiment, if that could be called raiment which was rags, was stained with mud and blood and dulled with sweat, their faces drawn and hollow, their eyes bright with famine and hardship—bright, too, with that which gold can never buy.

They were the bloody and war-wasted remnant of a once proud host which in battle after battle had been worsted not so much by superior forces in front of them as by treachery behind. Back from the banks of the Boyne, from the banks of the Shannon, back from the gates of Danish Dublin, in spite of all their valour, all their self-forgetting loyalty, they had been pushed, beaten, or driven, fresh foes starting up around them and behind. Through all Leinster they had been chased by famine or by the sword, till at last they fought not for victory, but only to bring their captain and King safe to the seaboard—to the seaboard, anywhere, and save him from the innumerable and deadly foes who had everywhere and so suddenly risen for his destruction. But Dublin, Arklow, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford, having gates and walls, had warned them off. All the ports of Leinster were either in rebellion or had been seized by the enemy. Then they broke out south-westwards across the mearings of the province, and, fighting their way into Munster, fighting night and day, for hungry hunters were on their traces, and the country rose against them as they went, few, and spent with war, famine, and marching, they at last reached the remote haven of Corkeran, where yonder English ship, long signalling and signalled to, has put in. God willing, she shall convey their dear lord and master to England beyond the reach of his foes. Bitterly he had now expiated his unlawful love for Dervorgilla, wife of Tiernan, King of Breffney. Gaunt, one-eyed Tiernan, the injured husband never forgave him. Though year had followed year since the famous elopement till their tale exceeded fourteen, and that matter seemed now to most men like ancient history, Tiernan did not forget—the long-memoried

Celt. Though he and Dermot had been war-allies since then, the one-eyed man was still implacable, retaining all in his deep mind. He never forgot that stealing of his wife, or how he had been made a spectacle and a laughing-stock for all Ireland. Then at last, fourteen full years after the injury, an opportunity for the first time presented itself. Tiernan found himself in a position to direct the action of the King of Ireland, and through him all the minor Kings, so that the whole island, as if set in motion by a single impulse and one common purpose, precipitated itself on Dermot. Simultaneously, Dermot's own false vassals arose against him, and the once proud and powerful King of Leinster, "after many battles, in which he was always defeated," was overthrown and cast out. All, save Dermot himself, and a few who kept hoping, believed that this was the end. Dermot, about to sail for England, unhurt in body, unbroken in spirit, his soul filled with dire purposes, for the last time addresses his faithful followers, and bids them be of good cheer, for that he will surely return. Near him, in complete steel, too, stood a tall and very handsome youth, Donald Kavanagh, that is "the Handsome," his eldest son, who is to remain behind and make such terms as he can, for himself and friends, with the victorious foe. For the old King had no thought at all of taking to cowl and beads in St. Austin's while there were friends to be rewarded and enemies to be destroyed. With the first swallow he will return—leader of a host. Then woe to his extern enemies and his own traitor "dukes."

"King of Leinster and the Leinstermen, I shall die!" he cried, "after having punished my enemies and rewarded my friends, as a King should. I have loved God too well to be forsaken by Him in my age, though He may try me. I have cherished the sons of Life. I have exterminated the sons of Death. I have adorned Leinster with many churches and endowed them with much land, and Almighty God, powerful and righteous, will not see me want or those who love me go unhonoured and unrewarded. This I know for a verity. Would you learn how? Come nearer."

"At the foot of Mount Leinster there is a little lake and a few sad reeds on one side, but the other is stony. There are twelve teal in the lake, fed once there by the hand of holy Colman. They will be there till the Day of Judgment, for if a man slays one of them, the bird returns to life, but the man dies. Such is the power of Colman! On the edge of the lake there is an oratory, all stone, very ancient, and in the oratory an altar, a grey flag, unchiselled, and candles burn there always in honour of Colman. When the King of Ireland conspired against me, and the major portion of my dukes rebelled, declaring that they would henceforth be kings and freed of my control, and when the Battle of Ferns was broken upon me, I was greatly afflicted. I fasted, and fasting, spent one night in the oratory, and there was none with me, prone before the altar where Colman looks for his resurrection. And I prayed to Almighty God, Maker of all worlds, and to holy Colman. Early in the morning, when the lights were

CHANCELLOR & SON,

BY ROYAL WARRANT

PHOTOGRAPHERS TO THE QUEEN.

55, LOWER SACKVILLE-STREET,
DUBLIN.

dim, a man stood before me. I lowered my eyes, for I did not dare to look upon him. The man spake to me, and what he said was this, 'Fight bravely, O Dermot, while any will stand beside thee. Fight to the end, though it will not avail thee. Thy enemies shall cast thee out of Ireland, for a season, for it is the will of God to punish thee, on account of thy many sins. But as thou hast served Him faithfully, building many churches and cherishing always His children, He will bring thee back again after a short season. Thou shalt return, O Dermot, with great power. Gloriously and victoriously thou shalt chase thy enemies and take vengeance on thy traitors, in especial upon Murrough, Duke of Tir-cullen, upon him before all others, and reward all thy friends like a rich King, and through thee great deeds shall be done in the Land of Fail.'

"Then the voice ceased, and when, after a long time, I looked, there was no man there. Therefore, without fear or grief, I cross the sea now, going into the land of strangers; and I tell you these things that they may strengthen your minds and harden your hearts while I am far from you. Till I return obey my son, Donald Kavanagh, as you would obey me, and let all of you, the constable and marshal, the dukes, barons, and sergeants, put your right hands into his in my presence."

When he saw that done, it was said by those who witnessed it that he was well pleased. After that, they say he took an affectionate farewell of the whole company, calling them each man by his name—that is to say, all the men who carried battle-axes, and the leaders of the light foot, but the rest in general. They were in all, five hundred men, lacking seventeen. Then he kissed all the captains upon the right cheek and his sons upon the mouth, but Donald Kavanagh he embraced with both his arms. Yet the best of his sons, namely, Enda, was not here, for he had been taken prisoner and blinded by the Ossorians. After that he raised his eyes and looked around, and he took no note at all of that army which he had defeated, but his eyes settled westward, where was a small house, whiter than snow, and a slender, white, very graceful tower beside it, and, around it, trees, and men and oxen labouring there in the fields, for it was harvest. And he said, "Whose house is that yonder?" And one answered that it appertained to the familia of Ailbhe of Emly, and that the said Ailbhe had not come into Ireland with Patrick, or after him, but before him, and that there was a relic of the holy Ailbhe preserved there.

"Donald, my son," said the King, "lay ten ounces of pure gold on the altar, and let it be told to the comarb of holy Ailbhe that, after I shall have returned and taken again the kingdom, I will double that gift and new shrine the relic of the saint, in gold, finely carved, and furnished with eyes of crystal." These were King Dermot's last words. After that he entered the boat, and Donald Kavanagh and the Duke of Idrone propelled her till her stern was cleared from the sand and mud and she floated free. All the company kept silence while that was being done, save one man only, who raised his voice and wept aloud, whom the constable struck down. The rest watched the departure of the King with eyes harder than iron. The King reached the ship and ascended to the poop. The crew followed, and the boat was raised up by ropes and set in her place in the ship. Then King Dermot looked towards the shore with a cheerful countenance, and raised high above his head, clear seen against the southern sky, his mailed arm and gauntleted hand. His people,

silent, all stooped and bent forward, had been watching him, the while they shaded their eyes with their hands. Then, seeing his gesture, they stood erect and raised their right hands. It was as if the King had cried, "Remember," and that they on their side had replied, "Yea, O Dermot, we remember." But the gesture was more eloquent than words.

Then the anchor of the galleys was drawn up to a sea-chaunt. A trumpet sounded, and, all at once, the long oars ran out through the vents with a dull roar like distant thunder and swung forward and were still. Again the trumpet sounded, and all dropped at once, suddenly. Strongly the good oars gripped while they bent and struggled with the surprised and reluctant yet yielding sea, strongly broke through and lashed the green water to foam, yet hardly communicated motion to the great galley. Again, again, again, the long white oars gripped and struggled through the green water, at each stroke more victoriously, till, anon, the galley seemed to know what she was required by them to do, and at each fresh impulse lifted herself and sprang forwards mightily. Her course first was due west as she lay, then, more gracefully than a sea-bird on the wing, she curved southward and eastward with a long, slow, gradual sweep till the dragon's eyes looked steadily to the rising sun. The sailors hoisted the one sail, and the breeze filled out the bright sail taut, and the ship's speed was doubled, for a gentle and prosperous wind blew steady out of the West. The unseen oarsmen felt the presence of their good ally and rejoiced. The stiffness of inaction, too, began to leave their limbs; they bent to their work with more power, and encouraged each other to row. Well they knew for what task they had been chosen, and whom they were bearing over the deep. So, propelled alike by wind and oar, the snoring galley sped eastwards, dividing the unfurrowed sea. Swifter, and ever swifter, the long white oars bounded forward, constant-going, steady, unhesitating, and behind the great ship as she sped there arose a tumult, a roar of displaced and sounding waters, and on both sides where the oars lashed the surface there shone as it were roads of white foam. At the mast-head a long pennon showing the arms of the FitzHardings, white on a red ground, bordered with narrow gold, floated and rippled, pointing eastward to Saxonland. Ere the galley left Corkeran horsemen were seen galloping eastward along the road that led to Waterford. Soon they entered a cut in the hills and were lost to view. King Dermot and his people knew well with what purpose those horsemen rode so fast. They were messengers despatched to the men of Waterford with the news that King Dermot had put to sea at Corkeran and had sailed eastward, and that they, the Vedra's Fiord sailors, should man their galleys and intercept him. The master accordingly steered out further and further from the shore, so that, ere long, only the distant hills were to be seen. When the galley passed Carnsore Point many galleys were seen far away, but near land. They were the Northmen waiting who thought that Dermot's galley would hug the shore. They gave chase, indeed, but soon fell away, and after that King Dermot commanded that the oarsmen should slack their rowing.

He was silent most part of the day, and evermore watched the receding shores, and then the mountains. As it drew towards evening he bade Maurice Regan, his secretary, to read for him out of a book.

He did not eat or drink till sunset. At supper he was cheerful, and called for the master and bade him

On the third day, early in the morning, the ship rowed up the Severn, and in the forenoon reached Bristol, where the King was joyfully and affectionately received by the whole city, and especially by Robert FitzHarding and his people. FitzHarding and the men of Bristol gave him, for his lodging, the Carfax, hard by St. Austin's, and ever treated him with great respect and affection. Yet he did not remain long there, such was his desire to come into the presence of Henry, son of the Empress, who was surnamed Curthose, and secure his assistance for the recovery of his kingdom.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued).

Foreigners are surprised to hear the Irish claim for their own country an antiquity and history prior to that of the neighbouring countries. Herein lie the proof and the explanation. The traditions and history of the mound-raising period have in other countries passed away. Foreign conquest, or less intrinsic force of imagination, and pious sentiment have suffered them to fall into oblivion; but in Ireland they have been all preserved in their original fulness and vigour, hardly a hue has faded, hardly a minute circumstance or articulation been suffered to decay.

country and its ancient traditions, is left to be enjoyed by us. There is not through the length and breadth of the country a conspicuous rath or barrow of which we cannot find the traditional history preserved in this ancient literature. The mounds of Tara, the great barrows along the shores of the Boyne, the raths of Slieve Mish, Rathcroghan, and Teltown, the stone caiseals of Aran and Innishowen, and those that alone or in smaller groups stud the country over, are all, or nearly all, mentioned in this ancient literature, with the names and traditional histories of those over whom they were raised.

The literary monuments in which is enshrined the ancient history of Ireland, though chronologically later than the corresponding monuments of Greece and of the Norse nations, are yet in fact more archaic. They cling close to and encircle the mounded tombs of Gods and heroes. Other literatures have floated far away from that to which they owe their genesis. They resemble the full course of a stream which has had its source far away. The stream of the Irish bardic literature still lingers in the mountains which gave it birth. It is near the well-head.

The pre-Christian period of Irish history presents difficulties from which the corresponding period in the histories of other countries is free. The surrounding nations escape the difficulty by having nothing to record. The Irish historian is immersed in perplexity on account of the mass of material ready to his hand. The English have lost utterly all record of those centuries before which the Irish historian stands with dismay and hesitation, not through deficiency of materials, but through their excess. Had nought but the chronicles been preserved, the task would have been simple. We would then have had merely to determine approximately the date of the introduction of letters, and allowing a margin on account of the bardic system and the commission of family and national history to the keeping of rhymed and alliterated verse, fix upon some reasonable point, and set down in order, the old successions of kings and the battles and other remarkable events. But in Irish history there remains, demanding treatment, that immense mass of literature of an imaginative nature, illuminating with anecdote and tale the events and personages mentioned simply and without comment by the chronicler. It is this poetic literature which constitutes the stumbling-block, as it constitutes also the glory, of early Irish history, for it cannot be rejected and it cannot be retained. It cannot be rejected, because it contains historical matter which is consonant with and illuminates the dry lists; it cannot be retained and it cannot be retained. It can—popular poetry is not history; and the task of distinguishing in such literature the fact from the fiction—where there is certainly fact and certainly fiction—is one of the most difficult to which the intellect can apply itself.

**BEST HOUSE COALS, WEIGHT AND QUALITY
GUARANTEED, try**

This content downloaded from 91.229.248.154 on Sat, 21 Jun 2014 15:15:04 PM
All use subject to [JSTOR Terms and Conditions](#)