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The Legend of Proleek

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The Legend of Proleek.

WHAT person of ordinary information does not now know of the existence of the Ballymascanlan Cromlech, or, as it is called in County Louth, the Proleek Stone? The present writer, having frequently seen illustrations representing men as mere pigmies beside it, formed therefrom quite an exaggerated idea of its dimensions, and when he did actually visit it afterwards, felt rather disappointed that the great cromlech, remarkable though it certainly is, did not altogether fulfil his expectations. This shows how much harm is done by some exaggerative pictures of antiquities or even natural wonders. Yet the mass and position of the enormous upper stone must always remain something of a great marvel. It is really not surprising that the peasantry of the district should have attributed the fixing of it in its present position to the efforts of two great "giants."

I propose now to give what I have gathered of the tradition connected with the great "stone." No matter how little some antiquarians may think of folklore, surely such a perfect specimen of a megalith is worthy of having a few particulars gleaned that appertain to it, even though they be all false, or very possibly contain only a grain of truth.

In his description of the cromlech in *Louthiana*, Wright alludes to the local tradition in the following terms:—

"This massy Stone, measuring 12 Feet one way and 6 another, which must, from the specifick Gravity of like Solids, weigh betwixt 30 and 40 Ton-weight; by the Inhabitants of the Country is called *The Giant's Load*, and the Native *Irish* tell a strange Story about it, relating how the whole was brought all at once from the neighbouring Mountains by a Giant called *Parrah bough M'shagjean*, and who they say was buried near this Place. The Grave or Cell of Stone-work they shew for it is about 20 Feet long and 5 Broad, and several Bones of a monstrous Size they affirm to have been dug up here. But to quit this idle and fabulous Story, and to draw nearer to the real Truth, I must inform my Reader, that there are many such to be found still standing in this Country, and also in many parts of *England*, where *PARRAH BOUG M'SHAGJEAN* never came, unless by the miraculous Cause-way of his Brethren in the North; one more I saw myself upon the Estate of Lord *Blundal*, near the Castle of *Dundrum*, and another, I am informed, is to be seen in the Mountains of *Moarn*. Several such are said to be in the Isle of *Anglesey*, called there *Cromlechs*, or, vulgarly, *Arthur's Quoits*."

Ever since I read the above, I have often wondered what Irish orthography lay concealed behind Wright's barbarous spelling of the "giant's" name. Here was a mystery that I thought would always remain unsolved and, indeed, unsolvable, with the exception, of course, of the self-evident "Parrah." This, however, being clearly a very late addition, was to me the least interesting element in the complex name, as I considered that such an usage could only have been due to the folk-idea in recent times, that so great a person as a "giant" ought to have a Christian name as well as a surname. Folklore affords many instances of the like, while such an example as *Ῥατὰς μόρ O Reibteáin*, from Farney, shows that the older method, i.e., the want of the forename, still survives in some cases.

Many a time, also, have I wished that Wright had not been so absorbed by

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[H. G. Tempest.

PROLEEK CROMLEAC, BALLYMASCANLAN.

It appears to have rather the value of *a* in *cage* than anything else. The *-gjean* at once reminds one of the English doublets *sergeant* and *serjeant*. Hence, in all probability *-gj-* represents the English sound of *j* and soft *g* and the *-ean-* was intended to be obscure as in the words quoted. Slender *o* in Irish would sound to the Englishman's ear something like this. We therefore arrive at the conclusion that "Shagjean" = Séirín. Now, how is this to be connected with Seoirín? The answer is, that the like is just what we should expect. There is exactly that tendency in Oriel towards variation between *éi* and *eoí* before slender *o*. It occurs also in *ar reoir* and *ar réir* = 'astray,' and in the surname *Mac Leoir* (anglicised Mac Leod), which in south Armagh becomes *mas Léir* (anglicised Maglade, M'Glade, and even Lloyd!).

Hence Wright's barbarous spelling probably represents *para beas Mac Séirín*. Comparing this with "*para buiré mór Mac Seoirín*" we find *beas* contrasting with *mór*. It may have been merely used *per antiphrasin*, or humorously—the element of humour is nearly always present in legends of the kind.

My identification of *Mannabár* with the Old Norse name *Mannvâri* appears to show that the Farney form of the legend contains just a single grain of truth, viz., the name of a Norse chieftain, no doubt a royal scion, who was buried in Fincarn, a tale common to all Ireland having afterwards become attached to his grave. We should probably explain the Ballymascanlan version in the same way. For the present I cannot say what kind of name *Seoirín* (or *Séirín*?) is. If it be taken as a purely Irish folk-coining, it might be *reoir* :- *-in* (or *réir* :- *-in*?)—many now know that the termination *-in* is invariably shortened to *-in* in Oriel. If the latter part be the diminutive *-in*, we may easily understand the *beas* postulated for Wright's form of the name. *Seoirín* or *Séirín* might convey such a sense as 'the little man who has strayed into Ireland from a foreign land.' How strange it would be—was it ever the case?—if the cromlech were raised in commemoration of one who was small in stature, though afterwards magnified by legend into a "giant"! This, however, is all mere speculation.

The name of the townland in which the megalith is demands some attention. It is Proleek, in Irish *prailic*. One's eye is at once arrested by the latter element *-leek*, *-lic*, and immediately Duleek = *Dailmias*, Belleek = *béal lice*, &c., come before the mind. It may be that the anglicised form Proleek is derived from an older Irish form **prailias*, and that in *prailic* the commoner word *leac* (oblique form *lic*) has been substituted at a rather recent period. What might be naturally expected is *-lias* rather than *-lic*. Whichever of them be the true element, I think it is clear that the townland must have been named from its one remarkable feature, viz., the great cromlech with its accompanying "giant's grave." *prailic* (older form *prailias*?) may have been an old term for *cromlech*. The first element is by no means clear, but may yet reward the patience of the investigator.

The only etymology I can suggest for Proleek up to the present is that **prailias* = **prainnias*, i.e., *prainn(prainn)ias*, i.e., 'dinner-stone,' or 'surfeit-stone' (so it would be understood in Oriel), i.e., the stone commemorating Mac Seoidin's great meal. If this be correct, the idea that *prailic* = 'cromlech' should, of course, be wrong, and the name in that case would have arisen through the working of folk's etymology.

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