

# HEROIC IRELAND

## I

Dr. Spengler, a German writer on history, has made a great stir in recent years by his effort to prove that Western civilization is mortally stricken and soon must die. He rests his theory on the close parallel between the present state of Europe and its state when the civilization of the ancients was dying. He draws a hundred startling comparisons. When Rome was near to destruction, it was rich, powerful and vile. From backward lands it drew its food and its wealth, even as Europe now; it built prodigious palaces, stadia and aqueducts, but it housed its people in crowded tenements. In place of its old austere morality, it embraced the love of pleasure. When it was richest, and its people most debased, it fell, and great was its ruin.

Dr. Spengler argues that destruction is at hand. He traces in every civilization four periods, which he compares with Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. In the Spring-time of a nation the folk are close to the land, and towns are but market towns; rulers are simple patriarchs. The literature is made up of ballads, epics and heroic tales – compositions which reflect their own virile, wholesome life. In the summer of a culture, the philosophers and great artists rise, to elaborate the old simple writings; a Sophocles composes tragedies where Homer had told but a fine story in verse.

Then comes the Autumn, when the towns have come to dominate. This is the time when cheap wit is the fashion among the vulgar. In this time, too, class distinctions amount to a complete divorce between the upper and the lower, and class war is rampant. Finally, there comes the Winter, when ideals have perished and the whole people is given over to materialism; henceforth there is no more literature, no art of any worth. The practical man rules. Material expansion is the single thought. Invention follows invention; the craze for speed consumes vital energy, and so the race plunges forward to destruction.

## II

When a writer says that he believes that Western civilization is falling he is called a pessimist. Perhaps he is really an optimist. Was it not well for the world that

the vile old civilisation of Rome, built upon a tenement-housed population of slaves, passed away? How otherwise could the virile young nations of Christendom have arisen? When we survey the urban civilisations of our own time, with their shoddy cinematograph amusements to stupefy a mass of wage-slaves, just as the circuses of old stupefied the mobs of Rome – with their worship of wealth, their ugliness and joylessness and disease – are we pessimists if we think that Providence soon will make a clear sweep of the mess, and will make a way for the unspoiled peoples?

Here it is that the Gaelic movement has a special importance. The literature of the Gael is one of the Springtime. The stories and poems which our people have cherished are heroic. The civilisation of Ireland was heroic until its fall under foreign might. The heroic ideal was never abandoned; the intruding civilisation of skepticism and materialism never was accepted. Always the Gael resisted the urban system. Revolt after revolt sought to re-establish the old native standards of life and literature. In the Gaeltacht to this very day we have an heroic people little changed from the days when Red Hugh limped home and the folks of the countryside went “booleying” on the moors. In other parts beyond the Pale, much the same life holds on, despite the break of language. Even now, Fionn and Oisín would feel at home in our farm-houses, and Odysseus might sail into our little ports and recognize in the stalwart fishermen, giants of body and noble of mind, men who sat in order in his vessels and smote the sounding furrows of the sea.

### III

Our literature is heroic. The ancient sagas – the strong warlike tales of the Red Branch, and the more romantic and charming and naturally beautiful tales of the Fianna – remained the chief substance of our Gaelic literature as long as that literature was being made folklore was in harmony with the manuscripts that the scribes copied. Down to our days, the typical Shanachie was he who could recite a Fenian lay. Every poet sprinkled his verses with allusion to the heroic tales, and the Gaelic folk whom the planters replaced were likened to the companions of Fionn. The heroes, in brief, were to the folk of all our cottages the household mythology, and our people dwelt imaginatively in the heroic world.

The word “heroic” is used vaguely nowadays, but it has a precise meaning, and it is the meaning which is implied here. Turn to the Odyssey, or to any good writer on that sublime old tale. There you have the heroic life most fully and vividly

depicted. Odysseus is the head of an island community, much resembling an Irish *tuath*. The kings of his day are big farmers; their houses resemble big Irish farmsteads, down to the midden in the courtyard. Strength and beauty of body are admired; sentimentality and all other weaknesses are despised. Among these people, great of body and clean of mind, poetry is honoured – and when vengeance falls on the usurpers, the bard is spared for his craft's sake. Poetry among these heroic folk is concerned with brave deeds, with the beauty of houses, ships, swords, ploughs, clothes, and food vessels. The natural virtues are held in high respect, as in all virile, healthy societies. Vice, treachery, and cowardice are loathed.

It is in moral character that the *Odyssey* most closely resembles the Irish tales. A great stress is laid by Professor Ridgeway on the marvelous material parallels between early Gaelic Ireland and Homer's Greece. He finds in the chariots, the helmets, and the art such close similarities that he declares the Irish Gaels and Homer's Achaeans were one and the same people. Yet, the moral parallel is even more striking. The heroes of Homer have virtues, rare in the dying urban civilisation, which are identical with those of our Fenian heroes. There is respect between man and man; concern for troubled folk, admiration for simplicity and honour. When Telemachus says that he loves Ithaca, his native island that has no pasture save for goats, more than any rich, strange land, old Nestor strokes the lad's hand and says: "Your words prove that you are the son of one who is truly noble." That might be said in the Gaeltacht any day. When, again, the youth comes to the house of Helen and Menelaus, talk of the olden war and the brave men who fell sets all of them to weep. There is an exactly similar incident at the beginning of *Agallamh na Seanorach*, wherein the woman warrior recalls the Fianna to the last of the heroes, and the company falls silent in tears.

#### IV

"Ireland's civilisation in the days of Red Hugh – just before its overthrow – has been likened to that of Homer by Standish O'Grady. Ireland had the supernatural life as well as a civilisation rich in the natural virtues. As she held fast to the spiritual she may hope to build again the material basis of her happy past. That was the dream of Padraic Pearse. His writings ring again and again with the word *heroic*, and his life and death were heroic in the truest sense. He brought back an heroic inspiration and many followed him, so that the last chapter of Irish history has been as noble as that of the mediaeval heroes. In this dark century, when all around us is doubt, when

ideals are deserted and even bravery is cynical, Ireland gave life after life for an immaterial end and for the sake of the good. The land which bred Terence MacSwiney (and so many others) is not a land that ought to surrender easily to the fate which cynicism is bringing down upon the richer countries.

While Gaelic Ireland was, and remains, a spring-time nation, Anglo-Ireland was autumnal at its best. Berkeley and Swift, the spokesmen of the Anglo-Irish civilisation, were doubters and cynics. They have been succeeded by men who stand for material things: Anglo-Ireland has entered on her winter. The popular Irish mind still craves for virile stories and ballads. Our people of the countryside; sea-taming, earth-conquering, unspoilt men, await writers who shall reflect their life and stir them – writers who will give Ireland a vision and a second Spring.

The nation of the Spring will be one in which the countryside is preferred to the town. Its people will be frugal, strong, manly, untroubled by the diseases of the dying civilisation around us. As Christian France and Spain rose from the ruins of the Roman Empire, Gaelic Ireland may rise in strength, lord of the future, when the empire of money has passed away.

AODH DE BLÁCAM.

### THE PEACE CHANT OF BRIDE, THE QUEEN OF SONG

“Peace up to Heaven,  
Heaven down to Earth.  
The Earth under Heaven,  
Strength to every one.”

ELLA YOUNG.