

# REVIEW OF SÉAN UA CEALLAIGH'S "BRIAN BÓIRMHE"

By Pádraig Pearse.

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*Brian Bóirmhe: A Saoghal agus a Bheatha. By Seán Ua Ceallaigh. Ath Cliath. Connradh na Gaedhilge. Price 1s; post free, 1s, 2d.*

In his preface Seán Ua Ceallaigh makes the confession that Brian Boirmhe has been one of his favourite heroes from his earliest years. The avowal suggests the spirit in which this very vivid sketch has been written; it is a panegyric, thought by no means an indiscriminating panegyric. Seán Ua Ceallaigh writes of Brian in the same lyric strain in which Miss Porter has written of William Wallace, and Kingsley of Hereward the Wake and of certain Elizabeth sea-kings. He does not indeed dishonestly gloze over the flaws in his hero's character as a Kingsley would not be above doing, but his aim, like Kingsley's, is to present rather a bold and attractive picture, striking in its main outlines and sufficiently true to history, than a subtle character study on the one hand, or a dry-as-dust antiquarian disquisition on the other. He thinks, and he thinks rightly, that young Ireland will be the better of having set before it in broad relief the figure of Brian, their nation's greatest, or at any rate, most successful man of action. Standish O'Grady has written that he would like to see the Gaels of to-day studying the story of the young Napoleon. Seán Ua Ceallaigh would probably prefer to see them studying the story of the young Brian. And to Gaels at least it is a tale equally inspiring.

Brian, when all is said, is the most commanding figure in Irish history. Only two others can be mentioned in the same breath with him; Aodh Ó Néill and Theobald Wolfe one. Each of these had probably a finer mind, a more soaring genius; but to neither were granted the ample stage and the great opportunities which made the career of Brian a possibility. Like Napoleon, Brian was born at a moment when Europe wanted a Man; and, like Napoleon, he rose to

the full height of the unique occasion. There is something awe inspiring in his irresistible march towards power; something wonderfully epic and grandiose in the dignity which he achieved and held as long as he lived – “Brian... Imperator Scotorum” in the wording of the entry in the Book of Ard Macha, doubtless dictated by himself; something extraordinarily pathetic in the fact that, his career or glory ended, Ireland was left infinitely weaker than she had ever been before.

For, successful as was Brian’s career, the mighty project which he had formed came, in the long run, to nought. That project, we take it, was to found in Ireland a strong and vigorous monarchy such as William the Norman was so soon after to establish in England. This was no vulgar personal ambition. Brian doubtless saw that it was absolutely necessary that Ireland should be welded into a homogenous political entity, and felt that he was the man to do it; seeing and feeling this, he was unscrupulous as to means. Chance or fate ruined his scheme. Had Brian or Murchadh survived Cluain Tairbh, or had any of his younger sons been equally strong and popular, a Dal gCais King might to-day be ruling Ireland. As things happened, Brian’s dynasty fell before it had time to consolidate its power, and the old system never recovered from the blow which his usurpation had inflicted on it. The tremendous effort to establish a strong ard-rioghacht eventuated in the overthrow of the ard-rioghacht. Hence became possible the successful Norman Invasion and the “English connection.” It is the greatest tragedy in all history.

Seán Ua Ceallaigh has told his tale with unflagging verve and enthusiasm. At the dark problems we have hinted at he barely glances. Enough for him that Brian was, like another conqueror of old, “mighty, bold, royal, and loving”; therefore let Ireland “honour” him and “love” him. To the patient waiting eyes of the Gael he has become a symbol of future redemption. “Conán Maol,” in a brilliant passage, has represented Éire as weeping on the plain of Cluain Tiarbh over Brian, dead and the monarchy laid low. And a voice from out the wastes of the air of the waters spoke to her saying: “Tiocfaidh leitheid Bhrian í gceann míle bliadhain.” How the Gael will welcome that coming!

The narrative of the book is lively and easy. A stickler for the dignity of history might find such expressions as “d’fhill se a bhaile agus a mbear i n-a bheal aige” (in reference to Maelsheachlainn’s unsuccessful attempt to enlist northern support) a trifle too colloquial. But at this stage in the Irish literary movement undue colloquialism is decidedly a fault on the right side.