

IN FIRST-CENTURY IRELAND.



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From *An Claidheamh Soluis*, December 21, 1907 to January 11,
1908.

PREFACE.

The following papers are the substance of a lecture delivered in English to the students of the Metropolitan School of Art, Dublin, in April, 1906, and afterwards expanded into a series of three lectures in Irish delivered before the Ard-Chraobh this year. I desire at the outset to express my obligations to Dr. P. W. Joyce, whose two noble volumes, 'A Social History of Ancient Ireland,' have been my most valuable mine of information.

I.

Let us imagine that we are foreigners paying our first visit to Ireland just about the time when Christ was preaching in Galilee. What does the land look like as we draw near its coast, borne in our Roman galley propelled by sail and oars? Our first impression is just such an impression as is made on the modern traveller who approaches our shores for the first time. Here is a land of crag and glen, of broad lake and broader plain. Here is a coastline defended at one point by bold granite heights towering to the altitude of two or three thousand feet, at another point by terraces of limestone cliffs rising to a scarcely less dizzy height. Here are blue fjords cutting deep into the heart of the land, and sentinelled on either side by bald or heathy headlands, whose feet are washed by the spray of the sea, while their heads are half buried in clouds. Here are purple mountains carpeted in heath, and furze, and fern. Here are many lakes, long and torturous, filling up the valleys between the heights, or gleaming wide and white on the plains. Here are broad rivers moving across the country and widening into stately estuaries as they reach the sea. Here brown streams rich in trout and salmon; here sombre boglands, the nursery of many flocks of wild birds. At first we are inclined to think that this must be a land of mountains, for except at the Gap of the East—the gap through which in after ages the invader will enter—mountain-group succeeds mountain-group and moorland moorland all around the coast. But we soon see that the island is in reality shaped like a hollow inverted shield: the highlands are all on the coast, and the interior is occupied by an immense plain, across which we may travel a hundred or a hundred and thirty miles without encountering a genuine hill.

As soon as we land we become aware of one fact which sufficiently differentiates the physical Ireland of the first century from the Ireland of the twentieth. Almost the whole of the great central plain and many of the slopes of the outer mountain-rim are still covered by the primeval forest. Bogs there of course are, both among the mountains and on the plain; but vast stretches of country to-day covered by dark blown bogland are in first-century Ireland clothed luxuriantly in a forest mantle of oak, ash, elm, pine, birch, and yew. As

we gaze on the dark tracts of forest-land we remember that one of the oldest names of Ireland was 'Inis na bhFiodhbhadh'—The Island of Woods.

Of animal life in this woodland county there is rich store. The stately Irish elk, which stood twice the height of a tall man, has, indeed, long disappeared, though his huge skeleton is sometimes to be found, as it is to the present day. The bear, too, has gone, and only dim memories of him remain; a strong warrior is still called, 'mathghamhain,' the bear, from which honourable designation will come in after centuries the surnames Ó Mathghamhna and Mac Mathghamhna. But the wild boar is still king of the forest, and the wolf still howls in the lonely places. The otter and the badger have not yet retired to the remoter fastnesses. Fierce wild-cats lurk in the woods. The red deer roams the mountainsides and the forest-glades of the lowlands. The fox, the hare, the stoat or so-called weasel, and all our familiar small wild things flourish apace. The kite and the eagle sweep fearlessly over the plains. Of reptiles there are no more trace than in our own day—only the harmless little lizard or arc-luachra, and, amongst amphibia, the common newt and the strange Kerry toad.

We land, not at some busy port, but at a sheltered creek, frequented by fishermen. There are curachs drawn up on the beach, differing nothing in essentials from the curachs we use to-day on our western coasts; the frame-work of wicker (called cliabh-curaigh, or curach-basket), and the covering, not of tarred canvas, but of hide. There are also representatives of another sort of boat, used chiefly, however, for inland navigation. This is a single-piece canoe, flat, and fashioned from the trunk of a single tree.¹

We moor our galley, and push on into the heart of the primeval forest. We observe few traces of habitation, and later on we shall see that the population of the country, whilst considerable, consists of communities, small or large, dotted here and there at cleared spaces in the forest. It is obvious that in these days of wild beasts and wilder men, single habitations must be few: men cluster together in village communities,—groups of huts crowding round a strong dwelling in

¹ Numerous specimens, dug up in bogs or found in lakes near crannogues, are preserved in the National Museum.

the centre, and guarded by a rath or rampart of earth. Rude roads lead through the forest glades from settlement to settlement.

Striking one of these woodland tracks, somewhat wider and better worn than the others, we conclude that it leads to a settlement of some little importance. As we follow it out, we find that it grows wider and wider; numerous signs of traffic appear; and at last we emerge from the forest depths into a clearing of considerable extent. It is the site of a village.

Let us take a good view of this primitive Irish village which we are approaching. The settlement really consists of the residence of a bó-aire, or well-to-do farmer, with the houses of his dependents clustering round it. The buildings, we notice, are not huddled close together as in a modern town or village: they are detached, and dotted at intervals over the grassy sward. The houses are small structures of wickerwork, thatched with straw, and are for the most part circular in shape. From the groups of houses a series of tillage and pasture-fields stretches away to the outskirts of the forest.

In the centre of the village stands the lios or residence of the bó-aire himself. This consists essentially of a space of ground enclosed by an earthen rampart or rath, and containing within itself a number of wooden buildings. (Properly speaking, the rath is the enclosing rampart, and the lios the space enclosed; but the words have long been used interchangeably). At a little distance from the rath is another area enclosed by a strong rampart: that is the badhun or cow-keep (the word comes from bó and dún into which the cattle are driven for safety at night. This, be it noted, is *outside* the rath or homestead proper. Approaching the lios itself, we first pass across the faithche or green—a large level sward used chiefly for athletic exercises and the games of the children. It is at the present moment occupied by a noisy troop of youngsters, encumbered only by the very scantiest clothing, who run, jump, tumble, and disport themselves in a thousand fashions—just such a merry group of Irish-speaking children as we should encounter to-day in a village of Connemara or Erris; many things have changed in Ireland, but the children have not changed.

Inside the faithche or green we come to yet another space, an ornamental lawn (called urla) which stretches immediately in front of

the door of the rath: this is a sort of pleasure-ground on which the folk promenade when so disposed. We now come to the lios or homestead itself; and we see that the way in which it has been fashioned is this. A deep circular trench is dug, and the earth thrown up on the inside. If water is convenient the trench is flooded for greater security. Within this moat or ditch the earthen embankment rises to a considerable height; it is neatly shaped and faced, and on its summit there is a quick hedge or palisade of hawthorn, hazel, or other trees. In the embankment there is one opening for a gate, and opposite the opening is a bridge across the moat, which is drawn up at night.

I have here described the ordinary type of lios or residence. I have made it circular, as a round or oval shape was generally preferred by the builders of ancient Irish mansions, though square and oblong forts were—and are—to be found. I have also made the embankment of earth, as this was by far the commonest material. But in stony countries, as along the rocky western coast, it was found more convenient to build the outer ramparts of stone. The series of huge stone forts of cyclopean masonry which stretch along the west and south-west coasts, and of which the grandest, not merely in Ireland, but in the world, are those on the islands of Aran, were just such dwellings as I describe; but in all probability they belong to a much earlier date than that with which I am now dealing.

Let us enter the lios or enclosure, passing across the bridge which spans the trench. We notice that the ground inside is somewhat elevated above the level of the plain without. The interior of the enclosure is occupied by a group of buildings similar in general style to those we have seen outside. They are all of wood and wickerwood, with thatches of straw or shingle. They are built in this wise. Let us suppose that the house is to be a circular one, as most houses were. The site having been marked out, a number of long and strong poles, peeled and polished smooth, are driven into the ground, placed at a little distance apart, and enclosing a circular space. The interstices are now filled in with twigs carefully interwoven, so that the whole forms a strong and substantial wall. A house of this sort is called a teach fighte, or woven house. The roof is conical in shape, and is formed of

hurdles or wickerwork, thatched, as already said, with straw or shingle.

Let us look round the lios, and gain a general idea of the number and the purpose of the buildings which it contains. The most prominent is naturally the dwelling-house itself, a single-roomed circular structure of the sort I have described. Attached to it, but entered by separate doorways, and having no internal communication with the dwelling-house or with each other, are a number of sleeping-rooms, round or rectangular. Next there is the kitchen, a little behind the dwelling-house, and quite a separate structure from it. (In the primitive Irish house, as afterwards in the primitive Irish monastery, the various rooms, such as dining-room, sleeping-rooms, kitchen, library, etc., instead of being merely apartments of the same building as amongst us, were detached buildings grouped close to one another). Near the kitchen is a kiln for drying corn, and dotted about the enclosure at convenient spots are a barn, a sheep-house, a calf-house, and a pig-house. (These seven buildings are enumerated in the old legal tract called the *Crith Gabhlach* as the minimum number of buildings in the homestead of a well-to-do farmer of the bó-aire class: a bó-aire was a farmer who rented land from a chief, and whose wealth consisted chiefly in cattle).

As we make our way through the lios we pass a number of the dependents of the bó-aire intent on their several occupations. Let us imagine that it is late in the afternoon, and that preparations are being made for the evening meal. In ancient Ireland the chief meal of the day was taken in the evening. Breakfast was early in the morning, and there was a light luncheon about mid-day, but the principal meal was that taken after the greater part of the day's work was done. We notice that the lios is full of bustle. The calves and sheep and pigs are being driven into their enclosures for the night. From the lawn without we hear the shouting of the herds as they drive home the cattle. A clatter of vessels resounds from the dairy. Women are passing in laden with bundles of fresh rushes to strew the floor of the house, that honour may be done to the strange guests. We pause to observe the persons and attires of the men and women more closely. The men are splendid specimens of manhood—just such tall, lithe, graceful figures as one

sees in Aran or Tory. They are big-boned and sinewy, but without an ounce of spare flesh; broad in the shoulder, thin in the flank, as lithe as greyhounds, as fleet as stags. They can run down the wild boar on foot; they can bear hunger and cold and thirst without complaint; they think naught of a night spent in the open air on a distant mountain-slope, with no covering from the dew or frost save their mantles and their matted hair. Their clothing consists essentially of a short tight-fitting tunic (*ionar*) and a kilt (*ceilt*) reaching down to the knee or near it, and displaying the rest of the limb bare. Under the *ionar* is a shirt (*léine*). The flowing *brat* or mantle which they would wear in travelling or on full-dress occasions is thrown aside to allow them greater freedom in their work. Some, however, wear a short cape, furnished with a hood (*cochall*). The heads are bare, save for their thick covering of hair, which falls down behind on the shoulders and is clipped short in front just above the eyes. Long moustaches clothe their upper lips, and in the majority of cases ample beards float on their bosoms. The feet are, for the most part, bare, but some wear stout brogues, often of untanned hide (*cuaroga*), like the bróga-úr-leathair of the Aran islanders of to-day.

The women are comely Irish types, differing little, I daresay, from the maids and matrons one meets to-day in an Irish-speaking countryside. Their characteristic garment is a long kirtle extending neatly to the feet. Like the women of our own day, many of them, especially the young girls, prefer to go bare-footed. The married women have their heads covered either with a hood (*caille*) or with a web of linen wound round it (*calladh*)—the girls and unmarried women for the most part go bare-headed.

The fact that we are strangers has now been observed, and a lad comes forward to guide us to the presence of the master of the lios. Piloted by him, we thread our way through the busy throng to the door of the dwelling-house. Here we are met by the bó-aire himself, who receives us with that mixture of stately courtesy and kindly good-nature which is still the birthright of the unspoiled Irish Gael. We are conducted within the main apartment, and in the intervals of exchanging civilities with our host, have time to look about us, and note the characteristics of this Irish home of the first century.

II.

The house in this particular instance happens to be round, but it might equally be oval or quadrangular. The high-pitched roof is supported by one, two, or more poles, across which runs a beam, from which hang lamps. Along the walls are ranged a series of cubicles or sleeping compartments, each screened off from the rest of the room by a wooden partition, eight or nine feet high, the various compartments thus being open at the top. (We have seen that there were outside the house a number of separate sleeping-chambers, entered by separate doors. But, except in a very large and important mansion, the chief provision for sleeping would be these little cubicles ranged round the wall of the chief dwelling-apartment. Of course, in the cabin of a peasant there would not be even these, and all would sleep as best they could in the same room). Each cubicle contains a bed for one, two, or three persons, the better beds being elegantly curtained; also a rack on which to hang clothes. Outside each cubicle, attached to the wooden partition, is a seat facing into the central apartment.

The fire is placed near the centre of the house, and round it are grouped a number of moveable seats. There are also three or four wooden tables in the apartment, with low seats or couches on which to recline when at meals.

Let us imagine for the nonce that we are foreigners of some distinction. Our host is not a chief, but a mere bó-aire; yet he is a man of considerable wealth and of not a little culture. He will do the honours of his house as punctiliously as would Meadhbh and Aileall at Rathcroghan or Cairbre at Tara. As a preliminary to dinner, we are invited to refresh ourselves by a bath. (The ancient Irish had a veritable passion for bathing: every child was taught to swim, and a gambol in the river or lake was part of the recreation of every day. Indeed, in those times in Ireland swimming was a necessary accomplishment: the ancient Irish never built stone bridges, and in the absence of a ford or a causeway swimming was the ordinary mode of crossing a river. Moreover, bathing at home was a daily practice, at least amongst the middle and upper classes. It was the custom to wash only the hands on rising; and in the late afternoon, just before dinner,

a bath was indulged in. The bath was a large tub or vat called *dabhach*.) Suppose we decline to bathe, we shall at least be pressed to have our feet washed: and, this ceremony performed, we sit down to dinner. To be accurate, we do not so much sit down, as lie down. For the tables are very low, and the seats are long, low couches on which, as amongst the Romans, the guests recline. Our sandals or other foot-covering are removed just before dinner by an attendant.

The table is plentifully spread with an abundance of good cheer. Of flesh meat, pork is the favourite, but there is beef, mutton, and even venison in plenty. The meat is boiled, roast, or broiled much as it is at present. Broth figures largely in the meal, and there are 'kitchens' (*annlann* is the Irish word) of onions, garlic, kale, cress, and other herbs. These come from the lubhghort or kitchen-garden, which we might have seen behind the lios in our passage towards the house. White-meats of various kinds,—new milk, buttermilk, butter, cheese, and eggs—are used in abundance. Honey figures largely in the menu. The drinks, in addition to milk, are such light intoxicants as ale, brewed for the most part from barley; mead, a delicate and delicious drink made chiefly from honey; and wine, which is, of course, imported. Uisge beathadh, or whiskey, was not invented for many centuries after the period we are dealing with.

The majority of the table-vessels are made of wood, beech-wood being the commonest material; but we notice that the best vessels are of yew. There are *corns* or drinking horns fashioned from bullock's horn, but the favourite drinking-vessel is the well-known wooden meadar. We eat from platters and use knives, but no forks: dinner-forks, as an invention, are only a few centuries old. Men and women sit at table together; and all join freely in the conversation.

Dinner over, our host invites us to visit the grianán or sunny chamber of the women folk. This apartment, as its name implies, is invariably placed in the brightest part of the dwelling. Often the grianán is a separate house altogether; but in the present instance, as is frequently the case, it is a raised apartment, placed in front over the common sitting-room, immediately above the door. Here the ladies of the house sit and work; here the daughters and foster-daughters of the bó-aire are trained in all the useful and ornamental arts suited to their

station in life. Here they are taught to prize the six gifts of perfect womanhood; and these, according to the old Irish, were the gift of beauty, the gift of voice, the gift of sweet speech, the gift of needlework, the gift of wisdom, and the gift of chastity. It was the universal custom in ancient Ireland for fathers and mothers to send their children to be fostered in the home of some friend or relative; and the foster-children lived in their adopted home precisely on the same footing as the children of the family. The old tales give us many delightful glimpses of the life of the *grianán*, with its large family of young girls, sisters and foster-sisters, living together in amity. The most memorable and beautiful is that which we gain of the home life of Emer, the future spouse of Cuchulainn, in the tale known as the *Wooring of Emer*.

It is now late evening. The tables in the main apartment have been cleared away; the lamps which hang from the cross-beam are lit, and so are candles made of rushes dipped many times into hot grease. The folk gather round the fire, just as they are wont to do in our own day, in Irish-speaking homes. A *seanchaidhe* drops in, and another who has a store of old songs; and just such another night of song and *sgéalaidheacht*, of *seanchus* and *comhradh*, is passed happily away as we have all of us spent by some remembered fireside in the *Gaedhealtacht*. All too soon comes the signal to retire to rest. Our hosts conducts us to our cubicle (*imda*), where our bed—fortunately a *lige cumtachta* or curtained bed, with a comfortable *dergud* or mattress resting on the substantial *tolg* (bedstead), and furnished with linen sheets, blankets (*setigi*), a quilt (*colcaid*), and a pillow (*adhart*)—invites us to slumber. With the ‘*slan codlata*’ of our kindly *bó-aire* ringing in our ears we sink to rest; and so ends our first evening in an Irish homestead of the days of Meadhbh.

III.

We had an object in electing to make our first visit to the house of a bó-aire or well-to-do farmer rather than to the hovel of a peasant on the one hand or to the dún of a chief on the other. The house of the bó-aire may be taken as typical of the Irish residence of the first century. In the dún of a chief we should have found more magnificence, more luxury, more culture; but the main lines of the picture would have remained. In the hovel of a herdsman or fisherman we should, of course, have been prepared for a considerably less degree of comfort. We should have marked without surprise the absence of the grianán and of separate sleeping apartments. The whole family would have lived and slept together—skins and rough mattresses stretched on the floor replacing beds; no tables or chairs would have been used, the meals being partaken of from the floor. But we may be sure that an Irish herdsman or fisherman of the first century would have received us with just such a dignity and courtesy as would his Irish-speaking descendant of to-day.

I trust that it will not be thought that in the descriptions I have given, and am about to give, I am in any way idealising the picture. I can quote chapter and verse for my every statement. It must be remembered that the very considerable meed of culture which we have seen in the house of our bó-aire, and which, in a still greater degree, we shall have an opportunity of seeing in the house of our bó-aire's chief, to whom we are about to pay a visit—it must be remembered, I say that this culture, generous and gracious though it was, was not incompatible with a certain measure of what may be called healthy primitiveness. The old world was in many ways less squeamish than the modern world, and, in so far as it was, the old world was undoubtedly a better and an honester world. The plainness of speech which would have characterised the conversation of an Irish fireside group two thousand years ago would, I daresay, shock a modern goody-goody—but then we have modern goody-goodies who are shocked, or pretend to be shocked, at the plainness of speech of the average Irish speaker, in his conversation no less than in his folk-tales and folk-songs. The plainness of speech of the old Gael was simply the

reflection of a certain simplicity in his life. Our ancestors never committed that cardinal sin against decency of considering the human body an unclean thing, always to be hidden away carefully from sight. They never encased their limbs in cumbrous and inartistic clothes. The feet and legs and arms of men were commonly bare, as were the feet and arms and necks of women. Young children wore little or no clothing. A cultured Gael of the days of Meadhbh would no more have been shocked at the sight of a nude child or a nude young lad, or a nude athlete or warrior, than would a cultured Greek of the days of Socrates, or a cultured Hindoo of our own days. It is expressly stated that the Red Branch heroes, like the Homeric heroes, often went nude into battle. Men frequently took their baths in the common apartment in the presence of the household. Without going so far as to recommend a return to the primitive simplicity, we may note that horror of comely nakedness is modern, mainly British, and almost entirely Pecksniffian.

It need hardly be said that the old Gael, like many Irish speakers of the present day, slept nude. This was the custom of all Europe down to comparatively recent times. In England it subsisted in Anglo-Saxon days, seems to have disappeared some time after the Norman Conquest, but had been restored before the reign of Elizabeth.

To resume our narrative. Whilst we are the guests of the bó-aire, we have ample opportunity of observing the daily life of the little community which clusters round his house. We can sit on the *faithche* and watch the children at their games; we can stroll from the *faithche* to the *badhun*, or, entering the *lios*, examine in turn the kitchen (*cuchtair*), the corn-kiln (*dith*), the barn (*saball*)—which, we note, unlike the other buildings, is oblong in shape; the sheep-house (*lias cáirach*), the calf-house (*lias larg*), and the pig-house (*muccál*). We can watch the dependants of the bó-aire as they go about their several avocations—the men, muscular yet lithe, sallying forth to the fields or to the chase; the women and girls, bright haired and bright-faced, with perfect complexions and teeth, with neck, arms, and feet which might put the masterpieces of Greek sculpture to shame, busied in the dairy or in the kitchen—talkative and sprightly, we may be sure, yet winsome and modest (these are the characteristics which seanchaidhes hand us

down of the Irish maids and matrons of the early centuries). Life is simple, and has few complications in this old Irish village. The village-folk till the little patch of ground which they have rescued from the forest; they herd cattle, sheep, swine; they rear bees; they dry their corn in their kiln, they grind it in their mill, they bake it in their ovens; they fashion their spears of the ash that grows in the wild-wood, they twist their shields from the osiers and cover them with the hides of their cattle. They build their own houses. The nimble fingers of the women fashion clothes for their husbands and sons,—card, spin, weave, die, embroider. Periodically, a great event occurs to break the daily routine: men and matrons, youth and maidens, go off to the great Aenach or Fair held by the local chief,—the men to join in council, the youths to engage in warlike exercises, the women to make purchases, to admire and be admired. Often, too,—oftener than is good, perhaps,—the chief summons them to war, and the men, bearing spear and sword, sally out to raid a neighbouring chief or to defend their own frontiers. Then no one is left behind in the village but anxious women at their spinning, and the children tumbling on the green.

Having spent a few days in quiet observation of this rustic life, we determine to push on to a wider field of inquiry where we shall, perchance, meet folk more famous and distinguished, though scarcely more kindly. Let us suppose that, hearing from our host that the residence of the chief or king of the district is only a short day's journey distant, we decide to proceed thither to pay him our respects. Rising shortly after daybreak—your ancient Gael of all classes was an early riser—we prepare for the journey. Journeys in olden Ireland were usually performed on foot, especially, of course, in the case of the poorer folk. But wealthier people rode in chariots, and our host willingly places his at our disposal. The Irish chariot (*carpat*) was of various forms and materials. Ours, like the majority, consists of a body (*crét*) of wickerwork, supported on an outer frame of strong wooden bars. It has two spoked wheels (*droch* or *rath*) shod with iron (*rotha iarnaidi*). There are two shafts (*fertas*, pl. *fertse*) of hard holly-wood, and the chariot is drawn by two horses, between which runs a pole called a *sithbe*. (Usually, however, the chariots of private persons, as distinguished from warriors, were drawn by oxen,—you will

remember the case of St. Patrick.) There is room in the vehicle for two persons a seat being provided for the master or mistress, and a lower one (commonly on the right) for the charioteer (*ara*). Over the chariot is an awning or canopy (*pupal*) supported on poles.

We start on our journey, and proceed over the rough road at a pace which—our car being without springs—makes travelling more exciting than comfortable. Our charioteer, a lad of the bó-aire's people, shortens the road in true Irish fashion by a tale.

Arrived at length at the dún of the king, we find that in general plan it does not differ materially from the homestead we have left. It is, of course, much larger and more magnificent. The faithche is more spacious, and so is the ornamental lawn before the door; also we catch a glimpse of a picturesque orchard (*uballgort*), stocked with goodly fruit-trees. Instead of the single rampart which enclosed the dwelling of our host of last night, this dún—for dún is properly the name of a lios which belongs to a king—has a triple earthen rampart, with a triple trench; moreover, outside the outermost earthen rampart is a strong wooden palisade called a *sonnach*, enclosing a very considerable area.²

On the faithche or green—which, by the way, is outside the *sonnach*—the boy-troop (*macrad*) of the dún is engaged in sport. This merry band consists of the sons and foster-sons of the chief, with mayhap the sons of minor chiefs held here as hostages for their fathers' fidelity. The boys have a very happy time of it. They are taught to swim, and to perform various feats in the water; to run, jump, wrestle, drive, ride, and use their weapons. Their whole education, the superintendence of which forms one of the most important duties of the chief³ is directed towards making them strong and clever,—brave and patient in war, gentle and courteous in peace. As we pass across the faithche we pause to watch their sports. A hurling match (*immán*) is in progress,—this is their favourite game. Another group is engaged

² In addition there would often be a chevaux de frise of stones to prevent a rush of an attacking force. The great chevaux de frise which protected Dun Aonghusa in Aran, on the land side of the cliff, still stands.

³ Conchubhar mac Neasa is said to have spent one-third of his spare time in superintending the education of the Macrad of Eamhain Macha.

at what is called the 'hole game'; each boy on one side has a ball which he endeavours to strike into a hole, while the opposite side tries to prevent him. The *cluiche lúibe ocus liathróidi* ('loop and ball game') has its votaries in a corner of the field; and a fourth group is interested in the *roth-chless* or 'wheel-feat,'—a kind of quoit-throwing. Other games they have, somewhat rougher, such as trying to upset one another and trying to tear off one another's clothes. This last was a favourite pastime amongst the boys of the Red Branch at Eamhain Macha; and we recall that Cuchulainn when a little lad was so good at this particular game that whereas the others could not as much as unloose the brooch which fastened his brat, he was able to tear off not merely the cloaks and tunics but the kilts of any three! I think the training of boys in ancient Ireland was on an entirely sensible plain, and if we are to trust the old tales—which in such matters we certainly may—their life must have been a very happy one. As we stand to watch the macerad of the dún we are about to visit, we cannot help observing what fine, comely little fellows they are; the glow of health on their cheeks, the flash of glee in their eyes, their heads bare and their locks braided or floating loose behind them. How sturdy they are, how straight and true of limb, how quick of eye, foot, and hand,—truly the makings of strong, brave men.

We pick our way through the noisy, merry troop, and one of them, noticing that we are strangers, runs and modestly offers to conduct us to the guest-house. Piloted by him, we enter the dún, passing across the triple rampart, and are presently received by the Rechtaire or Major Domo of the palace.

IV.

The dún of the king is a reproduction on a larger and more magnificent scale of the lios of our bó-aire. About the enclosure are dotted the usual wooden buildings,—the cuchtair, the áith, the saball, the lias cáirach, and so on. The *tech* or dwelling-house proper stands on a raised platform at or near the centre and commands a view of the whole lios. The structure is, of course, of wood, the platform being of earth. It is to the door of this, across the intervening space of the lios, that our guide conducts us. On the threshold we are received by the Rechtaire.

The Rechtaire (he is also called the *Taisech Teglaig* and the *Fer Taigis*) is a stately and important-looking officer, habited in a long fleecy mantle, and bearing a wand in token of his authority in the chief's household. He marshals us to the guest-house (*tech n-óiged*) and commits us to the charge of two of his subordinates, who carry us off to the customary bath. Duly washed and groomed, we are conducted to the banqueting-hall. In many chiefs' duns, the main apartment serves at once for living, dining, and even sleeping, but we are imagining that our host is a *rí tuaithe*⁴ of considerable wealth and importance. His dún, therefore, boasts a separate banqueting hall, which is, of course, a distinct structure from the dwelling-house proper. It is a large and lofty wooden building, supported on two rows of columns which divide it into three long aisles. In the centre blazes a huge fire, where the cooking is carried on during the meal, the attendants serving from the centre aisle. The walls are handsomely wainscoted, and hung with shields, weapons, and trophies of the chase. At the top of the hall is a raised platform, on which sit the king and queen, with the Druids, Brehons, Poets, and chief nobles. At the bottom is a space for the servants and humbler retainers, who, in accordance with the old, kindly custom, dine in common with their

⁴ The graduations were *rí tuaithe* (king or chief of a tuath or cantred); *rí mór-tuaithe* (king or chief of a territory comprising several tuaths); *rí cóicid* (king of a province); and—later—*árd-rí* (high king or emperor of all Ireland). It is almost certain that the king of Tara had not been recognised as *árd-rí* at the period with which we are dealing.

masters. The main body of the hall is occupied by the general body of guests. The seats or couches (called *bratrach*, npl. *-a*, but *imda* is also applied) are ranged around the walls. These are raised, above the level of the floor, and are richly canopied, the canopies being supported on carved pillars of yew, some of which are covered with bronze or silver.

The Rí and his chief guests have already taken their places on the dais. The Rechtaire leads us to the king's *imda*, and our host greets us after the Irish fashion by embracing us and thrice kissing us on the cheek. As foreigners, we are assigned a seat of distinction. Meantime the general body of the guests is assembling, marshalled by the Rechtaire. The warriors march in and take their seats, strictly in accordance with their rank, each hanging his shield and arms above his couch on a rack intended for the purpose, which runs along the panelled walls. The women take their seats opposite to the men. Before the meal commences the host rises and formally welcomes his guests. Then all fall to. A babble of conversation arises, men and women joining in freely. Whenever the din grows too great the Rí commands silence by striking a gong which hangs on a pillar before him.

It is scarcely necessary to describe the feast in detail. Each one, building on what has been said with regard to the evening banquet in the humbler homestead of the *bó-aire*, can fill in the picture for himself. Suffice it to say that many of the table utensils are exceedingly rich,—carved yew, white bronze, silver, gold. The joints are pork (*muicc-fheoil*), beef, (*mairt-fheoil*), mutton (*caer-fheoil* or *muilt-fheoil*), venison (*fiad-fheoil*), badger-flesh (*broc-fheoil*), and the flesh of the *togmall*—a small animal which O'Curry has (wrongly?) identified with the squirrel—together with wild fowl of various sorts. Numerous pottages concocted from meat and herbs figure in the menu, as well as various preparations from eggs and the other *bán-biada*. The drinks are ale (*lenn*), mead (*mid*), and wine (*fion*).

The meal over, the remainder of the evening is spent in traditional Irish fashion. The old formula of the seanchaidhes is 'trian le sgéalaidheacht, trian le ceol, agus trian le suan agus sámh-chodladh.' The Rí strikes his bell to command silence. A hush falls, to be broken presently by the voice of a Seanchaidhe as he commences the relation of some famous tale of valour or love or sorrow,—mayhap the battle

exploits of the Rí himself or his immediate ancestors, mayhap some old legend of the De Danann gods, Lugh and Aonghus and the Daghdha Mór, in which piteous human tragedy mingles with dark mysticism as in the Fate of Tuireann's Children. Next arise the *aes ciúil oirfidid*—the Court musicians—who rouse us with their *gentraige*, melt us with their *goltraige*, and sooth us with their *suantraige*. Anon perchance the *clár fidchilli* or chessboard and the *brannad*⁵ are drawn forth and the more sedate amongst the company gather round to play or to watch the play of their friends, while the younger folk engage in *roth-chless* (an indoor as well as an outdoor game). Thus, to use the Irish phrase, we 'bear out' the night until the signal comes to retire to rest.

It will be observed that no mention has been made of dancing, and that for the all-sufficient reason that dancing was not a pastime of the ancient Gael. Such at least is the inevitable conclusion from the complete silence of the tales, ample as they are in their descriptions of social life and customs. Where our reels and our jigs have come from it is not for us to say: certain it is that nothing like them—nothing that one could possibly identify with dancing as we know it—appears to have been in vogue in Ireland for centuries after the date of our imaginary visit.⁶

The rest of our tour may be passed over more rapidly. To give a glimpse of the old Gael *at home* has been the object of this paper. Of his wars and his commerce, his jurisprudence and his religious rites, we do not speak. There is no picture, however, which we would fain give ere we conclude. It is that of an ancient Irish *Aenach* or Fair. We are to imagine ourselves on a wide smooth green overlooking the sea. In the harbour ride many foreign vessels, which have borne merchants from Gaul and Greece and Egypt to buy and sell. One portion of the fair-green is occupied by booths, where rich merchandise is displayed for sale, and buying and selling proceed briskly. In another quarter

⁵ On this a game called *brannaigheacht*, evidently distinct from chess was played.

⁶ The introduction of dancing at the court of Brian Boirmhe is one of the many anachronisms in An tAthair Peadar's 'Niamh.' His blunder would scarcely have been greater had he introduced Ping-Pong or Bridge.

the nobles and freemen are assembled in council, under the presidency of the Rí of the territory. Here laws are deliberated upon, passed, and promulgated. On other days, courts of justice are held, and decisions on legal points given by the Brehons. There horse-racing, chariot-racing, foot-racing, wrestling, and all sorts of manly games are carried on by the young men; in other parts of the field gleemen (*crossán*) are singing ballads, clowns (*fuirseoir* or *obláire*) are making jokes, jugglers (*cless amnach*) are performing all manner of tricks. A separate enclosure is set apart for the women, and no man is allowed to enter the women's enclosure, nor is a woman allowed to enter the men's enclosure. At night the vast assemblage of people, gentle and common, encamp in hastily erected booths, or under the open sky. Order and decorum are strictly maintained. All public and private feuds are in abeyance whilst the Fair lasts, and the penalty for breaking the peace is death. These assemblies are, obviously, of immense service: they bring the people together for legislation, commerce, and amusement; they draw the nobles and the common people into friendly contact; they promote interest in the affairs of the commonwealth, and foster a feeling of brotherhood between the different classes and districts.

Our last night in first-century Ireland shall be spent in one of the great Bruigens or public Hostels. It would not do to leave the shores of the country without having visited so characteristic an institution. The *Brugaid* or public Hospitaller belongs to the bó-aire class. He is bound to keep open house for the entertainment of all wayfarers. He must maintain roads leading to his Bruigen from all directions, and a light must always burn on his lawn. From such tales as the Destruction of Bruigen Da Derga we are able to construct a singularly complete picture of one of these old Irish inns. Let us imagine that we are approaching one, taking mental notes the while. We observe that the Bruigen has a number of doors—four, six, or seven—always open, and with pathways leading to them from every side. The group of buildings is quite extensive: there is the dwelling-house, with a large structure at the back for servants or sleeping; round this are grouped various outhouses—all, like the dwelling-house, of wood and thatched—a mill, a kiln, a bake-house, cow-houses, sheep-pens, pig-sties. In the court are two immense vats, one for milk,

the other for mead or ale. On the lawn stands a huge torch or candle as a beacon to wayfarers. There are, of course, a dairy and numerous store-houses. The floors are strewn with fresh rushes. Within the precincts are several wells of fresh water, or else, as in the case of Bruigen Da Derga, a flowing stream runs through the centre. The buildings are surrounded by gardens in which grow fruit-trees and vegetables. The whole is enclosed by three immense raths, between which stretch grassy lawns where the men promenade and the ladies sit at their embroidery. Strong fighting-men are always on guard at the doors and on the ramparts.

But our time is up. We must bid farewell to Erin (so the old Gaels called their country). Hundreds of years have gone by since the things I have described ceased to be. Our civilisation has met with shipwreck, and from the battered fragments we in our day are attempting to build up anew that noble ark. A blessing on ye, builders!

P. Mac. P.