THE MYTHOLOGY OF ANCIENT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

CHAPTER I

THE CELTS AND THEIR MYTHOLOGY

'THE Mythology of Ancient Britain and Ireland.' This title will possibly at first sight suggest to the reader who has been brought up to consider himself essentially an Anglo-Saxon only a few dim memories of Tíw, of Wóden, of Thunor (Thor), and of Frig, those Saxon deities who have bequeathed to us the names of four of the days of our week.[1] Yet the traces of the *English gods* are comparatively few in Britain, and are not found at all in Ireland, and, at any rate, they can be better studied in the Teutonic countries to which they were native than in this remote outpost of their influence. Preceding the Saxons in Britain by many centuries were the Celts-the 'Ancient Britons '-who themselves possessed a rich mytho-

[1] Tíwesdæg, Wódnesdæg, Thunresdæg (later, Thurresdsg), and Frigedsg. Sæter(n)esdæg is adapted from the Latin, *Saturni* dies.

logy, the tradition of which, though obscured, has never been quite lost. In such familiar names as 'Ludgate,' called after a legendary 'good king Lud' who was once the Celtic god Llûdd; in popular folk and fairy tales ; in the stories of Arthur and his knights, some of whom are but British divinities in disguise ; and in certain of the wilder legends of our early saints, we have fragments of the Celtic mythology handed down tenaciously by Englishmen who had quite as much of the Celt as of the Saxon in their blood.

To what extent the formerly prevalent belief as to the practical extinction of the Celtic inhabitants of our islands at the hands of the Saxons has been reconsidered of late years may be judged from the dictum of one of the most recent students of the subject, Mr. Nicholson, in the preface to his *Keltic Researches*.[1] 'There is good ground to believe,' he says, 'that Lancashire, West Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Rutland, Cambridgeshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, and part of Sussex, are as Keltic as Perthshire and North Munster ; that Cheshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Monmouth-

[1] *Keltic* Researches: *Studies* in *the History and Distribution of the Ancient Goidelic Language and Peoples, by Edward* Williams Byron Nicholson, M.A. ; London, 1904.

shire, Gloucestershire, Devon, Dorset, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, and Bedfordshire are more so-and equal to North Wales and Leinster ; while Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire exceed even this degree and are on a level with South Wales and Ulster. Cornwall, of course, is more Keltic than any other English county, and as much so as Argyll, Invernessshire, or Connaught.' If these statements are well founded, Celt and Teuton must be very equally woven into the fabric of the British nation.

But even the Celts themselves were not the first inhabitants of our islands. Their earliest arrivals found men already in possession. We meet with their relics in the 'long barrows,' and deduce from them a short, dark, long-skullcd race of slight physique and in a relatively low stage of civilisation. Its origin is uncertain, and so is all we think we know of it, and, though it must have greatly influenced Aryan-Celtic custom and myth, it would be hard to put a finger definitely upon any point where the two different cultures have met and blended.

We know more about its conquerors. According to the most generally accepted theory, there were two main streams of Aryan emigra-

tion from the Continent into a non-Aryan Britain, both belonging to the same linguistic branch of the Indo-European stock-the Celtic-but speaking variant dialects of that tongue-Goidelic, or Gaelic, and Brythonic, or British. Of these the Goidels were the earlier, their first settlers having arrived at some period between 1000 and 500 B.C., while the Brythons, or Brĭttŏnes, seem to have appeared about the third century B.C., steadily encroaching upon and ousting their forerunners. With the Brythons must be considered the Belgæ, who made, still later, an extensive invasion of Southern Britain, but who seem to have been eventually assimilated to, or absorbed in, the Brythons, to whom they were, at any rate linguistically, much akin.[1] In physique, as well as in language, there was probably a difference between the Brythons and the Goidels, the latter containing some admixture of the broad-headed stock of Central Europe, and it is thought also that the Goidels must have become in course of time modified by admixture with the dark, long-skulled non-Aryan race. The Romans appear to have recognised more than one type in Britain, distinguishing between the inhabitants of the coast regions

[1] Rhŷs, **Celtic** *Britain*, **1904, and** Rhŷs **and Brynmor-Jones,** *The Welsh* ***People,*** **1906.**

nearest to France, who resembled the Gauls, and the ruddy-haired, large-limbed natives of the North, who seemed to them more akin to the Germans. To these may be added certain people of West Britain, whose dark complexions and curly hair caused Tacitus to regard them as immigrants from Spain, and who probably belonged either wholly or largely to the aboriginal stock.[1]

We have no records of the clash and counter-clash of savage warfare which must, if this theory be taken as correct, have marked, first, the conquest of the aborigines by the Goidels, and afterwards the displacement of the Goidels by the later branches of the Celts. Nor do we know when or how the Goidels crossed from Britain to Ireland. All that we can state with approximate certainty is that at the time of the Roman domination the Brythons were in possession of all Britain south of the Tweed, with the exception of the extreme West, while the Goidels had most of Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cumberland, North and South Wales, Cornwall, and Devon, as well as, in the opinion of some authorities, the West Highlands of Scotland,[2] the primitive dark

[1] Tacitus, *Agricola*, chap, xi.

[2] It is, however, held by others that the Goidels of Scotland did not reach that country (from Ireland) before the Christian era.

race being still found in certain portions of Ireland and of West Britain, and in Scotland north of the Grampian Hills.

It is the beliefs, traditions, and legends of these Goidels and Brythons, and their more unmixed descendants, the modern Gaels and Cymry, which make up our mythology. Nor is the stock of them by any means so scanty as the remoteness and obscurity of the age in which they were still vital will probably have led the reader to expect. We can gather them from six different sources: (1) Dedications to Celtic divinities upon altars and votive tablets, large numbers of which have been found both on the Continent and in our own islands ; (2) Irish, Scottish, and Welsh manuscripts which, though they date only from mediaeval times, contain, copied from older documents, legends preserved from the pagan age ; (3) So-called histories -notably that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, written in the twelfth century— which consist largely of mythical matter disguised as a record of the ancient British kings ; (4) Early hagiology, in which the myths of gods of the pagan Goidels and Brythons have been taken over by the ecclesiasts and fathered upon the patron saints of the Celtic Church ; (5) The groundwork of British bardic tradition upon

which the Welsh, Breton, and Norman minstrels, and, following them, the romance-writers of all the more civilised European countries founded the Arthurian cycle ; (6) And lastly, upon folk tales which, although but lately reduced to writing, are probably as old, or even older, than any of the other sources.

A few lines must here be spared to show the reader the nature of the mediaeval manuscripts just mentioned. They consist of larger or smaller vellum or parchment volumes, into which the scribe of a great family or of a monastery laboriously copied whatever lore, godly or worldly, was deemed most worthy of perpetuation. They thus contain very varied matter :-portions of the Bible ; lives of saints and works attributed to them; genealogies and learned treatises ; as well as the poems of the bards and the legends of tribal heroes who had been the gods of an earlier age. The most famous of them are, in Irish, the Books of the Dun Cow, of Leinster, of Lecan, of Ballymote, and the Yellow Book of Lecan; and in Welsh, the so-called ' Four Ancient Books of Wales'-the Black Book of Carmarthen, the Book of Aneurin, the Book of Taliesin, and the Red Book of Hergest-together with the White Book of Rhydderch. Taken as a whole, they date

from the beginning of the twelfth century to the end of the sixteenth ; the oldest being the Book of the Dun Cow, the compiler of which died in the year 1106. But much of their substance is far older-can, indeed, be proved to ante-date the seventh century-while the mythical tales and poems must, even at this earlier age, have long been traditional. They preserve for us, in however distorted a form, much of the legendary lore of the Celts.

The Irish manuscripts have suffered less sophistication than the Welsh. In them the gods still appear as divine and the heroes as the pagans they were ; while their Welsh congeners pose as kings or knights, or even as dignitaries of the Christian Church. But the more primitive, less adulterated, Irish myths can be brought to throw light upon the Welsh, and thus their accretions can be stripped from them till they appear in their true guise. In this way scholarship is gradually unveiling a mythology whose appeal is not merely to our patriotism. In itself it is often poetic and lofty, and, in its disguise of Arthurian romance, it has influenced modern art and literature only less potently than that mighty inspiration-the mythology of Ancient Greece.

CHAPTER II

THE GODS OF THE CONTINENTAL CELTS

BUT before approaching the myths of the Celts of Great Britain and Ireland, we must briefly glance at the mythology of the Celts of Continental Europe, that Gallia from which Goidels and Brythons alike came. From the point of view of literature the subject is barren; for whatever mythical and heroic legends the Gauls once had have perished. But there have been brought to light a very large number not only of dedicatory inscriptions to, but also of statues and bas-reliefs of, the ancient gods of Gaul. And, to afford us some clue amid their bewildering variety, a certain amount of information is given us by classic writers, especially by Julius Caesar in his Commentaries on the Gallic War.

He mentions five chief divinities of the Gauls, apparently in the order of their reputed power. First of all, he says, they worship Mercury, as inventor of the arts and patron of travellers and

merchants. Next comes Apollo, the divine healer, and he is followed by Minerva, the teacher of useful trades, by Jupiter, who rules the sky, and by Mars, the director of battles.1 This does not, of course, mean that Caesar considered the gods of the Gauls to be exactly those of the Romans, but that imaginary beings represented as carrying out much the same functions as the Roman Mercury, Apollo, Minerva, Jupiter, and Mars were worshipped by them. In practice, too, the Romans readily assimilated the deities of conquered peoples to their own ; hence it is that in the inscriptions discovered in Gaul, and indeed in our own islands, me find the names of Celtic divinities preceded by those of the Roman gods they were considered to resemble :-as Mercurius Artaios, Apollo Grannos, Minerva Belĭsăma, Jupiter Sŭcellos, and Mars Cămŭlos.

Modern discoveries quite bear out Caesar's statement as to the importance to the Gaulish mind of the god whom he called Mercury. Numerous place-names attest it in modern France. Costly statues stood in his honour ; one, of massive silver, was dug up in the gardens of the Luxembourg, while another, made in bronze by a Greek artist for the great temple of the

1 *De Bello Gallico*, iv. 17.

Arverni upon the summit of the Puy de Dôme, is said to have stood a hundred and twenty feet high, and to have taken ten years to finish. Yet it would seem to have been rather for the war-god that some at least of the warlike Gauls reserved their chief worship. The regard in which he was held is proved by two of his names or titles:— Rīgĭsămos (' Most Royal,') and Albiŏrix ('King of the World '). Much honour, too, must have been paid to a Gaulish Apollo, Grannos, lord of healing waters, from whom Aix-la-Chapelle (anciently called Aquae Granni), Graux and Eaux Graunnes, in the Vosges, and Granheim, in Würtemburg, took their names, for we are told by Dion Cassius [1] that the Roman Emperor Caracalla invoked him as the equal of the better-known Aesculapius and Serapis. Another Gaulish ' Apollo,' Toutiŏrix (' Lord of the People ') has won, however, a far wider, if somewhat vicarious fame. Accidentally confounded with Theodoric the Goth, his mythical achievements are, in all probability, responsible for the wilder legends connected with that historical hero under his title of Dietrich von Bern.[2]

But the gods of the Continental Celts are being

[1] lxxvii. 15.

[2] Rhŷs, *Hibbert Lectures* for 1886, pp. 30-32.

treated in this series [1] far more competently than is in the power of the present writer. For his purpose and his readers', the only Gaulish deities who need be noticed here are some whose names reappear in the written myths of our own Islands.

In the oldest Irish and Welsh manuscripts we meet with personages whose names and attributes identify them with divinities whom we know to have been worshipped in the Celtic world abroad. Ogma combines in Gaelic mythology the characters of the god of eloquence and poetry and the professional champion of his circle, the Tuatha Dé Danann, while a second-century Greek writer called Lucian describes a Gaulish Ogmios, who, though he was represented as armed with the club and lion-skin of Heracles, was yet considered the exponent of persuasive speech. He was depicted as drawing men after him by golden cords attached from his tongue to their ears and, as the 'old man eloquent,' whose varied experience made his words worth listening to, he was shown as wrinkled and bald. Altogether (as a native assured Lucian), he taught that true power resides in wise words as much as in doughty deeds, a lesson

[1] Celtic *Religion*, by Professor E. Anwyl, to whom the writer here takes the opportunity of gratefully acknowledging his indebtedness for valuable help towards the making of this book.

not yet quite forgotten by the Celt.[1] In the Continental Lŭgus, whose name still clings to the cities of Lyons, Laon, and Leyden, all anciently called Lŭgŭdūnum ('Lŭgus's town'), we may claim to see that important figure of the Goidelic legends, Lug of the Long Hand. With the Gaulish goddess Brigindu, of whom mention is made in a dedicatory tablet found at Volnay, near Beaune, we may connect Brigit, the Irish Minerva or Vesta who passed down into saint-ship as Saint Bridget. The war-god[2] Cămŭlos is possibly found in Ireland as Cumhal (*Coul*), father of the famous Finn; in Belĭnus, an apocryphal British king who reappears in romance as Balin of the *Morte Darthur*, we probably have the Gaulish Bĕlĕnos, whom the Latin writer Ausonius mentions as a sun-god served by Druids; while Măpŏnos, identified by the Romans with Apollo, we find in the Welsh stories as Mabon son of Modron (Mātrŏna), a companion of Arthur.

It is by a curious irony that we must now look for the stories of Celtic gods to two islands once considered so remote and uncivilised as hardly to belong to the Celtic world at all.

[1] Rhŷs, *Hibbert* Lectures, pp. 13-20.

[2] Cămŭlus seems to have been a more important god than his Roman equation with Mars (p. 10) suggests. Professor Rhŷs calls him a 'Mars-Jupiter.' Cf. pp. 11, 20-21, and 63 of this book.

CHAPTER III

THE GODS OF THE INSULAR CELTS

IT would be impossible, in so small a space as we can afford, to mention all, or indeed any but a few, of the swarming deities of ancient Britain and Ireland, most of them, in all probability, extremely local in their nature. The best we can do is to look for a fixed point, and this we find in certain gods whose names and attributes are very largely common to both the Goidels and the Brythons. In the old Gaelic literature they are called the Tuatha Dé Danann (*Tooăha due donann*), the 'Tribe of the Goddess Danu,' and in the Welsh documents, the 'Children of Dôn' and the 'Children of Llŷr.'

Danu-or Donu, as the name is sometimes spelt-seems to have been considered by the Goidels as the ancestress of the gods, who collectively took their title from her. We also find mention of another ancient female deity of some-

what similar name, Anu or Ana, worshipped in Munster as a goddess of prosperity and abundance: who was likewise described as the mother of the Irish Pantheon--' Well she used to cherish the gods,' wrote a commentator on a ninth-century Irish glossary.2 Turning to the British mythology, we find that some of the principal figures in what seems to be its oldest stratum are called sons or daughters of Dôn : Gwydion son of Dôn ; Govannon son of Dôn ; Arianrod daughter of Dôn. But Arianrod is also termed the daughter of Beli, which makes it reasonably probable that Beli, who otherwise appears as a mythical king of the Brythons, was considered to be Dôn's consort. His Gaelic counterpart is perhaps Bile, the ancestor of the Milesians, the first Celtic settlers in Ireland, and though Bile is nowhere connected with Danu in the scattered myths which have come down to us, the analogy is suggestive. Bile and Beli seem to represent on Gaelic and British soil respectively the Dis Pater from whom Caesar3 tells us the Gauls believed themselves to be descended, the two

[1] *Coir Anmann.* 'The Choice of Names.' Translated by Dr. Whitley Stokes in *Irische* Texte.

[2] Cormao's *Glossary.* Translated by O'Donovan and edited by Stokes.

[3] *De Bello Gallico,* vi. 18.

shadowy pairs, Bile and Danu, Beli and Dôn, standing for the divine Father and Mother alike of gods and men.

Llŷr, the head of the other family, appears in Gaelic myths as Lêr (*gen.* Lir), both names probably meaning 'the Sea.' Though ranked among the Tuatha Dé Danann, Lêr seems to descend from a different line, and plays little part in the stories of the earlier history of the Irish gods, though he is prominent in what are perhaps equally ancient legends concerning Finn and the Fenians. On the other hand, there are details concerning the British Llŷr which suggest that he may have been borrowed by the Brythons from the Goidels. His wife is called Iwerydd (Ireland), and he himself is termed Llŷr Llediaith, i.e. 'Llŷr of the Half-Tongue,' which is supposed to mean that his language could be but imperfectly understood. He gave its name to Leicester, originally Llŷr-cestre, called in Welsh Caer Lyr, while, through Geoffrey of Monmouth, he has become Shakespeare's 'King Lear,' and is found in hagiology as the head of the first of the 'Three Chief Holy Families of the Isle of Britain.'

Both Lêr and Llŷr are, however, better known to mythology by their sons than from their own

exploits. We find the Gaelic Bron mac Lir and Manannán mac Lir paralleling the British Brân ab Llŷr and Manawyddan ab Llŷr. Of the Irish Bron we know nothing, except that he gave his name to a place called Mag Bron (' Bron's Plain '), but Brân is one of the most clearly outlined figures in the Brythonic mythology. He is represented as of gigantic size-no house or ship which was ever made could contain him in it-and, when he laid himself down across a river, an army could march over him as though upon a bridge. He was the patron of minstrelsy and bardism, and claimed, according to a mediaeval poem [1] put into the mouth of the sixth-century Welsh poet Taliesin, to be himself a bard, a harper, a player upon the *crŵth*, and seven score other musicians all at once. He is a king in Hades with whom the sons of Dôn fight'to obtain the treasures of the Underworld, and, paradoxically enough, has passed down into ecclesiastical legend as 'the Blessed Brân,' who brought Christianity from Rome to Britain.

Turning to the brothers of Bron and Brân, it is of the Irish god this time that we have the fullest account. Manannán mac Lir has always

[1] ' Book of Taliesin,' poem xlviii., in Skene's *Four Ancient Books of Wales, vol.* i. p. 297.

been one of the most vivid of the figures of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Clad in his invulnerable mail, with jewelled helmet which flashed like the sun, robed in his cloak of invisibility woven from the fleeces of the flocks of Paradise, and girt with his sword 'Retaliator' which never failed to slay; whether riding upon his horse' Splendid Mane,' which went swift as the spring wind over land or sea, or voyaging in his boat 'Wave-Sweeper,' which needed neither sail nor oar nor rudder, he presents as striking a picture as can be found in any mythology. The especial patron of sailors, he was invoked by them as 'The Lord of Headlands,' while the merchants claimed that he was the founder of their guild. He was connected especially with the Isle of Man; euhemerising legend asserts that he was its first king, and his grave, which is thirty yards long, is still pointed out at Peel Castle. A curious tradition credits him with three legs, and it is these limbs, arranged like the spokes of a wheel, which appear on the arms of the Island. His British analogue, Manawyddan, can be seen less clearly through the mists of myth. On the one hand he appears as a kind of culture-hero-hunter, craftsman, and agriculturist; while on the other he is the enemy of those gods who seem most beneficent to man.

One of his achievements was the building, in the peninsula of Gower, of the Fortress of Oeth and Annoeth, which is described as a gruesome prison made of human bones ; and in it he is said to have incarcerated no less a person than the famous Arthur.

Whether or not we may take the children of Llŷr to have been gods of the sea, we can hardly go wrong in considering the children of Dôn as having come to be regarded as deities of the sky. Constellations bore their names — Cassiopeia's Chair was called Dôn's Court (*Llys Dôn*), the Northern Crown, Arianrod's Castle (*Caer Arianrod*), and the Milky Way, the Castle of Gwydion (Caer *Gwydion*). Taken as a whole, they do not present such close analogies to the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann as do the Children of Llyr. Nevertheless, there are striking parallels extending to what would seem to have been some of the greatest of their gods. In Irish myth we find Nuada Argetlám, and in British, Nûdd, or Llûdd Llaw Ereint, both epithets having the same meaning of the 'Silver Hand.' What it signified we do not know; in Irish literature there is a lame story to account for it (see p. 35), but if there was a kindred British version it has been lost. But the attributes of both Nuada and Nûdd

(Llûdd) show them as the kind of deity whom the Romans would have equated with their Jupiter. Nuada rules over the Tuatha Dé Danann, while Llûdd, or Nûdd, appears as a mythical British king, who changed the name of his favourite city from Trinovantum (Geoffrey's 'New Troy') to Caer Ludd, which afterwards became London. He is said to have been buried at Ludgate, a legend which we may perhaps connect with the tradition that a temple of the Britons formerly occupied the site of St. Paul's However this may be, we know that he was worshipped at Lydney in Gloucestershire, for the ruins of his sanctuary have been discovered there, with varied inscriptions to him as DEVO NODENTI, D.M. NODOKTI, and DEO NUDENTE M., as well as a small plaque of bronze, probably representing him, which shows us a youthful figure, with head surrounded by *solar* rays, standing in a four-horse chariot, and attended by two winged genii and two Tritons.[1] The 'M' of the inscription may have read in full MAGNO, MAXIMO, or, more probably: MARTI, which would be the Roman, or Romano-British, way of describing the god as the

[1] A monograph on the subject, entitled *Roman* Antiquities *at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire*, by the Rev. W. H. Bathurst, was published in 1879.

[2] Professor Rhŷs, following Dr. Hübner.

warrior he appears as in Irish legend. With him, though not necessarily as his consort, we must rank a goddess of war whose name, Mórrígu (the 'Great Queen '), attests her importance, and who may have been the same as Macha ('Battle'), Badb (' Carrion Crow '), and Nemon (' Venomous '), whose name suggests comparison with the British Nĕmĕtŏna,[1] a war-goddess to whom an inscription has been found at Bath. The wife of Llûdd, however, in Welsh myth is called Gwyar, but her name also implies fighting, for it means 'gore.'[2] The children of both the Gaelic and the British god play noteworthy parts in Celtic legend. Tadg (*Teague*), son of Nuada, was the grandfather, upon his mother's side, of the famous Finn mac Coul. Gwyn, son of Nûdd, originally a deity of the Underworld, has passed down into living folk-lore as king of the *Tylwyth Teg*, the Welsh fairies.

Another of the sons of Dôn whom we also find in the ranks of the Tuatha Dé Danann is the god of Smith-craft, Govannon,[3] in Irish Goibniu (yen. Goibnenn). The Gaelic deity appears in

[1] The two are identified by the French scholar, M. Gaidoz, but the equation is not everywhere upheld.

[2] Rhŷs, *Studies* in *the Arthurian Legend*, p. 169.

[3] Also called in Welsh, 'Govynion Hên.' *Hên* means 'The Ancient.'

mythical literature as the forger of the weapons of his divine companions and the brewer of an ale of immortality ; and in' folk-tales as the Gobhan Saer, the fairy architect to whom popular fancy has attributed the round towers and the early churches of Ireland. Of his British analogue we know less, but he is found, in company with his brother Amaethon, the god of Husbandry, engaging in a wonderful feat of agriculture at the bidding of Arthur,

But, greater than any of the other sons of Dôn would seem to have been Gwydion, who appears in British myth as a 'Culture-Hero,' the teacher of arts and giver of gifts to his fellows. His name and attributes have caused more than one leading mythologist to conjecture whether he may not have been identical with a still greater figure, the Teutonic Woden, or Odin. Professor Rhŷs, especially, has drawn, in his *Hibbert Lectures* (1886) on Celtic Heathendom, a remarkable series of parallels between the two characters, as they are figured respectively in Celtic and Teutonic myth.' Both were alike pre-eminent in war-craft and in the arts of story-telling, poetry, and magic, and both gained through painful experiences the lore which they placed

[1] Pp. 282-304.

at the service of mankind. This is represented on the Celtic side by the poetical inspiration which Gwydion acquired through his sufferings while in the power of the gods of Hades, and in Teutonic story by two draughts of wisdom, one which Woden obtained by guile from Gundfled, daughter of the giant Suptung, and another which he could only get by pledging one of his eyes to its owner Sokk-mimi, the Giant of the Abyss. Each was born of a mysterious, little-known father and mother; each had a love whose name was associated with a symbolic wheel, who posed as a maiden and was furiously indignant at the birth of her children ; and each lost his son [1] in a curiously similar fashion, and sought for him sorrowfully to bring him back to the world. Still more striking are the strange myths which tell how each of them could create human out of vegetable life ; Woden made a man and a woman out of trees, while Gwydion 'enchanted a woman from blossoms ' as a bride for Lleu, on whom his unnatural mother had 'laid a destiny ' that he should never have a wife of the people of this earth. But the equation, fascinating though it is, is much discounted by the fact that the only traces we find of

[1] But see note 2 on following page.

Gwydion in Britain are a few stories connected with certain place-names in the Welsh counties of Carnarvonshire and Merionethshire. This would seem to suggest that, like so many of the divine figures of the Celts, his fame was merely a local one, and that he is more likely to have been simply the 'lord of Mona and Arvon,' as a Welsh bard calls him, than so great a deity as the Teutonic god he at first sight seems to resemble. His nearest Celtic equivalents we may find in the Gaulish Ogmĭos, figured as a Heracles who won his way by persuasion rather than by force, and the Gaelic Ogma, at once champion of the Tuatha Dé Danann, god of Literature and Eloquence, and inventor of the ogam alphabet.

It is another of the family of Dôn—Arianrod, the goddess of the constellation 'Corona Borealis,' to which she sometime gave her name, which was popularly interpreted as 'Silver Wheel,' [1] who appears in connection with Gwydion as the mother of Lleu, or Llew, depicted as the helper of his uncles, Gwydion [2] and Amaethon,

[1] The form Arianrod, in earlier Welsh Aranrot, may have been evolved by popular etymology under the influence of *arian* (silver).

[2] Lleu is sometimes treated as the son of Gwydion and Arianrod, though there is no direct statement to this effect in Welsh literature, and the point has been elaborated by Professor Rhŷs mainly on the analogy of similar Celtic myths. The fact,

in their battles against the powers of the Underworld. Llew's epithet is *Llaw Gyffes*, i.e. 'Of the (?) Firm Hand,' with which we may compare that of *Lámfada* ('Of the Long Hand') borne by the Goidelic deity Lugh, or Lug. This tempts us to regard the two mythical figures as identical, equating Lleu (Llew) also with the Gaulish Lŭgus. There are, however, considerable difficulties in the way. Phonologically, the word *Lleu* or *Llew* cannot be the exact equivalent of *Lŭgus*, while the restricted character of the place-names and legends connected with Lleu as a mythic figure mark him as belonging to much the same circle of local tradition as Gwydion. Nor do we know enough about Lleu to be able to make any large comparison between him and the Irish Lug. They are alike in the meaning of their epithets, in their rapid growth after birth, and in their helping the more beneficent gods against their enemies. But any such details are wanting with regard to Lleu as those which make the Irish god so clear-cut and picturesque a figure. Such was the radiance of Lug's face that

however, that Lleu is found in genealogies as 'Louhé (Lou Hên), son of Guitgé' (the 'Gwydyen' of the Book of Aneurin and the Book of Taliesin), seems to show that the idea was not absolutely unfamiliar to the Welsh. For another side of the question see chap. ii. of *The Welsh People* (Rhŷs and Brynmor-Jones).

it seemed like the sun, and none could gaze steadily at it. He was the acknowledged **master** of all arts, both of war and of peace. Among his possessions were a magic spear which slew of itself, and a hound of most wonderful qualities. His rod-sling was seen in heaven as the rainbow, and the Milky Way was called (Lug's chain.' First accepted as the sun-god of the Goidels, it is now more usual to regard him as a personification of fire. There is, however, evidence to show that a certain amount of confusion between the two great sources of light and heat is a not unnatural phenomenon of the myth-making mind.[1]

This similarity in name, title, and attributes between Bilé and Beli, Danu and Dôn, Lêr and Llŷr, Bron and Brân, Manannán and Manawyddan, Nuada and Nûdd (or Llûdd), (?) Nemon and Němětŏna, Govannon and Goibniu, and (2) Lug and Lleu has suggested to several competent scholars that the Brythons received them from the other branch of the Celts, either by inheritance from the Goidels in Britain or by direct borrowing from the Goidels of Ireland. But such a case has not yet been made out convincingly, nor is it necessary in order to account

[1] The Rig-Veda, for instance, tells us that 'Agni (Fire) is Sûrya (the Sun) in the morning, Sûrya is Agni at night.'

for similar names and myths among kindred races of the same stock. Whatever may be the explanation of their likeness, these names are, after all, but a few taken out of two long lists of divine characters. Naturally, too, deities whose attributes are alike appear under different names in the myths of the two branches of the Celts. Specialised gods could have been but few in type; while their names might vary with every tribe. Some of these it may be interesting to compare briefly, as we have already done in the case of the British Gwydion and the Gaelic Ogma. The Irish Dagda, whose name (from an earlier Dagodêvos), would seem to have meant the 'good god,' whose cauldron, called the 'Undry,' fed all the races of the earth, and who played the seasons into being with his mystic harp, may be compared with Dôn's brother, the wise and just Math, who is represented as a great magician who teaches his lore to his nephew Gwydion. Angus, one of the Dagda's sons, whose music caused all who heard to follow it, and whose kisses became birds which sang of love, would be, as a divinity of the tender passion, a counterpart of Dwyn, or Dwynwen,[1] the British Venus,

[1] **Dwynwen means 'the Blessed Dwyn.' The church of this goddess-saint is Llanddwyn in Anglesey.**

who was, even by the later Welsh bards, hymned as the 'saint of love.' Brigit, the Dagda's daughter, patroness of poetry, may find her analogue in the Welsh Kerridwen, the owner of a 'cauldron of Inspiration and Science.' Diancecht (*Dianket*) the Goidelic god of Healing seems to have no certain equivalent in Brythonic myth, but Mider, a deity of the Underworld-though his name would bring him rather into line with the British Medyr, who, however, appears in Welsh romance only as a wonderful marksman-may be here considered in connection with Pwyll, the hero of a legendary cycle apparently local to Dyved (the Roman province of Demetia, and, roughly, south-west Wales), Pwyll, who may perhaps represent the same god as the Arawn who is connected with him in mythic romance, appears as an Underworld deity, friendly with the children of Llyr and opposed to the sons of Dôn, and with him are grouped his wife, Rhiannon (in older Celtic Rīgantŏna, or ' Great Queen ') and his son Prydéri, who succeeds his father as king of Annwn or Annwvn (the British Other World), jointly with Manawyddan son of Llŷr. He is represented as the antagonist of Gwydion, who is eventually his conqueror and slayer,

But even the briefest account of the Celtic

gods would be incomplete without some mention of a second group of figures of British legend, some of whom may have owed their names to history, with which local myths became incorporated. These are the characters of early Welsh tradition who appear afterwards as the kings and knights and ladies of mediaeval Arthurian romance. There is Arthur himself, half god, half king, with his queen Gwenhwyvar-whose father, Tennyson's 'Leodogran, the King of Cameliard,' was the giant Ogyrvan, patron and perhaps originator of bardism-and Gwalchmai and Medrawt, who, though they are usually called his nephews, seem in older story to have been considered his sons. A greater figure in some respects even than Arthur must have been Myrddin, a mythical personage doubtless to be distinguished from his namesake the supposed sixth-century bard to whom are attributed the poems in the Black Book of Carmarthen. Prominent, too, are Urien, who sometimes appears as a powerful prince in North Britain, and sometimes as a deity with similar attributes to those of Bran, the son of Llŷr, and Kai, who may have been (as seems likely from a passage in the *Mabinogion* story of 'Kulhwch and Olwen') a personification of fire, or the mortal chieftain with whom tradi-

tion has associated Caer Gai in Merionethshire and Cai Hir in Glamorganshire. Connected, too, by a loose thread with Arthur's story are the figures of what is thought to have been the independant mythic cycle of March (King Mark), his queen Essyllt (Iseult), and his nephew Drystan, or Trystan, (Sir Tristrem). All these, and many others, seem to be inhabitants of an obscure borderland where vanishing myth and doubtful history have mingled.

The memory of this cycle has passed down into living folk-lore among the descendants of those Brythons who, fleeing from the Saxon conquerors, found new homes upon the other side of the English Channel. Little Britain has joined with Great Britain in cherishing the fame of Arthur, while Myrddin (in Breton, Marzin), described as the master of all knowledge, owner of all wealth, and lord of Fairyland, can only be the folk-lore representative of a once great deity. These two stand out clearly; while the other characters of the Brythonic mythology have lost their individualities, to merge into the nameless hosts of the dwarfs (*Korred*), the fairies (*Korrigan*), and the water-spirits (*Morgan*) of Breton popular belief.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYTHICAL HISTORY OF IRELAND

ACCORDING to the early monkish annalists, who sought to nullify the pagan traditions against which they fought by turning them into a pseudo-history, Ireland was first inhabited by a lady named Cessair and her followers, shortly after the flood, They describe her as a grand-daughter of Noah; but it is more likely that she represented a tribal goddess or divine ancestress of the pre-Celtic people in Ireland.[1] Whoever she may have been, her influence was not lasting. She perished, with all her race, leaving a free field to her successors.

We say 'field' with intention; for Ireland consisted then of only one plain, treeless and grassless, but watered by three lakes and nine rivers. The race that succeeded Cessair, however, soon set to work to remedy this. Partholon, who

[1] Rhŷs, *Celtic Britain*, Third edition, p. 288.

landed with twenty-four males and twenty-four females upon the first of May (the Celtic feast of 'Beltaine'), enlarged the island to four plains with seven new lakes. The newcomers themselves also increased and multiplied, so that in three centuries their original forty-eight members had become five thousand. But, on the three hundredth anniversary of their coming, an epidemic sprang up which annihilated them. They gathered together upon the original first-created plain to die, and the place of their funeral is still marked by the mound of Tallaght, near Dublin.

Before these early colonists, Ireland had been inhabited by a race of demons or giants, described as monstrous in size and hideous in shape, many of them being footless and handless, while others had the heads of animals. Their name *Fomor*, which means 'under wave,' [1] and their descent from a goddess named Domnu, or 'the Deep,' [2] seem to show them as a personification of the sea waves. To the Celtic mind the sea represented darkness and death, and the *Fomorach* appear as the antithesis of the beneficent gods of light and life. Partholon and his people had to fight them for a foothold in Ireland, and did so successfully.

[1] Rhŷs, *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 594.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 598.

The next immigrants were less fortunate. The People of Nemed followed the Race of Partholon, and added twelve new plains and four more lakes to Ireland. But, after being scourged by a similar epidemic to that which had destroyed their forerunners, they found themselves at the mercy of the Fomorach, who ordered them to deliver up as tribute two-thirds of the children born to them in every year. In desperation they attacked the stronghold of the giants upon Tory Island, off the coast of Donegal, and took it, slaying Conann, one of the Fomor Kings, with many of his followers. But More, the other king, terribly avenged this defeat, and the Nemedians, reduced to a handful of thirty, took ship and fled the country.

A new race now came into possession, and here we seem to find ourselves upon historical ground, however uncertain. These were three tribes called *Fir Domnann*, the 'Men of Domnu,' *Fir Gailióin*, the 'Men of Gailióin' and *Fir Bolg*, the 'Men of Bolg,' emigrants, according to the annalists, from Greece. They are generally considered as having represented to the Gaelic mind the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland, and the fact that their principal tribe was called the 'Men of Domnu' suggests that the Fomorach, who are called 'Gods of Domnu,' may have been the divinities of their

worship. At any rate, we never find them in conflict, like the other races, with the gigantic and demoniac powers. On the contrary, they themselves and the Fomorach alike struggle against, and are conquered by, the next people to arrive.

These are the Tuatha Dé Danann, in whom all serious students now recognise the gods of the Celts in Ireland, and who, as we have seen, parallel the earlier divinities of the Celts in Britain. They are variously fabled to have come from the sky, or else from the north or the south of the world. Wherever they came from, they landed in Ireland upon the same mystic First of May, bringing with them their four chief treasures —Nuada's sword, whose blow needed no second, Lug's living lance, which required no hand to wield it in battle, the Dagda's cauldron, whose supply of food never failed, and the mysterious 'Stone of Destiny,' which would cry out with a human voice to acclaim a rightful king. This stone is said by some to be identical with our own 'Coronation Stone' at Westminster, which was brought from Scone by Edward I., but it is more probable that it still stands upon the hill of Tara, where it was preserved as a kind of fetish by the early kings of Ireland.[1] They had not been long

[1] *See The Coronation Stone.* A monograph by W. F. Skene.

in occupation of the country before their presence was discovered by the race in possession. After some parleying and offers to partition the island, a battle, known as that of Moytura-in Irish *Mag Tuireadh*, ' Plain of the Pillars '-was fought near Cong, in Mayo, in which the Tuatha Dé Danann gained the victory. Handing over the province of Connaught to the conquered race, they took possession of the rest of Ireland, fixing their capital at the historic Tara, then called Drumcain.

Their conquest, however, still left them with a powerful enemy to face, for the Fomorach were by no means ready to accept their occupation of the soil. But the Tuatha Dé Danann thought to find a means of conciliating those hostile powers. Their own king, Nuada, had lost his right hand in the battle of Moytura, and, although it had been replaced by an artifical one of silver, he had, according to the Celtic law which forbade a blemished person to sit upon the throne, been obliged to renounce the sovereignty. They therefore sent to Elathan, King of the Fomorach, inviting his son Bress to ally himself with them, and become their ruler. This was agreed to; and a marriage was made between Bress and Brigit the daughter of the Dagda, while Cian, a son of Diancecht the god of Medicine, wedded Ethniu,

the daughter of a powerful prince of the Fomorach named Balor.

But Bress soon showed himself in his true Fomorian colours. He put excessive taxes upon his new subjects, and seized for himself the control of all the necessities of life, so that the proud gods were forced to manual labour to obtain food and warmth. Worse than this even- to the Gaelic mind-he hoarded all he got, spending none of his wealth in free feasts and public entertainments. But at last he put a personal affront upon Cairbré son of Ogma, the principal bard of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who retorted with a satire so scathing that boils broke out upon its victim's face. Thus Bress himself became blemished, and was obliged to abdicate, and Nuada, whose lost hand had meanwhile been replaced by the spells and medicaments of a son and daughter of Diancecht, came forward again to take the Kingship. Bress returned to his undersea home, and, at a council of the Fomorach, it was decided to make war upon the Tuatha Dé Danann, and drive them out of Ireland.

But now a mighty help was coming to the gods. From the marriage of Diancecht's son and Balor's daughter was born a child called Lug, who swiftly grew proficient in every branch of skill

and knowledge, so that he became known as the Ioldánach (*Ildāna*), 'Master of all Arts.' He threw in his lot with his father's people, and organised the Tuatha Dé Danann for a great struggle. Incidentally, too, he obtained, as a blood-fine for the murder of his father at the hands of three grandsons of Ogma, the principal magic treasures of the world, The story of their quest is told in the romance of 'The Fate of the Children of Tuireann,' one of the famous 'Three Sorrowful Stories of Erin.' [1]

Thus, by the time the Fomorach had completed their seven years of preparation, the Tuatha Dé Danann were also ready for battle. Goibniu, the god of Smithcraft, had forged them magic weapons, while Diancecht, the god of Medicine, had made a magic well whose water healed the wounded and brought the slain to life. But this well was discovered by the spies of the Fomorach, and a party of them went to it secretly and filled it with stones.

After a few desultory duels, the great fight began on the plain of Carrowmore, near Sligo, the site, no doubt, of some prehistoric battle, the memorials of which still form the finest collection

[1] Translated by Eugene O'Curry, and published in vol. iv. of *Atlantis.*

of rude stone monuments in the world, with the one exception of Carnac.[1] It is called Moytura the Northern-to distinguish it from the other *Mag Tuireadh* further to the south. Great chiefs fell on either side. Ogma killed Indech, the son of the goddess Domnu, while Balor, the Fomor whose eye shot death, slew Nuada, the King of the Tuatha Dé Danann. But Lug turned the fortunes of the fray. With a carefully prepared magic sling-stone he blinded the terrible Balor and, at the fall of their principal champion, the Pomorach lost heart, and the Tuatha Dé Danann drove them back headlong to the sea. Bress himself was captured, and the rule of the Giants broken for ever.

But the power of the Tuatha Dé Danann was itself on the wane. They would seem, indeed, to have come to Ireland only to prepare the way for men, who were themselves issuant, according to the universal Celtic tradition, from the same progenitor and country as the gods.

In the Other World dwelt Bilé and Ith, deities of the dead. From their watch-tower they could look over the earth and see its various regions. Till now they had not noticed Ireland-perhaps on account of its slow and gradual growth-but

[1] Fergusson, *Rude Stone Monuments,* pp. 180, etc.

at last Ith, on a clear winter's night, descried it. Full of curiosity, he started on a tour of inspection and landed at the mouth of the Kenmare River. Journeying northwards, he came, with his followers, upon the Tuatha Dé Danann, who were in council at a spot near Londonderry still called Grianan Aileach to choose a new king.

Three sons of Ogma were the candidates-Mac Cuill, Mac Cecht, and Mac Gréine. Unable to come to a decision, the Tuatha Dé Danann called upon the stranger to arbitrate. He could not, or would not, do so; and, indeed, his whole attitude seemed so suspicious that the gods decided to kill him, This they did, but spared his followers, who returned to their own country, calling for vengeance.

Milé, the son of Bilé, was not slow in answering their appeal. He started for Ireland with his eight sons and their followers, and arrived there upon that same mysterious First of May on which both Partholon and the Tuatha Dé Danann themselves had first come to Ireland.

Marching through the country towards Tara, they met in succession three eponymous goddesses of the country, wives of Mac Cuill, Mac Cecht, and Mac Gréine. Their names were Banba, Fotla, and Eriu. Each in turn demanded

of Amergin, the druid of the Milesians-as these first legendary Irish Celts are called-that, in the event of their success, the island should be called after her. Amergin promised it to them all, but, as Eriu asked last, it is her name (in the genitive case of 'Erinn') which has survived. The legend probably crystallizes what are said to have been the three first names of Ireland.

Soon they came to the capital and called the Tuatha Dé Danann to a parley. After some discussion it was decided that, as the Milesians were to blame for not having made due declaration of war before invading the country, their proper course was to retire to their ships and attempt a fresh landing. They anchored at 'nine green waves" distance from the shore, and the Tuatha Dé Danann, ranged upon the beach, prepared druidical spells to prevent their approaching nearer.

Manannán, son of the Sea, waved his magic mantle and shook an off-shore wind straight into their teeth. But Amergin had powerful spells of his own. By incantations which have come down to us, and which are said to be the oldest Irish literary records, he propitiated both the Earth and the Sea, divinities more ancient and more powerful than any anthropomorphic gods, and in

the end a remnant of the Milesians came safely to shore in the estuary of the Boyne.

In two successive battles they defeated the Tuatha Dé Danann, whose three kings fell at the hands of the three surviving sons of Mile. Disheartened, the gods yielded to the hardly less divine ancestors of the Gaels. A treaty of peace was, however, made with them, by which, in return for their surrender of the soil, they were to receive worship and sacrifice. Thus began religion in Ireland.

Driven from upper earth, they sought for new homes. Some withdrew to a Western Paradise—that Elysium of the Celts called Avnllon by the Briton, and by many poetic names by the Gael. Others found safe seclusion in underground dwellings marked by barrows or hillocks. From these *sídhe*, as they are called, they took a new name, that of *Aes Sídhe*, 'Race of the Fairy Mounds, and it is by this title, sometimes shortened to 'The Sídhe' (*Shee*), that the Irish peasantry of to-day call the fairies. The 'banshee' of popular story is none other than the *bean-sídhe*, the 'fairy woman,' the dethroned goddess of the Goidelic mythology.