

John O'Beirne Ranelagh

A Short History of **IRELAND**



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JOHN O'BEIRNE RANELAGH

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

1085002
Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Telstore Ltd 1983

First published 1983

Printed in Great Britain at
the University Press, Cambridge

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 82-21991

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Ranelagh, John O'Beirne
A short history of Ireland.

1. Ireland – History

I. Title

941.5 DA910

ISBN 0 521 24685 7 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 28889 4 paperback

Preface

Ireland's history is distinguished by two special characteristics. First, a recognizable Irish nation, of course over time itself a conglomerate of many 'nations', distinct from a British nation, with its own language, customs and lore dating back to the iron age, survived right into the nineteenth century. This gave Irish nationalism a particular force. Secondly, over the centuries of increasingly powerful and centralized British government, ruling social and political pressures combined first to make Irish people feel and then to believe that they were inferior. This is one of the worst things that any nation or race can do to another. It results in the most terrible of paradoxes where in practical matters there is a desire equally to welcome and to oppose, thus ensuring that failure accompanies success, and despair and a sense of futility underlie the whole of life. As many Irishmen were government spies, agents and informers as were national heroes; emigration became almost the only way of escaping depression. To the present day many Irish writers find it somehow necessary to practise their art away from home.

In modern times the complexities of economic development, international arrangements and the rejection of Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland have begun to change traditional attitudes. The very concept of a unitary Irish nation has been challenged, and the reality of Ireland's connections with Britain has begun to be faced honestly for the first time by politicians. In the last quarter of the twentieth century we can, I think, say that Ireland's people are at last considering themselves in relation to an Irish world for which they themselves accept responsibility.

I would like to thank Charles Davidson, Sean Dowling, Susannah Johnson, Joseph Lee, Deirdre McMahon, Victor Price, David Rose, Richard Rose, A. T. Q. Stewart and Norman Stone who have all

helped me most generously with their knowledge and advice. I owe them all a great debt: my accuracies are their achievement; any inaccuracies are mine. To my wife, Elizabeth, I owe most thanks of all.

Grantchester, 1982

JOHN O'BEIRNE RANELAGH

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1

Prehistory and legends

Human bones found in a cave in Co. Waterford in 1928 indicate that the first Irishmen may have lived before 9000 BC. But the evidence is unreliable, and in any case they would not have survived the last cold spell which ended the ice age around 7000 BC. The first significant human habitation dates from the middle of the seventh millennium BC. In the previous 25,000 years a variety of animal life flourished, notably the giant Irish deer with antlers spanning up to ten feet; elephant-like hairy mammoths, hyenas, wolves and foxes. As temperatures changed, Ireland variously experienced tropical forests, tundra and open vegetation. Earlier still, the landscape of the country was formed. The Mountains of Mourne and other famous land forms were created some seventy-five million years ago as molten lava cooled. Drumlins and deep valleys like the Gap of Dunloe were sculpted and gouged by the gigantic force of ice 200,000 years ago.

Until about 9,000 years ago, Ireland was attached to Britain. As the world's climate warmed the ice melted, sea levels rose, and Ireland lost its land link with Britain and became an island on the north-western corner of the European continental shelf, separated from her neighbours by shallow seas. A fall in sea-level of 350 feet (106 metres) would once again connect south-east Ireland and Wales, while a fall of about 600 feet (182 metres) would lay bare the sea floor to France as well as the continental shelf 150 miles out into the Atlantic, west of the provinces of Munster and Connaught. Britain retained her land connections much longer with the European mainland across the southern reaches of the North Sea to Belgium, the Netherlands and north-western Germany. This explains why Britain, unlike Ireland, has snakes: by the time they reached west Britain after the ice age, Ireland was already an island

(although legend has it instead that St Patrick, Ireland's patron saint, banished the reptiles).

However, before the rising sea submerged these land bridges, the first humans to settle in the British Isles came across them, probably reaching Ireland on a land connection from Scotland. When this too had been submerged, around 6700 BC, Ireland was left alone facing the Atlantic. The first settlers found a country whose principal geographical characteristics had been formed. Of the country's twenty million acres, an eighth were hills and mountains with inhospitable rocks bared by ice, wind and rain. Much of the rest was wooded, but by 3000 BC another eighth had become bog as trees and other vegetation collapsed into lakes and streams. Of the remaining fifteen million acres, most of it good productive land, not until the twentieth century has it been exploited fully with improving agricultural efficiency and afforestation policies. But eight and a half thousand years ago, before mass human habitation, Ireland like Britain was covered by dense deciduous forests, with only lakes, mountains, streams and rivers breaking the cover. Thus was provided the habitat for animal life and food and shelter for the first Irishmen.

The first communities in Ireland were composed of mesolithic (middle stone age) people. There are conflicting opinions about their origins and first settlements. They did not live by farming, but instead collected food and hunted wild life. For the most part, they seem to have lived by the sea shore or lake and river banks. It is likely that they did undertake sea voyages, but in very primitive craft, probably skin-clad coracles similar to those that survive to the present day in the west of Ireland. Their primitive economy lasted undisturbed for over two thousand years until the knowledge of domestication of animals and plants arrived in Ireland during the fourth millennium BC. Even then, mesolithic ways of life continued for perhaps two thousand years after the first farmers began to settle in the country.

Little is known of mesolithic man in Ireland. No mesolithic graves (one of the principal sources of evidence for archaeologists) have been discovered, and significant traces of only one mesolithic community have been found at Mount Sandel in Co. Londonderry. Excavations there have revealed the post holes of round huts, approximately 20 feet (6 metres) across, with central hearths and

associated pits. The Mount Sandel site is likely to have been a winter residence, more substantial than those used at other times of the year. The other main source of information about these people comes from the large number of their rubbish dumps that have been found. They contain the remnants of sea food – molluscs, crustaceans and fish – birds and sometimes mammals, together with flint and stone implements and chippings produced in the course of tool-making. But there is no direct evidence of the linguistic and religious culture, let alone the ethnic composition of these Irishmen. What is clear from these excavations, however, is that from about 3500 BC neolithic (late stone age) farmers began to arrive and to assimilate the mesolithic hunter-gatherers.

In comparison to mesolithic settlers, neolithic farmers were sophisticated and technically advanced. They also had a major impact on the natural landscape, clearing large tracts of land, using polished stone tools to till and plant the soil with crops. Herds of sheep and cattle were kept, and neolithic communities penetrated far inland. Their agricultural way of life, with domestication of animals, complemented the coastal fishing and hunting economy of their mesolithic predecessors, and this is the probable reason why both ways of life co-existed for so long.

The neolithic settlers in Ireland originated in the Middle East from where they were gradually forced to emigrate as expanding population in their homelands increased the pressure for new farming lands. By about 5000 BC they had moved through the Balkans, pushing along the Mediterranean coast into France and Spain, and then northwards to the Low Countries and Britain. Bringing their own crops and livestock, they probably sailed in coracles to Ireland across the sea from Spain, Portugal and Brittany. The evidence is unclear, but they may have also introduced the art of pottery, decorating and shaping pots with round bottoms for storing food, and heavier flat bottoms for cooking. The most impressive neolithic site in Ireland so far discovered was at Lough Gur on the Knockadoon Peninsula, about 12 miles (19.7 km) south of Limerick city. Excavated mainly in the 1930s and 1940s, the domestic structures of an early Irish farming community were revealed. Houses were built with stone foundations, some round, some rectangular, with wooden frame walls filled with earthen turves. Polished stone axes with wooden handles and picks made from the antlers of deer were used by these

people. Bones were shaped as needles, awls and other domestic implements for spinning wool and making clothing and material for warmth. Flint arrow and spearheads provide clear indication that the new settlers hunted as well as farmed. Bone and stone bead bracelets and ornaments demonstrate that they were probably as interested in their appearance as we are today. They even set up factories to produce their stone axes, but the most striking remains of the neolithic farmers are the massive stone megaliths and dolmens they raised for their dead.

There are several different types of neolithic burial sites in Ireland, suggesting that these settlers arrived from a variety of places and in successive waves. There is some evidence that the first neolithic mortuary monuments may have been constructed of timber, only to be superseded by those of stone construction. Whether of stone or wood, these monuments all consisted of a central chamber or gallery which was covered with earth to form a mound. The earliest stone tombs dating from around 3000 BC are reckoned to be those known as 'court cairns' which are especially numerous in the northern half of the country, suggesting that a particular neolithic immigrant group was associated with them. A long, straight-sided stone gallery with a stone slab roof covered with earth, incorporating an open court – sometimes in the middle of the gallery but more often at one end – characterizes these buildings. The tombs were collective, with the dead, sometimes cremated, sometimes buried, being placed in the galleries with personal artifacts, thus indicating that their religion involved belief in an after-life. The court was apparently used for burial and doubtless religious rites. Tombs of other traditions also abound. 'Passage graves' are especially numerous in the north and east of Ireland, forming some of the most spectacular illustrations of stone age architecture. These graves are usually found on hilltop sites, grouped in cemeteries, with a stone passage leading to a burial chamber, all covered in an earth cairn. The earliest date from about 2800 BC and the leading example of a passage grave site, and one of the most significant in western Europe, is on the river Boyne, at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, near Drogheda, Co. Meath, dating from 2500 BC. Here, as with other passage graves, the stone walls of the burial chamber are decorated with elaborate spiral, zig-zag and meandering carvings. The dead were cremated and, as with the court cairn people, were placed in the chamber together with pottery,

beads and tools. At Newgrange, the extent and intricacy of the carvings suggest that some of the patterns may have had a religious significance, possibly even depicting highly stylized human faces and figures. Newgrange was designed by its builders so that the sun could enter the chamber only once a year, around midwinter day, suggesting that the passage grave people may have had a knowledge of astronomy and involved the sun in their worship.

The existence of passage graves and similar artwork outside Ireland—notably in Brittany and the Iberian peninsula—supports the observation that these people in Ireland belonged to a group of sea-borne immigrants enjoying ancestral traditions and connections with the developing urban civilizations of the Mediterranean. More than this, from the size and positioning of passage grave sites, archaeologists have been able to suggest something of the society of their constructors. While the graves are grouped in cemeteries and used communally, the larger ones seem to have been the repositories of chieftains and their families, with smaller graves being grouped around them: evidence of an hierarchic social order preserved in death.

Another sort of chambered tomb, ‘dolmens’, built during the neolithic era, probably derived from the court cairn people. They were single-chamber tombs, with standing stones acting as a support for a large capstone which was then covered with earth to form a mound. Concentrated in the north and east of the country, they tend to be further inland than court and passage graves, suggesting that their builders had penetrated woodland further and were thus later than the court and passage peoples. Some dolmens have capstones weighing perhaps 100 tons: stark testimony to the ingenuity and engineering ability of these stone age Irishmen.

The fourth type of megalithic tomb, and broadly a later one, is the ‘wedge’ type consisting of a single main chamber with walls and ceiling formed of stone slabs in a rectangular shape, narrowed at one end to produce a wedge-like effect. Almost 400 have been found, predominantly in the south-west, often close to metal deposits, indicating that they represent bronze age rather than neolithic people. It may well be that the wedge tomb builders were among the first groups in Ireland to use metal, and that their farming economy was more dependent upon cattle and grazing than their neolithic predecessors since these graves are usually found on light, well-

drained soil. Bodies, cremated or, if whole, in a crouched position, were placed inside the wedge stone box along with pots, ornaments or other equipment. Tombs were used individually, not collectively, although often clustered together.

Metal working of copper, gold, silver and lead developed in the Near East around 3500 BC, and experimentation with alloys led to the discovery of bronze in the latter third millennium BC. The toughness of bronze made complex casting possible and also provided a harder cutting edge for tools and weapons. In the period before 2000 BC new migrations took place in Europe, ultimately reaching the British isles.

The group who brought the bronze age to Ireland are known as the 'beaker people' from their distinctive beaker-like pots, and probably came from Britain to the north and east of Ireland around the end of the third millennium BC. As with neolithic immigrants, it seems the beaker people supplemented rather than supplanted the existing peoples of the country: the continuation of megalithic burial practices after the arrival of the beaker people suggests this as well as a continuation in the traditions and patterns of life. Their burial practices were not as elaborate as the neolithic farmers', although they often used the same sites. They employed cist-like graves, often grouped in cemeteries, usually scooped in the flat earth. Little evidence remains of how bronze age Irishmen lived, although we know more about them than their neolithic and mesolithic precursors. While their burials employed stone, their dwellings were less permanent, usually constructed of wood and earth. But in Lough Gara, on the borders of counties Sligo and Roscommon, draining revealed a concentration of lake island buildings – *crannogs* – dating from the bronze age. They were artificial islands built in or near the edge of a lake, forming platforms for wooden buildings surrounded by a defensive wooden fence. Crannogs were built from these early times – indeed, there is some evidence that they date from neolithic times – and lived in right into the seventeenth century AD.

Stone circles also date predominantly from the bronze age which lasted in Ireland until around 700 BC. While there are no circles which compare with Stonehenge in England, or as extensive as the stone works at Carnac in Brittany, there are a number that are monumental in scale. At Grange, near Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, for example, a circle surrounded by a massive outer bank has a standing

stone ring of 150 feet (45 metres) in diameter. The circles probably varied in purpose, some being for religious and ritualistic use, others perhaps to facilitate astronomical measurements. Single standing stones were also first erected during the bronze age, sometimes as grave markers and sometimes perhaps as territorial markers. Such stones continued to be erected into the early Christian era some thirteen hundred years later, many being 'converted' to Christian use with the addition of carved crosses and *ogham* inscriptions.

Ogham is the first written form of the Irish language, dating from a very early period of Irish Christianity. The letters, based on the Roman alphabet, are represented by lines, up to five in number, set at various angles on either side of a stem line. Frequently found in southern Ireland, *ogham* stones are rare in the rest of the country. Those that have survived usually tell us the name of a person followed by the name of an ancestor, and it is clear that the script was used for epitaphs and memorials. But before the arrival of Christianity, the Celts came to Ireland.

The Celts came to Ireland from Europe, and probably originally from the lands around the Caspian Sea from which they emigrated in all directions. Sociologists and linguists have detected important similarities between Celtic language, laws, customs and religion and those of the Hindus in India. Two groups populated the British Isles, the Gaels and the Brythoni. The Brythoni settled in Britain and the Gaels occupied Ireland and some of Scotland. The Gaelic language, related to British and Gaulish, was the direct forebear of the Irish language today. Exactly when the Celts arrived is not clear, but by 500 BC Ireland seems to have been a completely Celtic country. They brought with them the iron age culture which had come to central and eastern Europe around 800 BC. Iron was stronger than bronze, and iron ploughs dug deep and were long-lasting. Bronze age settlers had traditionally adopted new metallurgical discoveries, and thus no clear break between the two cultures can be determined.

More is known about the Celts than about any other prehistoric people outside Greece and Italy. In Ireland alone, the archaeological information is vast: over 30,000 Celtic ring forts and sites can still be seen today. From Greek and Roman sources, we have vivid descriptions of ancient Celtic society. Since the Celts themselves transmitted knowledge orally, not until the advent of Christianity in Ireland, which also brought the skill of writing to the country, did

Celtic Irishmen transcribe their tales and sagas, laws and annals. Through these writings, however, a detailed picture of iron age life is available.

The first recorded mention of the Celts dates from the sixth century BC and places them in France and Spain. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, described the Celts as one of two western European peripheral peoples living along the Danube and in the Pyrenees. Because the Celts came to live on the periphery of Europe, particularly in Ireland, they avoided assimilation into the Roman Empire and the later turmoil of the Huns, Goths and Vandals in the Dark Ages after the fall of Rome. Consequently, two special features characterize Irish Celtic heritage. First, more Irish Celtic artifacts survive than for any other Celtic group. Secondly, Irish Celtic language and culture survived right up to modern times, remaining widespread to the end of the nineteenth century. Gaelic, in fact, is the oldest living vernacular in the West. It took the famines of the 1840s and 1850s, together with emigration and English-language educational policies, to bring the general use of the Irish language to an end. And, since oral tradition was a strong element in this culture, a consistent Irish historical consciousness was maintained. It is now a joke that Cromwell is still 'remembered' in Ireland, but for over 200 years after his death, amongst millions of Irishmen memory of him was no joke at all.

The earliest written evidence of Ireland and its people can be dated from the ninth century BC when Homer in *The Iliad* described the north-west of Europe as 'A land of fog and gloom . . . Beyond it is the Sea of Death, where Hell begins.' About 400 years later a Carthaginian sailor, Himilco, left a record of a voyage through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), northwards up the coast of Portugal to the Bay of Biscay and along the coast of France. He saw Celts sailing 'at high speed' in coracles and learnt of 'the Sacred Island (so the ancients called it). This lies amid the waves, abounding in verdure, and the race of the Hierni dwell there widespread.' Several centuries later, in the first-century BC, an unflattering picture was again recorded by the Greek geographer Strabo. Sensibly noting that 'We relate these things, perhaps, without having trustworthy authorities', Strabo portrayed the Irish Celts as 'More savage than the Britons, [they] feed on human flesh and are enormous eaters. They deem it commendable to devour their deceased fathers as well

as openly to be connected not only with other women but also with their own mothers and sisters . . . The natives are wholly savage and lead a wretched existence because of the cold.'

In fact, the Celtic Gaels of Ireland possessed a highly sophisticated society. Their massive stone forts, built along the coast of Ireland (or 'Erin' as they called it) and in the interior on hills, suggest a warlike and dangerous society. Inside the forts – some of which encompassed as much as forty acres – lived whole communities, largely dependent upon cattle grazing on the land and fields spread around. Smaller communities and isolated homesteads also abounded, often – as with the stone forts – on or near Bronze Age sites, thus indicating that the Gaels accepted and, perhaps, assimilated older religious customs. They enjoyed a tribal social organization without any political unity but having in common a language, religion and culture. Independent tribal chiefs and kings were dominant in their own areas. Only once, at the beginning of the eleventh century AD, were most Gaelic tribes united under one high king, Brian Boru, and then only for his lifetime. The Gaels were different from other Celtic groups in maintaining the system of kingship for so long, but in most other respects they were similar to the Celts of France, the Gauls.

In his *History of the Gallic Wars*, Julius Caesar provides one of the most detailed accounts of Celtic society. He distinguished three broad social groups, druids, warriors and farmers. Druids were both the repository of Celtic knowledge and wisdom and the teachers of succeeding generations. Since the Celts did not write, druids underwent up to twenty years of study, learning the sagas, laws and religious practices of their people, and accurate recitation was demanded:

It is said that they commit to memory immense amounts of poetry, and so some of them continue their studies for twenty years. They consider it improper to commit their studies to writing. . . They also have much knowledge of the stars and their motion, of the size of the world and of the earth, of natural philosophy, and of the powers and spheres of action of the immortal gods, which they discuss and hand down to their young students.

Celtic religion taught of an after-life and an immortal soul which passed into another body after death. Their god of the underworld, Dis, was also regarded as the common father of mankind. Human and animal sacrifices were conducted by the druids who were also the priests.

Over 400 different Celtic gods are known. Most can be identified as local or tribal deities, but about 100 appear to have been generally worshipped. The Roman poet Lucan noted that the Celts worshipped three gods in particular: Esus, the god of arts and crafts, the patron of traders and travellers, whose Greek equivalent was Hermes and, by all accounts, was the most popular; Taranis, probably the equivalent of Zeus (the Irish word *torann*, meaning 'thunder', comes from Taranis), and Teutatis, probably a different, named god of each tribe. *Tuath*, the Irish for 'tribe', comes from the same linguistic root as Teutatis, and in the Gaelic sagas, warriors frequently pledge themselves, swearing 'by the god by whom my tribe swears'. Lug was another important deity, probably of harvests and fertility, and has lived on in the place names Lugudunum, Laon, Leon, Loudon and Lyons in France, Leiden in the Netherlands and Leignitz in Germany. Lug was celebrated in Ireland by the Gaels on 1 August, from which Garland Sunday today can be traced.

Streams, rivers, springs and trees were also incorporated in Celtic religion. Some rivers, like the Boyne, were even regarded as divine. The earth itself was worshipped, in female form, as a mother, defender and provider. Bulls, bears, boars and horses enjoyed divine representation. In the great Gaelic saga, *The Tain*, the supernaturally endowed brown and white bulls can be seen as the vestiges of a bull-god.

From about 400 BC, the Celts competed with the forces of Rome, sacking the city itself in 387 BC. In the centuries which followed, however, Roman legions gradually conquered the Celts in Spain, France, Britain and central Europe, though even then Celtic tribes continued to harass their oppressors. Strabo, writing of the Gauls, described them as 'madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle, but otherwise straightforward and not of evil character'. Diodorus Siculus, a first-century BC Greek historian, in his history of the world, noted:

Physically the Gauls are terrifying in appearance with deep-sounding and very harsh voices. In conversation they use few words and speak in riddles...They are boasters and threateners and given to bombastic self-dramatization, and yet they are quick of mind with good natural ability for learning...When the armies are drawn up in battle array they are wont to advance before the battle-line and to challenge the bravest of their opponents to single combat, at the same time brandishing before them their

arms so as to terrify their foe. And when someone accepts their challenge to battle, they loudly recite the deeds of valour of their ancestors and proclaim their own valorous quality, at the same time abusing and making little of their opponent and generally attempting to rob him beforehand of his fighting spirit. They cut off the heads of their enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. . . and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses.

Diodorus' account is remarkably similar to descriptions of battle in the Gaelic sagas, and highlights the importance Celts gave to qualities of courage and bravery in the individual.

The particular customs of the Celtic Gaels of Ireland were first recorded by Gaelic Christian monks in the seventh century AD. The monks overcame their abhorrence of paganism and set down in writing the records of their forebears, providing scholars with an extensive account of the political and cultural organization of Ireland in the centuries before and during the Dark Ages. Along with the artistic wealth of the Gaels, attested by the surviving volume of golden objects and ornaments, Gaelic Christianity with its piety, learning and artwork, not only made Ireland legendary throughout the world, but also has provided Irishmen with a source of profound pleasure and pride.

Gaelic society, in common with its time, had rigid hierarchic order. There were three broad social groups, the aristocrats, the freemen and the slaves. Aristocrats included not only tribal kings (*ri*), but also warriors (*flaithi*), judges (*breitheamh* or *brehons*), druids (*draci*), poets (*fili*), historians (*seanchaidhe*) and a number of professional advisers (*aos dana*) who shared with the king the duties of guarding the well-being of the tribe (*tuath*), organizing feasts and sacred occasions and applying the law. Poets and historians had a particularly honoured place in society, and a poet's satire was an especially powerful sanction since (it was believed) it could bring disgrace, physical disfigurement and even death to its victim. By the fourth century AD there were five leading Gaelic kingdoms which, despite fluctuating fortunes, remained ascendant for 800 years. Roughly, they corresponded to the present provinces of Ulster, Leinster, Munster and Connaught with the fifth and smallest in the counties of Meath and Westmeath. Each of these kingdoms was dominated by one or two families. In Munster, it was the Eoganachta clan; in Ulster the Ui Neill; in Leinster the Ui Muiredaig and Ui