

THE ANCIENT RACES OF IRELAND.



THE Irish question is one of the leading questions of day. It is essentially a political one, but Ireland is attracting the attention of scholars as well as statesmen. They are beginning to find out that Ireland has a history of its own,

and that it is as well deserving of study as the beautiful legends of Central and Northern Europe. In two of the great universities of Germany, chairs of the Irish language have been established and necessarily, for it is so intimately connected with the other tongues of Europe, that it must form part of any thorough linguistic study. In an appendix to "Speranza's," *Ancient legends and Superstitions of Ireland* there is a lecture delivered by her husband, Sir William Wilde, on the subject which forms the title of this article. In this short essay I propose giving a synopsis of the lecture.

From the similarity which exists between the fauna and flora of England and Ireland and those of the continent we are led to believe that what is known as the British Isles was at one time joined to the mainland. At some unknown period a break took place and Great Britain and Ireland assumed their present shape. After this epoch man first set foot on Irish soil, but his peregrinations were many and far distant before he reached that resting place. From the sacred writings we learn—and this statement is confirmed too by the investigations of historians, that the cradle of mankind was somewhere between the Caspian Sea and the great River Euphrates. After the flood and the subsequent increase of the earth's population the human family was divided into three great branches, the Asiatic, the African and the Indo-European or Aryan. With the two first of these we have nothing to do. As the population increased emigration became necessary and large hordes passed up the banks of the Euphrates, the Volga and the Danube.

That some rude, uncultivated tribes remained for a time on the Danube and that they rested for a considerable period in Switzerland is learned from unerring memorials—implements of stone, flint and pottery, resembling in a great measure the

stone tools and weapons of the primitive Irish. Driven by some more powerful and more cultivated race from their mountain home they passed down the banks of the Rhine and the Elbe and helped to people North-Western Europe, forming with those who arrived coastwise the great nation of the Gauls and Belgae. Still moving westwards they soon landed in Kent and ere a considerable lapse of time they crossed the Irish Sea and their western migrations were at an end. This was long before the time of Solomon; and the Irishman of that day could boast of having traversed lands and seas altogether unknown to Phœnician or Carthaginian commerce. The people were very simple in their habits;—they were clad in the skins of animals slain with weapons of flint, stone, bone, and wood or horn; and adorned with shells, amber and pebbles collected on the sea shore. Their religion was Pagan—Sunworship or Druidism—a relic of their eastern origin. With regard to their dwellings we are not left to mere conjecture, for about sixteen years ago a log hut was discovered fourteen feet below the surface of a bog in the county of Donegal. This dwelling was twelve feet square and nine feet high; and consisted of an upper and lower chamber which were probably sleeping apartments. The pastoral state was the one which prevailed most amongst those first inhabitants of Erin. Stock raising occupied the attention of the people to so great an extent that many of the quarrels which took place amongst the native princes had their origin in difficulties concerning cattle. The "Tain Cuailne" the most famous metrical romance of Europe after the "Niebelungenlied" is but the recital of a cattle raid from Connaught into Louth during the reign of Mave Queen of Connaught—a personage transmitted to us by Shakespeare as the Queen Mab of the "Midsummer Night's Dream." These primitive people are styled the Firbolgs. They had laws and social institutions and established a monarchical form of government at the far famed hill of Tara in the centre of a veritable Arcadia, for even to this day the plains of Meath are unrivalled for their pasturage.

The next immigration we hear of is that