

Science in Ancient Ireland

By Dr. Sigerson. In Dublin last week the inaugural lecture, under the auspices of the National Literary Society, was delivered by the President, Dr. George Sigerson, F.R.S.E., on "Science in Ancient Ireland." There was a large attendance. The chair was occupied by Mr. George Colley. Dr. Sigerson, who on rising was received with loud applause, said that two forces characterize the ancient Irish nation, in the realm of intellect, a passion for learning and a passion for diffusing knowledge. The first was not simply a desire to ascertain and appreciate facts and opinions, it involved more, and a more important principle. In the realm of intellect, this is the spirit of research, which gives life, animation, progress, a future to knowledge. Without this, generations live like their ancestors, mentally repeating their views, not increasing, but not lessening the stores of knowledge. Without this, the heritage of ideas becomes like a treasure trove lying in a shallow bay, from which the uplifting and ever-moving waters have withdrawn. The passion for diffusing knowledge, like that of learning, elevated in a most unusual and remarkable manner the ancient Irish above narrow restrictions, race animosities, and rendered them everything but insular in character. Nothing is more strange in the world's history than that which which was by no means a mild but a militant nation—a fierce fighting people—could prove so attractive as for centuries to draw students of strange lands to its great schools, and so adaptable, so little of a pedant, that for centuries its own scholars pervaded all the warring kingdoms around, re-creating knowledge amid the ruins of Empire, and making it flourish in the savage wilds of barbarism. It is well known that, in the seventh century, St. Columbanus proceeding from Ireland to Gaul and Italy, established the great monastic schools of Annegray, Luxeuil, and Bobbio, and that his famous disciple St. Gall created another not less illustrious, near Lake Constance, which had a great and acknowledged influence over Germany. Now, when, in the succeeding century, Charlemagne formed his Imperial School, in the Palace, where he and his kindred and paladins sat as pupils what examples inspired him? There were none so famed and so flourishing as those great Irish schools, which were either within his dominions or on its borders. Columbanus died at his great and growing school of Bobbio, in Lombardy, and it was in the shadow of its great fame that Charles in 780, met the scholar who was to be, for a time, master of his own school. This was Alcuin, stated to be a Saxon, but bred up under Irish influences in Northumbria, where Irish was the court language, as Mr. Stopford Brooke discovered. He had formerly been a student, with his friend Joseph the Commentator, and innumerable others, under the rule of Oicu, at the noble school of Clonmacnoise on the Shannon. In the letters of Alcuin, more profuse of personal details than Irish scholars were, we get glimpses of school work and life in the eighth century, and learn inferentially something of the Master Schools of Ireland. We know that all authors who refer to the subject speak of the plentiful supply of books in this island, and of the unparalleled generosity of the people who furnished foreign as well as native students with books, food, and lodging, and all gratuitously. In this matter none had taught the Ancient Irish, and none have been, in this matter taught by them, not even Charlemagne. Oengus the Cele De, writing of the works of reference from which he had borrowed in the compilation of his calendar, picturesquely says he "milked into it the vast tome of Ambrose, Hilary's pious senses, Jerome's Autograph, Eusebius's Martyrology, and the hosts of the Books of Erin." Oengus is concerned here with Church matters chiefly, but there cannot be a doubt that what the daughter-schools of Northumbria held, the mother-schools of Ireland possessed—and more. Hence, the interest in hearing Alcuin (who, after leaving Clonmacnoise, became master in York) when he enumerates the books confided to him by the previous master, Elbert. There were, he says, the Hebrew writings, the brilliant books of Greece, Rome and Africa. He mentions the productions of Jerome, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, Athanasius, Orosius, Gregory the Great, Leo, Basil, Fulgentius, Cassiodorus, Chrysostom, Baeda, Athelm, Victorinus, Boethius; the ancient historians, Pomponius, Pliny, Aristotle, Cicero, Lemens, Alcuin, Prosper, Paulinus, Arator, Fortunatus, and the writings of the masters of grammar, Probus, Phocas, Donatus, Priscian, Servienus, Euticius, Pomponius, Comminianus. This has been described as perhaps the earliest and most complete catalogue of a Colliere Library of the Middle Ages, and it may be taken for certain that all these works, and many more, were in the great schools of ancient Erin. In regard to the teaching of his master, Elbert, from which we can rather more information as regards the instruction there given—the Sage Elbert, he says, gave to drink from all founts of knowledge to thirsting minds. Some he taught the rules of grammar, for others rolled the waves of rhetoric. These he formed for the struggle in the forum, and the Cas-tellan pipe. He taught also with lyric foot the summits of Parnassus, He explained the harmony of the heavens, the mortal eclipses of sun and moon, the seven wandering planets, the laws of the stars, their rising and setting, the violent motions of the sea, earthquakes, the nature of man, of floods, of winds, and wild beasts, the di-

verse combination of numbers and their various forms. He taught the certain calculation of the Eastern Epoch, unveiled the mysteries of Holy Writ, and laid open the profundity of Ancient Law. With this equipment and the permission of his Archbishop and the King, Offa, Alcuin set sail with a few companions to take up his position as Master of the Palatine School, at Aix-la-Chapelle. Charles assuredly deserved the name of Great, less by his martial conquests, which were many and fierce, than by his imperial mind, which, viewing the fallen state of learning in Europe generally, strove with enduring anxiety to raise it to the highest levels. He himself set the example. Young, when he took the Palatine School, for he was little over twenty-one, he sedulously cared for it, watching over its efficiency and fostering its fame. Nowhere in history do we find a parallel. As the years passed, he, his became and continued students of the school. By a quaint but gracious custom, each new student took a new name as he entered, concealing, as it were, his personality under the scholar's gown. Thus in these halls of learning Charlemagne was no longer King and Majesty, but David. His sister, the Princess Gisela, became Lucia, his daughters the Princesses Gertrude and Gisela, were now Columba and Della, his son-in-law Alcuin was called Homer, the Princess Liutgar who afterwards became his Queen, was given the name of Ava. His sons were students of the school, as were all members of the Cortège Royal. The monk of St. Gall relates that one day, noting that learning flourished, but ripened no fruit like the ancient Fathers, he experienced a more than mortal anguish, and in his discouragement exclaimed: "Why have I not a dozen clerics as learned as Jerome and Augustine?" It was at this epoch that two young Irish scholars made their appearance, and a sensation in the streets of Paris. Where material merchandise of all kinds abounded they offered a new merchandise. They cried: "If anyone wants wisdom let him come to us and obtain, for we have it on sale." This was a highly original mode of announcing their mission, and they became known as the Irish Wisdom Sellers. Their wares proved to be of refined gold, and this Charlemagne discovered when he had them brought before him in his palace. Clement and Alhuin were their names. The magnitude of the triumph of the Irish scholars can be best understood by the expressions of angry mortification of Alcuin. But I know well the calculations of Memphis, it is true that I only incline to the traditionary of Rome. Then follow some pious platitudes in which, evading the scientific questions at issue, he exhorts his own orthodox opinions with insinuations and innuendoes unworthy of his position, but not uncommon in like case. So, some fifty years before, another great original Irish thinker had been assailed by another sincere, but imaginative, Saxon—Fergal Geometer, known better, perhaps, by his latinized name, Virgilius, sometimes called Solivagus, or the lone-wanderer. He maintained not only that the earth is a sphere, which was not absolutely novel, though not universally accepted—but he went further and projected the perfectly new idea that the Antipodes were inhabited. This fell like a lightning bolt on the solid, not to say stolid, edifice of the Saxon Bonifacian mind, so that he at once saw it the wreck of all religion, and had recourse to the familiar method of denouncing what he could not disprove. His denunciations, happily, did not prevent the great Irish scholar from being canonized as St. Virgilius—well remembered abroad, though long forgotten in his native land. Nor had the assaults of Alcuin, or those he instigated some of his pupils to make an influence on the prestige of Clement. In vain did Joidiguisius, who had accompanied Alcuin from York, enter the lists; his essay is condemned as pretentious and void. It was worse than vain for Alcuin to denounce Clement as an Athenian Sophist; for Spleit from the School of Plato, for this he only bore testimony to the attainments of his successor, and unwilling witness to the correctness of that title. The Greek Sage, which Charlemagne gave to Clement. Against all influences, intrigues, and anger, the Irish Master of the Palatine School held his higher sway with silent supremacy. His knowledge of the ancient languages, especially of Greek, was acknowledged, but it appears manifest that he had other linguistic attainments, for Bishop Thegan relates that Charlemagne worked with his Irish teachers at a revision of the Gospels in the Greek and Syriac texts. The monks went eastward, and Diocul obtained information of one, who had passed through the ancient Canal of Suez. Egyptian monks came to Ireland, when persecuted at home. Thus there was opportunity for Irish scholars to learn languages of the East, which was a region of ineffable interest, to which others besides Sedulius were attracted as princes and pilgrims. What Charlemagne most anxiously and eagerly desired was astronomical information, and he was apparently well content with what the Irish scholars provided. What may we infer? That they were in possession of new sources of knowledge of which Alcuin and his group were ignorant. Now there is extant an ancient Irish astronomical tract, of which copies are preserved in the Royal Irish Academy and in Marsh's Library. That dear and venerated friend of Irish learning, the late Rev. Maxwell Close, caused a translation of this to be made, of which he was good enough to confide to me a copy with manuscript notes. This work was dealt with from the standpoint of astronomical science by our eminent Irish astronomer, Sir Robert Ball, in a lecture before the Irish Library Society of London. I refer to it from an historical point of view. It appears to me that we have in this remarkable work the very core of the astronomical instruction given by the Irish

lars to the eager pupils of Charlemagne in his Palatine School. My position is that the core of the work dates back to his time, not necessarily that all the book is so ancient, for there have been later accretions. That view, if it prevails, should give additional interest to an already most interesting tract, showing, as it would, how superior was Irish scholarship over Alcuin's efforts, and how rightful was the supremacy granted to the Irish scholars by Charlemagne. There are certain facts worth noting about it besides its intrinsic value. Mr. Close pointed out that, whilst Messahalla wrote in the 8th century, a Latin version by Gerard of Sabinonetta was made in the 13th, which, Statius edited and published in the 15th century, but it is emphatically shown the Irish work is not a translation from this version, and it contains one-half more than is contained in any of these non-Mohababic chapters. Mr. Close thought, came from an Arabic source. This, it will be seen, does not conflict in the least with the view I venture to propose; on the contrary, it helps to establish the antiquity of the Irish Text. This Irish Astronomical Tract is an earnest and important treatise, illustrated by some diagrams, and a text of the fortifications that married Alcuin's teaching. It is divided into thirty-nine chapters which treat of the Creation, the sun, moon, stars, planets, and elements; the earth, volcanoes, seas, tides, rivers, rains, animals, and plants. Original matter is often interspersed with that taken from the Greek or Alexandrian authors. It is particularly curious to note the twelve chapters which are, essentially, not Messahalla's, though some of them be from other Arabic sources, because there we are like to find, and there I believe, we do discover some of the original work of the ancient Irish thinkers. These extra chapters are entitled: Of the rotundity of the earth, and of the vicissitudes of day and night. Of the changes of the sea and of the rivers. Of the motion of the earth, and of the change of the waters. Of the two burning mountains which are on fire. Of the flowing and ebbing of the sea. Of the flood of the River Nile in Egypt. Of the retrogression of the firmament, and of the sun. Of the unchangeability of the firmament. Of the differences of the rising and the setting of the sun. Of the seven habitable regions of the earth. Of the two places in which the earth is one year in its orbit. Of the first and last chapters here mentioned are particularly interesting. As regards the first, the doctrine of the rotundity of the earth might almost be called a distinctive Irish doctrine. It is true that a Greek philosopher speculating as to its form, thought it might be globular or cylindrical. St. Basil, in his Hexameron, imagines it cylindrical. The ancient Irish writers, however, appear to have uniformly advocated its globular shape. It is so described in a glossary in the Senabus nor: Virgilius, in 745, proclaimed it with the additional statement of the existence of man at the Antipodes. Here, also we have in Irish an elaborate defence of the doctrine against what were plainly continual and besetting objections. Moreover, in reply to the objection that if the earth were spherical, the inhabitants should walk with their heads down, the Irish writer argues the contrary. "Whatever is towards the mass of the earth," he says, in effect, is down, and contrariwise what is upwards is upwards. So that on what side soever people may be standing their heads are up and their feet down. This is probably the first teaching on this subject recorded. Virgilius did not teach it. In the extra chapter on the flowing and ebbing of the sea, the Irish author, whilst giving first the old view of the influence of the moon's light in producing tides, goes on to assert of himself that the moon has a power over moist substances, and over the water of the sea, like the power which adamant exercises over iron, and the result of this attraction is called the ebbing of the sea. When the attraction ceases the sea ebbs. Mr. Close notes that Coimbra College and Kepler held this view of the moon's magnet-like attraction, and that it is "a most interesting anticipation of the attraction of gravitation." The last extra chapter stating that there are two places on the earth in which the entire year is one day and one night. One of these places is directly under the Arctic Pole. Then this statement is proved astronomically. But I think that scientific attention was first drawn to this subject by the reports made in the middle of Charlemagne's reign, by Irish clerics who had resided from February to August in Ireland. They stated, which is perfectly correct, that at mid-summer the sun scarcely sets there, and there is light enough to enable people to pursue their daily avocations. One of the famous Irish geographers, who wrote his memorable work "De mensura orbis Terrarum" in 825, records this statement, and observes that he had heard it from these Irish clerics 30 years before. That the reputation of Irish scholars for knowledge in astronomical science did not for long decline may be inferred from the fact that in 811, Charlemagne consulted Dungal the Recluse as to whether two eclipses had taken place in the previous year, or could occur in any year, and received a satisfactory reply in a Latin letter which is still extant. Notwithstanding all the facts cited, and others, in the most prominent arena of the world in its time, we everywhere find the name of Alcuin in honor and Clement ignored; the defeated warrior goes out of the arena with the laurels of his conqueror. In conclusion, I would say that no one is more conscious than I that only a fringe of the great veil of the Temple of Science in ancient Ireland has been lifted. There is an abounding room and work for willing minds. All I claim is to have shown that amidst their most advanced contemporaries the ancient

Irish stood foremost, because their passion for learning and their passion for diffusing knowledge with the service of alert, energetic, and free minds, elevated them above racial or regional restrictions, endowed them with the spirit of research, and made them in the realm of intellect the most progressive people in Europe.

Success of Cardinal Merry Del Val

The name of Raphael Merry del Val, the Roman correspondent of The London Times, has been brought so prominently before the public during the last few months as to render unnecessary any addition to the accounts of his career and personality which have already appeared. His recent appointment, however, as Secretary of State has provoked a discussion abroad upon which it may be opportune to offer some comments. Everywhere except in Vienna, and in less degree in Berlin, the appointment seems to have given great satisfaction. What are the precise grounds for the dissatisfaction felt by Austria and Germany it is difficult to say, but one may gather from the vague and sometimes entirely unfounded suggestions thrown out by the press of both countries and their objections are to the youth of Cardinal Merry del Val, to the fact that he was born an Italian, and to a supposition that he is opposed in some way to the Triple Alliance. The new Secretary of State has had a wider experience of the world outside Italy than most members of the Sacred College, and youthful energy and strength, if they can be considered disadvantages in the arduous post he has been called upon to fill, are drawbacks which will only too soon be remedied by time. There is no shadow of reason to suppose that he entertains any convictions hostile to the Triple Alliance; he has never had any occasion to express an opinion one way or another, and quite possibly, even as Papal Secretary of State, never may have occasion; if he should have, it would be natural to conjecture from his conduct that he would be all in favor of maintaining and strengthening the bonds which bind Italy and Austria together. The foreign policy of the Vatican is likely to be in future simple and of easy comprehension, though, for that matter, in the past it has never been so tortuous nor so stupidly shortsighted as some of its critics have represented it. As to the question of nationality, it would seem that Germany and Austria would rather have their affairs in the hands of an Italian. They can at least console themselves with the reflection that Cardinal Merry del Val is more an Englishman than a Spaniard, and more an Italian, by right of his long residence in Italy, than an Englishman. The fact that a man is a cosmopolitan and speaks four languages, among them German, is not a recommendation, and hardly he against his filling so cosmopolitan an office. The Italians themselves have so long looked upon him as an Italian that they are little concerned with the questions of his parentage or birthplace. No one who was present in the Sala Borgia, where the new Cardinal received the congratulations of his friends, could have doubted for an instant as to his real nationality in the country, and Austria would rather have their affairs in the hands of an Italian. 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