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THE CELTIC CHARACTER.

BY THE REV. C. J. OFFER, M.A.

THERE are three natural groups into which the human race is commonly divided—the Indo-Europeans, consisting of Persians, Greeks, Latins, Celts, Teutons, Slavonians, etc.; the Semitic and the Mongolian groups. Of the first group one of the most interesting if less prominent branches is that of the Celts. Of the two last groups the Semitic alone is familiar to Western races in the Jews, the depth and intensity of whose religious feeling has marked them out amongst the religious people of the world. But the Jews have not had anything like the influence upon the creative and constructive forces of British civilization compared with the Celts, who have very materially affected the race of the Britons. The origin of this singular people must be sought for far back in the early centuries, when the nomadic tribes of Central Asia began to expand and explore towards the West.¹ Their home, according to the latest investigators, must have been around the Vistula, north of the Carpathians,² until their expansion towards the West, which process must have been long in existence by the time we first hear of the Celts³ as a separate people, called “*Keltoi*” by the Greeks in the fourth century B.C. The Celtic Venedi, however, remained in occupation of the district around the Vistula as late as the second century B.C. The Celts appear to have already developed certain distinct customs, such as cremation and the use of iron tools and weapons instead of bronze. Somewhat earlier than this the Celts swarmed over Central Europe as far south as Lombardy, from whence they drove out the Etruscans,⁴ and pushing on into Italy, finally succeeded in capturing Rome, who

¹ For a full account of Central Asia and the birth of peoples, see Prof. Peisker's article in the *Camb. Med. Hist.*, Vol. I, chap. xii. A much briefer treatment is given by Dr. Haddon in *The Wanderings of Peoples*, chaps. ii, iii.

² This is the view of Prof. Peisker, *op. cit.* Vol. II, chap. xii. It is based on the fact that the northern Europeans, who were the ancestors of the Celts, originally possessed names for the beech and yew, which, however, do not grow eastwards of a line drawn from Konigsberg to Odessa. Their home, therefore, must have been somewhere north and west of this limit.

³ From Pytheas of Massilia, c. 330 B.C., quoted by Oman, *Eng. before the Nor. Conq.*, chap. i., p. 9.

⁴ Attracted thither, according to Gibbon, by “the prospect of the rich fruit and delicious wines.”—*Decline and Fall*, Vol. I, chap. ix. [ed. Bury].

had despised her barbarian foes, and paid the penalty for her contempt. This branch of the Celtic family never ranked as Allies of Rome; but, on the contrary, was expressly excluded from Roman citizenship.¹ Another group penetrated into Asia Minor, where they left their mark in the survival of the name "Galatia," the volatile character of whose inhabitants was used by Bishop Lightfoot² to establish his "North Galatian theory." Here the Celts formed a well-organized political entity in the second century B.C., and were granted independence by the Senate after their successful revolt against Eumenes of Pergamus.³ Contemporaneously with this southern movement there was a corresponding activity in the North. The pressure of a new people—new, that is, to the Europe of the time—the Teutons—produced a Western trek in the northern parts of Central Europe. The compelling force of this as of the other migrations was doubtless political rather than economic,⁴ and the Teutons for a long time were content to settle in the territory north of the Elbe, which river formed the southern boundary of their state. It was here that they came into contact with the Celts, who like the Greeks led captive their conquerors by subduing them with their superior civilization. "There is no race to which the Teutons owe so much as to the Celts . . . the whole Teutonic race shared a common civilization with the Celts, to whom they stood in a relation of intellectual dependence; in every aspect of public and private life Celtic influence was reflected."⁵ This period must have begun to close about the beginning of the first century B.C. For the latter part of the preceding century was marked by ferment and unrest throughout the whole Germanic world. "Nations were born and perished. Everywhere there was pressure and counter-pressure. Any people that had not the strength to maintain itself against its neighbours, or to strike out a new path for itself, was swept away. The tension thus set up first found

¹ They were, however, permitted to retain their national constitution, and no tribute appears to have been levied upon them. Mommsen, *Hist. of Rome*, iii. 7.

² See the description of the Celtic temperament on p. 14 of his *Commentary on Galatians*.

³ Cf. Mommsen, *op. cit.* II, iii. 8, 10.

⁴ Dr. Peisker's contention, cf. his art., *Camb. Med. Hist.*, Vol. I, p. 328.

⁵ Dr. Bang, in *Camb. Med. Hist.*, I, chap. vii. p. 185, and cf. Prof. MacCulloch's remark that in all such contact with other races "the Celts probably gave more than they received." Art. in *Hastings Dict.*, "Rel. and Ethics," Vol. III.

relief on the Rhenish frontier.”¹ The obvious result of this was to hasten the movement westward of the Celtic peoples, which appears to have taken the usual route through North Eastern Gaul and across into Britain via Southampton Water and the Humber. Another movement struck south along the lower reaches of the Elbe; this movement, however, had been preceded by other Celtic migrations dating probably from about 550 B.C., the whole migratory process being completed by c. 150 B.C., so far as Britain is concerned. This movement produces the final Celtic migration to Britain of the Belgæ.

These movements appear to have taken place in successive waves, which in various ways have left very distinct traces behind them. Of these different waves the first must have been the Goidels or Gaels whose language assumed the forms of Erse in Ireland, Gaelic in the Highlands, and Manx in the Isle of Man. To this branch of Celtic tribes approximated in many ways the ancient Picts, who were grouped with the Goidels of Scotland under the name of Caledonians, and who spoke their language.² The second large migratory wave was composed of another branch of the great Celtic family usually denominated by the term Cymri, but sometimes by the term Brythonic, from which is derived perhaps the name Britannia,³ as most probably Gaul is from Gael. From this migration, which penetrated as far north as the Firth of Forth, we get the surviving dialects of the Welsh and the Bretons in France, and the now extinct dialect of Cornwall. These were probably of the same family as those whom Caesar met in Gaul, and whose vast stature was a surprise to the Romans. Finally, the third wave reached our shores from Gaul, probably as late as 170 B.C., and was composed largely of the Belgæ,⁴ who settled in South East England, stretching from Wiltshire to Kent, but keeping south of the Thames. These were the foes that confronted Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. The result of these various invasions was, with the

¹ Dr. Bang, *op. cit.*

² Prof. Rait, *Hist. of Scotland*, chap. i.

³ Dr. Hodgkin's view. *Pol. Hist. Eng.*, I, p. 8. But Prof. Oman gives, as the origin of the phrase, the “Pretanic isle” from the Massiliot explorer Pytheas who uses the names which he probably obtained from the “P” using Celts and not the “Q” using Celts. *Eng. before the Nor. Conq.*, p. 15. Britannia, of course, was the name of that part of France known as Armorica and later Brittany, but the name was given after the Celtic invasion from Britain in the sixth century A.D.

⁴ The capital of the Belgæ was Winchester, known as Venta Belgarum.

exception of some remnants of the earlier inhabitants lingering in distant parts of Ireland and Scotland, to make these islands largely Celtic.

This fact has many consequences of importance. Apart altogether from linguistic influence, the wide dispersal of the Celts over Britain is sufficient to guarantee that in spite of the Roman Conquest, Celtic character would still be a great power amongst the suppressed population, all the greater, perhaps, for being a cherished racial mark ignored by their conqueror. It will probably always be a disputed point how far the Britons were Romanized during the centuries of the Roman occupation of Britain, but it is certain that in many respects it failed to stamp out many native elements that survived the invasion. Undoubtedly Roman organization and law, Roman customs and language profoundly affected the upper strata of society, the official and governing classes. But it is almost equally certain that the same influences did not percolate with similar thoroughness to the lower ranks of the population. All the existing evidence points to the fact that the Roman occupation was pre-eminently a military one, and that the Romans "either did not attempt or did not succeed in the attempt, largely to win over the inhabitants to their own ways and to accustom them to that civic life which had been the cradle of their own civilization."¹ We should therefore not be surprised to find that a strong strain of Celtic influence survived in the ordinary Briton to temper the Teutonism of their Saxon invaders. But if so, very few traces of such influences actually survive. "Nothing can be more definite or well marked," writes Professor Oman, "than the evidence that the higher civilization of the conquerors destroyed within two or three generations the lower national culture of the Conquered."² But it is possible in such cases to exaggerate the significance of material evidences: and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility for a people to assimilate the customs and habits of a conqueror without any radical alteration of character or nature. Consequently the absence of tangible evidences, such as sculpture or poetry provide, is not sufficient of itself to destroy the possibility of a very substantial survival of the fundamental characteristics of the Celtic nature. It would be only natural to suppose that Roman culture

¹ Hodgkin, *Pol. Hist. Eng.*, I, p. 76.

² Oman, *op. cit.* p. 106.

would be largely assimilated and Roman manners and customs extensively imitated by the British after centuries of Roman occupation. But it is also safe to assume that many of the lowest classes would perpetuate by inter-marriage those Celtic characteristics which no superficial assumption of Roman customs could obliterate. Later, after the Saxon invasions, these characteristics would be gradually merged in the central stream of Anglo-Saxon life ; but even so the main reservoir of Celtic influence remained intact amongst the mountains and valleys of Wales. Consequently when we look less to the material evidences of survival than to the spirit and nature of the English race we cannot but be struck with the evidences of the existence of a strong Celtic strain in our blood which points to some powerful survival of Celtic influence after the Roman and Saxon conquests ; and the influence apparently possessed sufficient vigour and vitality to survive the subsequent shock of the Danish invasions and the Norman Conquest. This Celtic element, as Matthew Arnold long ago pointed out, "manifests itself in our spirit and literature."¹ In any case there is often to be found in the English character and temperament those elements of delicacy and sensibility to spiritual influences which are marked characteristics of the Celtic nature. And this seems to point to a survival amongst the lowest strata of society of Celtic elements which succeeded in maintaining themselves in spite of all appearances to the contrary. And historical considerations render this intrinsically probable. We know that the Western half of Britain shook off its Roman culture, which had never penetrated far below the surface, in the time of chaos and confusion which supervened upon the withdrawal of the Roman legions and the abandonment of Britain to the ravages of her enemies. The victory of the Mons Badonicus² marked the arrest of the Teutonic invasions and the commencement

¹ *Essay on the Study of Celtic Literature.*

² Probably Bath, but great uncertainty surrounds both the date and place of this fight. It is fully discussed by Prof. Oman, *op. cit.* pp. 200, 201. In any case the neighbourhood of Bath is not an impossible scene for the decisive encounter which checked the westward march of conquest. But even supposing the "conflagration," as Gildas calls it, "licked the Western Ocean," that could only mean the Bristol Channel and the Dee, and even then, as Prof. Oman says : "The area of permanently conquered territory cannot have reached nearly so far," p. 209, cf. Plummer's Bede, Vol. II, p. 31. Strathclyde and West Wales (Devon and Cornwall) were not subdued until the seventh and ninth centuries respectively ; but Wales never succumbed to the Invaders.

of the period of settlement which left the lands West of the Severn to the Britons ; and this victory provided, by the immunity from disturbance thus secured, a fruitful soil for the survival of Celtic characteristics. Therefore we should expect that the close proximity of a great Celtic people like the Welsh would be bound to exercise considerable influence upon their neighbours, especially those of the neighbouring shires. And we have ample evidence that the genuine Celtic spirit not merely lingered amongst the hills and valleys of Wales, but at intervals burst out with rich and splendid expression notably in the sixth and twelfth centuries. In each case the outburst coincided with a time of great national expression and self-consciousness, and in the latter century took the permanent form of literary production.¹

The Celtic spirit, therefore, by no means tended to extinction during the centuries which saw the successive conquests of England, and this spirit is usually regarded as revealing itself in history by certain clearly marked characteristics. It is almost universally understood as being of an excessively volatile and fickle nature, nervous, highly-strung, and extremely sensitive to religious impressions. But it is an easy task to exaggerate outstanding racial characteristics and to give them a prominence far beyond their due. It is true that Cæsar notes of the inhabitants of Gaul a fickleness and instability which agrees well with the commonly accepted tradition. And their conduct in antiquity appears to support him, for they were noted as being a restless people, nomadic both by habit and by choice, and, according to Mommsen, a terror to all civilized people until finally curbed by the forces of Cæsar and the frontier organization of Augustus. In addition it must be admitted that Thierry's statement that one of the foremost characteristics of the Celts, "want of perseverance, aversion to discipline and order, ostentation and perpetual discord,"² has been rather painfully exemplified by some Celtic descendants in the modern world. Nevertheless it is a matter for consideration whether these undoubted

¹ G. G. Coulton in his *Chaucer and his England* quotes Walsingham's lines, "O stormy people, unsound and ever untrue. Aye, indiscreet and changing as a vane." And he points out that this was the common verdict of English writers ; but he ascribes it to the Age "when men in general were far more swayed by impulse than by reflection," and when "the fundamental insecurity of the social and political fabric was such as to thwart even the ripest reflection at every turn," p. 134.

² Quoted by Mommsen, *Hist. of Rome*, I, ii., 4.

characteristics have not received undue attention from historians to the exclusion of other and more durable features of the Celtic character. The description of the Celts given by Mommsen is such as we should expect of a wandering people not yet habituated to settled modes of life. They were driven into Western Europe by forces beyond their control, and were thus compelled during a long period to adopt a mode of life which develops just those characteristics which create "good soldiers but bad citizens." The life of a nomadic people in Europe in the centuries immediately succeeding the first inroads of the barbarians beyond the Roman frontiers can hardly have been conducive to a settled existence or the development of civic virtues. The continual imminence of danger, the ceaseless search for the means of subsistence, the constant change produced by the threatening proximity of still more powerful tribes were disastrous to the creation of more pacific habits of life. And in addition we may observe that these particular Celtic habits are common to nearly all tribes in a state of transition and migration. Something very similar could be said about practically all the tribes whose successive invasions brought desolation to central Europe and revealed invaders who seemed as incapable of leading a settled existence as the Celts. Thus Dr. Hodgkin, speaking of the description of the Germans by Tacitus, refers to them as a people who possessed "an invincible preference for the life of the warrior over that of the agriculturist" ¹—almost the identical statement, it will be seen, made by Mommsen of the Celts. Gibbon also speaks of the Franks in similar terms. ". . . An inconstant spirit, the thirst for rapine and a disregard of the most solemn treaties, disgraced the character of the Franks." ²

There appears to be nothing very exceptional, therefore, about this fickleness of the Celts; and neither history nor experience, especially in modern times, lends much support to the traditional view. When the whole question of the continued existence of Celtic Christianity in England was under discussion at the Council of Whitby in A.D. 664, the Celtic representatives were inflexible in adhering to their principles and displayed none of that changeableness commonly ascribed to them. And even earlier British History supports this view. For by the Canons of the Council of Arles, held

¹ *Life of Theodosius*, p. 54 (*Heroes of the Nations*).

² Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, I, xi.

in A.D. 314, and attended by the three British Bishops of London, York and Lincoln,¹ it was decreed that all churches should accept the custom of the Church of Rome with regard to the date of keeping Easter. This custom followed the eighty-four year cycle which was therefore introduced into Britain in accordance with the decree of the Council. When, centuries after, Wilfrid taunted the British bishops with maintaining an inconvenient and antiquated system he was really paying a high testimony to their fidelity. Other people and churches had changed their customs; not so the British.² And if we may judge by the attitude of the British bishops in their interview with Augustine in 603 A.D., "inflexible obstinacy" was as much the characteristic of those ancient Celts as of those to whom the words were originally applied by Pliny.³ And indeed the modern world can exhibit an equally clear indication of the true nature of the Celtic temperament both in Wales and Ireland. Professor Pollard is very near the truth when he remarks that whereas the stolid Britisher is never averse to fluctuations of the political barometer, to-day "the only people who never change their mind at general elections are the mercurial Celts."⁴ And if this is true of Liberal Wales it is equally true of Catholic Ireland. For no people have exhibited a more resolute tenacity in their adherence to their own views than the Sinn Fein inhabitants of that unhappy land. And, strange as it may seem, their view gains support even from the history of the Celts in Asia Minor. For in spite of the fact that they dwelt amongst several other races, each with their own customs and characteristics—Romans, Phrygians, Greeks, Jews, forming their all-pervading environment—they were true to type and clung to their own language for more than six hundred years.⁵ Bishop

¹ Reading *Colonia Lindunensium* for *C. Londinensium*.

² Cf. Dr. Williams, *Christianity in Early Britain*, pp. 147, 149. The controversy on the date of keeping Easter is the subject of an *Excursus* in Plummer's *Bede*, Vol. II.

³ It is interesting to observe that it is the actual word used by Wilfrid at Whitby to describe the attitude of the British towards their native religious customs. He refers to the Picts as being "accomplices in the obstinacy of the Britons." ". . . praeter hos, tantum et obstinationis eorum complices, Pictos dico et Brettones, cum quibus de duabus ultimis oceani insulis, et his non totis, contra totum orbem stulto labore pugnant." *Bede, H.E.*, iii. 25 (Plummer's Ed.).

⁴ *The History of England*. (Home Univ. Lib.)

⁵ Lightfoot, *Ep. to Gal.*, p. 12. Cf. Ramsay's *St. Paul*, p. 132. Also his whole account of the Province of Galatia, chap. vii. It is interesting to note that Freeman in commenting on the similarity of tongue between the Treveri in northern Europe and the Gauls of Asia Minor, observes that what astonished

Lightfoot has carefully catalogued the different elements that go to compose the rich diversity of the Celtic character, and traced a correspondence in St. Paul's incidental allusions in his "Epistle to the Galatians." But in so doing it was only natural that he should lay the stress on that fickleness and "mobility of mind" which Julius Cæsar noticed in the Celts of Gaul.¹ But, as we have seen, this fickleness was an inheritance from the past, and probably assumed no greater prominence in the Celts than in some other races. In any case it was a trait that was far outweighed by the Celtic power of steady adhesion to a great cause, and their hasty repudiation of Christianity in St. Paul's time really tells in their favour, for it indicates an inherent tendency to revert to the old rather than to follow the new. And in the case of a people so situated many forces would tell against Christianity, such as the persistent pressure of conservative and reactionary forces which would abound in a province like Galatia. Their knowledge of Christianity could not have been profound, for the activities of St. Paul appear to have been restricted to a somewhat limited area even supposing the North Galatian theory to represent a correct interpretation of the facts. And St. Paul's preaching in Greece would fail to reach many of the native elements where indigenous characteristics most persistently linger, as the inhabitants appeared to have retained their native tongue in ordinary life.² The unexpected reversion to their old faith, therefore, was not so strange as it no doubt appeared to the anxious mind of St. Paul. Lightfoot seems not to have calculated on the conservative forces at work. If St. Paul had been able to prolong his labours and consolidate his work in Galatia a different result might soon have been manifest, unless, which is improbable, the impress of surrounding peoples had tended to eliminate that characteristic of the Celtic character which we find so prominent in those who confronted Augustine and Wilfrid in the west in the sixth century A.D.

him most was "that any native tongue should have borne up so long in either country against the influence of Greek in the one case and Latin in the other." *Essay on Augusta Treverorum in Historical Essays* (3rd Series). Perhaps after all the explanation is to be found in the Celtic power of loyal adherence to traditional beliefs and habits.

¹ The people of Lystra, it must be admitted, according to St. Luke's condensed account in Acts xiv. 18, 19, showed traces of distinct instability of character in their rapid surrender to Jewish intrigue.

² *Acts xiv. 11.*

It seems, therefore, that writers have tended to exaggerate the undoubted fickleness of certain branches of the Celtic family at the expense of their other and more stable racial characteristics which have contributed not a little to the glory of the Celtic race. But the placing of one of their characteristics in a less prominent position relative to the others is not to deny to the Celts those other natural attributes which have left their mark in history. For it is important to recognize that the Celtic race has contributed much by infusing into life just those elements of vivacity, spontaneity and enthusiasm which the more sober and phlegmatic Teuton sorely lacks. To those elements we must probably ascribe the Englishman's willing championship of lost causes, his power of sustained and nervous oratory, his occasional outburst of self-sacrificing enthusiasm. These are elements which are neither to be despised nor neglected, and the world would have been the poorer if some mischance had eliminated them from Western life. The future may prove that the Celt can combine more successfully than any other race stubborn tenacity of purpose with a rich and vivacious nature. The ideal is not impossible. At one time the Celts of Ireland were the schoolmasters of Northern Christendom and their land a fount of learning for half the countries of Europe.¹ In addition the recent history of the British Empire shows that men of Celtic blood have contributed not a little to the efficiency of that great political fabric.

If therefore a settled Ireland can release for the wider service of mankind the rich store of Celtic enthusiasm and ardour, the Celt may yet succeed in playing a decisive part in the future development of Anglo-Saxon civilization.

¹ See the very interesting account in R. L. Poole's *Illustrations of Mediæval Thought and Learning*, pp. 8-21 (2nd Ed.) ; cf. H. B. Workman, *Christian Thought to the Reformation*, pp. 139, 140.

