



ST GILES' LECTURES.

FIRST SERIES—THE SCOTTISH CHURCH.

LECTURE I.

HEATHEN SCOTLAND TO THE INTRODUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

By the Rev. JAMES CAMERON LEES, D.D., St Giles' Cathedral
(High Kirk), Edinburgh.

IT has, as some of you know, been proposed to have a series of Lectures upon Scottish ecclesiastical history from the earliest times down to the present day, to be given by various well-known ministers in this ancient church. It is to be hoped that this course will be both interesting and instructive. The lectures are delivered here without infringing upon our ordinary hours of public worship, and will I believe be thoroughly in accordance with the spirit of the day of rest and prayer. Nothing surely can have a more religious tendency, and be more calculated to awaken in the mind sentiments truly religious than to trace the progress of Christianity in our land from the barbarism of the prehistoric age, to the light and civilisation of the present day; from where it triumphed over heathen temples and overthrew the shrines of heathen gods, to its influence in our own time, and its power as a chief factor in the civilisation

ness of the old religion, and of the gleam of hope which the new threw on the life and destiny of man. 'The life¹ of man in this world, O king,' said the speaker, 'may be likened to what happeneth when thou art sitting at supper with thy thanes in the time of winter. A fire is blazing on the hearth, and the hall is warm; without, the rain and the snow are falling, and the wind is howling. There cometh a sparrow, and flieth through the house. She entereth by one door, and goeth out by another. While she is within the house, she feeleth not the howling blast; but when the short space of rest is past, she flieth out again into the storm, and passeth away from our eyes. Even so is it with the brief life of man; it appeareth for a little while, but what precedeth it or what cometh after it we know not at all. Wherefore, if this new lore can tell us aught, let us hearken to it and follow it.'

What that new lore told them regarding the present life and destiny of man we know, for we have heard it ourselves. The contrast between the paganism of that time and the civilisation of to-day is so overwhelmingly great as to be indescribable. The change in social life—political organisation—the rise of art—the discoveries of science—these things mark the distance we have travelled since the first Christian missionary set foot upon our shores. Year by year there has been a steady advance in all that pertains to the elevation of man; and the Scotland of to-day is as unlike the Scotland of that early time, as the well-tilled and cultivated fields are unlike the rough forests, swamps, and morasses, in which our wild ancestors were wont to dwell. How difficult it is for us, as we travel through some of the more fertile parts of our country, to think of them being formerly only inhabited by painted barbarians, living by the spoils of the chase; and that where now the busy city stands—its spires and noble buildings springing up against the sky—were groups of huts in which they lived in all the

¹ M'Lear's *Conversion of the English*, p. 51.

squalor of savage misery. It is impossible to deny that it is Christianity that has been the chief source of all that has made our country great; that it caused barbarism to be exchanged for purity of life, and the heroism of savages for the virtues of Christianity; that it gave an impulse to civilisation that has not yet spent itself. Above all, it brought comfort to those who knew no mitigation of human sorrow, and hope to those for whom the future was full of dread. It is well for us who now hear the sound of peaceful industry and the chime of the church bell, where once ascended the screams of devil-worshippers and the smoke of sacrifices, to remember how the change has come, how mighty it has been, and to have faith in the power of the same cause ever to produce the same result. Heathenism still confronts us in many quarters of the globe with which we have a close connection and a direct interest—heathenism, many of the forms of which recall that from which our own country was delivered. Let us not deny to those that ‘sit in darkness’ the same blessings that have in God’s mercy come to ourselves. ‘You have seen,’ it has been eloquently said,¹ ‘the fresh spring bursting up from the earth, and after it has filled its own little basin, overflowing into a rill that causes fertility and bloom all over the neighbouring valley. Like this is the living water of the love of Christ, that gleams and leaps with life, and then starts forth to convey its fullness and exuberance to barren places. The church that has no love to spare is the standing pool that “creams and mantles” with unwholesome things bred in its bosom by reason of its deadly stillness.’ If this imperfect sketch which we have given you to-day of the paganism of old Scotland, make you more earnest in striving to enlighten that which still exists even in the Scotland of the present day—the heathenism in the heart of the Christian Church and under the shadow of our temples, and which sheds its baleful shadow over so large a portion of

¹ *Word, Work, and Will*, by W. Thomson, Archbishop of York.

the globe ; if it fill you with a sense of gratitude to Almighty God for your own privileges, and deepen a sense of your responsibility to extend these privileges to others ; if it bring you into greater sympathy with those who are seeking to extend the kingdom of Christ ; if it lead you even ' to hold the rope ' for those who bravely go down into the pit, I shall not have spoken in vain. If, looking to the past and to the present, we can say with the Psalmist : ' Blessed be the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things ; and blessed be his glorious name for ever,' we will surely not refuse to add also with him the prayer : ' And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and amen.'¹

¹ Psalm lxxii. 18, 19.

of the nineteenth century. We all know how deeply interesting is the book of Acts, which tells of the commencement of the Christian church, and its conflict with Roman, Greek, and other religions. Every account of its progress since that time is a sequel to that book, and shews us how the river of whose rise that book tells has flowed onward, like the stream described by Ezekiel, making waste places glad, and changing desolation and barrenness into fertility. The history of the church in Scotland, like that of the civil history of this same country, is full of romance, of stirring scenes, and of most picturesque and weird effects. These will doubtless be dwelt upon in turn; but what the devout mind will see and reverently admire is, that amid many changes and overturnings there has been a steady progress on the whole, and evidence of an overruling power causing all things to work together for good. To be able to recognise this, it is necessary to take a view, not of one portion, but of the whole history of our country's faith, to review the causes that have been at work for generations—to trace them in their operation from age to age down to the present hour. All know that Scotchmen have been made in great measure what they are by their national religion; its story, too little known, ought therefore to prove attractive. That it will be so in the hands of those who tell it I cannot doubt. It could not be told in a more suitable place than in this church, with which so many historic associations are connected.

I have been honoured by those who have instituted this course by being asked to give the introductory lecture. It seems to me that I can best discharge this duty by bringing before you, so far as can be ascertained, the state of Scotland at the advent of Christianity, when those influences, of which subsequent lectures will give a full account, first began to tell on our country, and which, reaching down to the present day, have created and moulded our national and religious life.

The materials for forming an estimate of the state of pre-

Christian Scotland are of the very scantiest character. Few monuments of those dark ages which preceded the coming to our land of Christian teachers have come down to us. There is almost nothing in the discoveries or treasures of archæology; neither temple nor sacrificial knife nor altar, from which we can glean an idea of what the religion of our Scottish forefathers was. The little that we can learn is chiefly from Christian historians, who describe the conflict of their religion with heathendom, and who incidentally tell somewhat of those rites and superstitions from which the first converts to the new faith were delivered. But as these historians wrote after Christianity had obtained a firm hold upon the country and people, it is difficult to say how much of what they relate may be relied upon. St Patrick, St Columba, St Cuthbert, are Christian heroes whose lives are glorified with a halo of miracle and romance. It is not easy to discriminate between what is legend and what is fact in the story of their words and deeds. Some slight knowledge of Christianity had apparently been previously imparted through the Roman occupation, and also through the preaching of St Ninian.

When Christianity first made itself felt as a permanent power in these lands, the country we now call Scotland was divided into four kingdoms. To the north of the line of the Forth and Clyde lay the kingdoms of the Scots and Picts, separated from one another by a mountain chain called by the old writers, *Dorsum Britannicæ* or *Drumalban*. The kingdom of the Scots comprehended generally what are now called the counties of Argyll and Bute and Arran. That of the Picts, those of Orkney and Shetland, Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Inverness, Perth, and Fife. The part of Scotland to the south of the line of the Forth and Clyde was divided between two other kingdoms—those of the Britons of Strathclyde, and the Saxons of Northumbria. The territory of the Britons extended southwards from the Clyde to the river Derwent in Cumberland. It comprehended part of Cumberland and Westmore-

land, and the counties of Dumfries, Lanark, Ayr, Renfrew, and Peebles. To the east of this kingdom was that of the Saxons or Angles, which included Northumberland, Berwick, Roxburgh, East-Lothian, and perhaps Mid-Lothian, where then, as now, there stood the strong fortified position that still bears the name of the Saxon King Edwin—Edwinsbruch. Galloway was occupied by a colony of Picts.¹

The Scots were the descendants of a colony of Irish who in the fifth century had settled along the western coast of Scotland, and who were in close connection with their mother-country of Ireland. The Picts were the ancient Caledonians, that fierce people of whom we have an account from the Roman historians—men of red hair and large limbs, who had no walled cities, who lived by pasturage and the chase, who fought in chariots and painted their bodies with pictures of wild animals, and who could stand for days immersed in the waters of their marshes.² The Britons were the native Celtic race, who had been colonised by the Romans, and who called themselves Roman citizens. They had received some knowledge of Christianity at a very early period; but apparently after the withdrawal of the Romans they relapsed into Paganism.³ The Saxons were the Teutons from Hanover and Friesland, who had made a settlement on the eastern coast, and who were continually trenching on the territory of their neighbours.

The language of the Scots, and probably also of the Picts,⁴ was that which is now known as the Gaelic. That of the Britons still lingers in Wales. That of the Saxons or Angles is

¹ The four old kingdoms are referred to by more than one early historian. In a poem relating to the labours of St Columba, it is said :

‘The people of Alba to the Ictian Sea,
The Gaedhil cruithneans, Saxons, Saxo-Brits.
Best of men was the man who went [to them].’

See also Bede, c. 14.

² Dion Cassius.

³ Skene's *Celtic Scotland*, vol. i., p. 157.

⁴ Mr Skene seems to have shewn this conclusively.

represented by the English tongue. Each of these kingdoms had its capital—a fortress of great strength, the seat of government, where the king resided. The capital of the Scots was at Dunadd, a rocky eminence near the Crinan Canal. That of the Picts, at the commencement of the Christian period, was near the mouth of the river Ness—probably the height called Craig Patrick, near the modern town of Inverness.¹ The capital of the Britons was at Alcluith or Dunbarton, and that of the Saxons at Bamburgh on the Northumbrian shore.

Between these races there was continual warfare. Like all barbarians, they delighted in the chase and martial achievements. Their annals, such as they are, are the record of petty feuds. The northern Caledonians hunted the deer, the boar, and the wolf. They navigated lake and sea in canoes made out of a hollow tree, such as are still occasionally dug up out of the morasses; or in boats made of wicker-work covered with the skins of animals, like those that are still used in some parts of the west of Ireland. They had advanced a certain stage in civilisation. They had emerged from the stone and bronze age, were conversant with the use of metals, and the Britons at least had local government in a more or less organised form. Probably the nearest resemblance to the northern Scot may be found in an African tribe of the present day, with its scattered villages and head township strongly fortified, where the king resides.

The religion of the two northern kingdoms, those of the Picts and the Scots, seems to have been very much the same in its character. We can only form an idea of what it was from the history of the early Christian missionaries. Holding a high place among both Scots and Picts, was a class of men called Druids. They are mentioned frequently in the lives of St Columba and St Patrick; and in the ancient Celtic manuscripts

¹ See Adamnan's account of St Columba's visit to King Brude.

which have come down to us from Irish sources, Druids appear to have held a distinct position in connection with the religious life of the people such as it was. They resided at the residence of kings, and they exercised great power in national affairs. An order of priests bearing this name inhabiting Gaul and Southern Britain has been described by the Roman historians with considerable minuteness. These Druids, according to them, presided at sacrifices; they were instructors of the young, and were judges in all matters of controversy. They took no part in war, nor were liable to pay taxes. They made use of the Greek letters in writing. They inculcated the immortality of the soul and its transmigration into different bodies. They taught the youths astronomy, and 'much about the nature of things and the immortal gods.' They used rites of augury from the slaughter of a human victim, and dwelt in dense groves in remote places. They taught in caves or hidden forests, and they burned or buried with the dead what was most prized by them when living. They considered the oak as the emblem of the Almighty, and the misletoe was regarded with peculiar veneration. It was detached from the parent tree by a golden knife, and carried home with imposing ceremony. Cæsar and also Pliny have a good deal to say of these mysterious persons the Druids, and they still furnish material for much antiquarian and historic controversy. Into such controversy we cannot of course enter. All that we have to say is, there is no trace of any such organised priesthood existing in Northern Britain as the Roman historians describe.

Whatever may be the degree of belief put in the legends respecting the character and even the designation of the Druids—supposing we go the length of saying there were never any such persons—we are confronted with certain tangible memorials existing to this day of a religious or ceremonial observance unrecorded in history. There they are, and as rational beings we are invited to account for them. Most probably, as we venture to think, these memorials are the significant relics of

a system of pagan worship which vanished on the introduction of Christianity. We allude in a special manner to those mysterious circles and groups of stones of different dimensions, and varied in their mechanical preparation, that are found in the British Islands and in France, the Gaul of the Romans. The grandest and most remarkable of these memorials is the well-known Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Two others, less imposing, but equally suggestive, are the standing-stones of Stennis in Orkney, and of Callernish in the island of Lewis. Differing as these circles do in some respects, they are clearly all of one character. They have had the same meaning. They belong to a people possessing a similarity in superstitious or symbolic observance.

We are aware that the custom of fixing large stones in an upright posture in the ground commemorative of men or important events is of prodigious antiquity in almost all nations. Besides being found in Britain and continental Europe, these monoliths are seen in Assyria, Persia, India, and Mexico. Such memorials receive notice in the Old Testament. We read in Judges, ix. 6, of Abimelech being made king 'by the pillar which was in Shechem;' and in 2 Kings, xi. 14, of Joash, when he was anointed king, standing 'by a pillar, as the manner was.' A like usage prevailed in ancient Britain when the king or chief was elected. At Carnac in Brittany there is a surprisingly large number of upright stones, not in circles, but in straight lines, with a curved row at one end, while all around are seen barrows and cromlechs. The whole had evidently been connected with sepulchral, judicial, or other solemnities. In Norway and the north-east of Scotland exist many rudely sculptured stones which had been set up in a remote period of paganism, but some of which had received carvings of Christian symbols, such as the cross, after the diffusion of Christianity.

Let us not despise these rude testimonies, obscure though they be, and of no recognisable value, according to ordinary notions. There is something to touch the feelings in observing

these sculptured records of an extremely ancient heathenism. There is, indeed, always matter for elevating emotion in contemplating objects of human art which carry us back to the far-reaching past, into what might be called the infancy of mankind. Uncouth as they are, there is a sentiment of good in these old stones. We can at least say that at first sight of the gigantic monoliths of Stonehenge, we experienced feelings of awe akin to those which usually occur on coming in presence of the Pyramids. We saw before us the relics of a huge work of art, excelling all similar constructions in Britain, and the age of which could not reasonably be deemed less than three thousand years, a stretch of time that takes us back to the era of Moses, the venerated lawgiver of Israel. Nor, in looking at Stonehenge, standing as it does in melancholy solitude, were our emotions of a less solemnising nature by knowing that we were within a few miles of that noble Christian fane, Salisbury Cathedral, with its lofty and exquisitely tapering spire piercing the skies, reminding us of an eminent Scotsman and church dignitary, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, the historian of the Reformation, and the eloquent advocate of civil and religious liberty.

Reverting to those shadowy persons, the Druids, it is alleged that one of them of considerable celebrity named Broichan, resided at the court of the Pictish King Brude, and that the Highland apostle St Columba had with him more than one trial of strength, which has been duly recorded. 'On a certain day,' says the biographer of Columba, 'Broichan, while conversing with the saint, said to him: "Tell me, Columba, when dost thou propose to sail?" The saint replied: "I intend to begin my voyage after three days, if God permits me and preserves my life." Broichan said: "On the contrary, thou shalt not be able, for I can make the winds unfavourable to thy voyage, and cause a great darkness to envelop you in its shade." That same day, the saint, accompanied with a number of his followers, went to the long lake of the river Nesa (Loch

Ness), as he had determined. Then the Druids began to exult, seeing that it had become very dark, and that the wind was very violent and contrary. Our Columba called on Christ the Lord, and embarked in his small boat; and while his sailors hesitated, he the more confidently ordered them to raise the sails against the wind. No sooner was this order executed, while the whole crowd was looking on, than the vessel ran against the wind with extraordinary speed.¹ This is one instance in which the magical pretensions of the Druids have been specified. It is not the only one: the Christian teachers seem constantly to have been in conflict with them, and are represented as triumphing over their black art by means of the miraculous powers they are supposed to have possessed. 'A few days after his conversion,'² says the writer we have already quoted, 'a son of a householder was attacked with a dangerous illness, and brought to the very borders of life and death. When the Druids saw him in a dying state, they began with great bitterness to upbraid his parents, and to extol their own gods as more powerful than the God of the Christians, and thus to despise God, as if he were weaker than their gods. When all this was told to the blessed man (Columba), he turned with zeal for God, and proceeded to the house of the friendly peasant.' The saint, of course, triumphs over the Druids, and raises the boy who had died to life again.

Among the Irish Scots, St Patrick had conflicts of a similar nature, in which he also came off victorious. A Druid pours poison into the cup of St Patrick, who blesses the cup, and the fluid it contains congeals. He inverts it, and the poisonous drops fall out. The Druid then by his incantations covers the plain with snow, but admits his inability to remove the enchantment till the same hour on the morrow; Patrick blesses the plain, and the snow disappears. The Druid brings on a thick darkness, but is unable to remove it. Patrick prays, straight-

¹ *Life of St Columba*, by Adamnan, Book II., chap. xxxv.

² *Ibid.*, Book II., chap. xxxiii.

way the darkness vanishes, and the sun begins to shine.¹ In an ancient Irish manuscript,² these magicians are represented as drying up by their spells and incantations all the rivers, lakes, and springs of a district. A great Druid shoots an arrow into the air, and a fountain bursts forth where the arrow falls. Many allusions are found in these old manuscripts to the necromancy of the Druids, and to their different spells and incantations. A favourite method of divination with them was by sneezing,³ or by the song of a bird perched on a tree. In an old poem attributed to St Columba, these and other similar practices are referred to and abjured. 'Our fate,' sings the poet, 'depends not on sneezing :

Nor on a bird perched on a twig,
Nor on the root of a knotted tree,
Nor on the noise of clapping hands.
Better is He in whom we trust—
The Father, the One and the Son.⁴

And in another verse of the same poem, he says :

' I adore not the noise of birds,
Nor sneezing, nor lots in this world,
Nor a son, nor chance, nor woman—
My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.'⁵

In another poem, in the form of a prayer, the same saint alludes to the magical arts of his adversaries. He recognises their power over the elements of nature, and exclaims :

' My Druid—may he be on my side !—
Is the Son of God, and truth with purity.'⁶

¹ Todd's *Life of St Patrick*, p. 452.

² Professor Occury's *Lectures*, p. 271.

³ Both among the Greeks and Romans, sneezing was used for the same purpose. In the middle ages, this method of divination was denounced by ecclesiastical councils.

⁴ Todd's *Life of St Patrick*, p. 122.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

These notices are probably sufficient to shew what was the character of Druidism among the Celts. It was a system of necromancy like that which has ever been inseparably connected with heathenism¹—a belief in men who can bring storms, and bewitch fields, and bring down rain—a belief in oracles and divinations and charms. Belief in such men has always accompanied the lowest forms of religious faith.

The religion of the northern kingdoms of the Picts and Scots, of which the Druids were the ministers, was in itself, as might be expected from what we have said, of a very debased and grovelling kind. It seems to have been mainly a kind of fetichism, an adoration of natural objects and of the powers of the external world—the rocks, the wind, the thunder; and if the people rose in thought above what came within the knowledge of the senses, it was only to people the material world with demons and malignant spirits, to whom all phenomena were attributed, and whose aid was to be sought, or whose wrath was to be averted, by means of charms and magical spells. Among the pagan Scots, pillar stones were objects of worship,² and were either overthrown, or consecrated with the sign of the cross, by the early Christian teachers. On a great plain in Ireland stood, it is said, a great stone idol, called *Cenn Cruaich*, ornamented with gold and silver, with twelve other idols around it, ornamented with brass, which were worshipped by the natives, and which St Patrick cast down by simply raising his pastoral staff.³ In a poetic life of the same saint, it is said that

‘ He preached three-score years
The cross of Christ to the Tuatha of Feni;
On the Tuatha of Erin there was darkness.
The Tuatha adored the Sidhe.’⁴

¹ *Conflict of Christianity*, by Gerhard Uhlhorn, Book II., chap. iii.

² Todd's *Life of St Patrick*, p. 127.

³ Professor Occury's *Lectures*, p. 539; Todd's *Life of St Patrick*, p. 127.

⁴ *The Celts*, by Rev. G. R. M'Lear, p. 23.

The *sidhe* were spirits who were supposed to haunt nature, and to dwell underground, and a belief in their dread power remained long after Christianity had obtained firm hold on Scotland, and lingers in some parts of our country to the present day.¹ St Columba seems to have had full belief in the existence of these demons, which were believed to have their usual dwelling-place in fountains and green hillocks, and delighted in exorcising them. 'While² the blessed man was stopping,' says his biographer, 'for some days in the province of the Picts, he heard that there was a fountain famous among this heathen people, which foolish men, having their senses blinded of the devil, worshipped as a god. For those who drank this fountain, or purposely washed their hands or feet in it, were allowed by God to be struck by demoniacal art, and went home either leprous or purblind, or at least suffering from weakness or other kinds of infirmity. By all these things the pagans were seduced, and paid divine honours to the fountain. Having ascertained this, the saint one day went up to the fountain fearlessly; and on seeing this, the Druids, whom he had often sent away vanquished and confounded, were greatly rejoiced, thinking that, like others, he would suffer from the touch of that baneful water.' The saint then blessed the fountain, 'and from that day the demons departed from the water; and not only was it not allowed to injure any one, but even many diseases amongst the people were cured by this same fountain after it had been blessed and washed in by the saint.' At another time, when the saint began to pray, he beheld 'a very black host of demons fighting against him with iron darts;' and in an ancient life of St Patrick, mention is made of his meeting with nine Druids clad in white garments with a magical host.³ These invisible spirits pervaded the elements of nature

¹ See a curious book on the underground people, by Mr Kirke, minister of Balquhiddel.

² Adamnan's *Life of St Columba*, p. 45.

³ Betham, *Ant. Res.*, II., Ap., p. xxxi.

—the clouds, the waters, the earth, the trees. One of the legendary kings of Ireland is stated to have received as pledges from the nation, ‘sun, moon, and every power which is in heaven and in earth,’ that the sovereignty should always remain in his own race; and in a striking poem, said to be by St Patrick, there are signs that even he had not altogether shaken himself free from a sense of the mysterious power of the elements of nature. He realised it very vividly. He says :

‘ I bind to myself to-day
The power of Heaven,
The light of the Sun,
The whiteness of the Snow,
The force of Fire,
The flashing of Lightning,
The velocity of Wind,
The depth of the Sea,
The stability of the Earth,
The hardness of Rocks.’

He invokes these with Christian powers, such as the power of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, to defend him from the magical and evil influences by which he believed himself surrounded.

‘ I have set around me all these powers,
Against every hostile savage power
Directed against my body and my soul ;
Against the incantations of false prophets ;
Against the black laws of heathenism ;
Against the false laws of heresy ;
Against the deceits of idolatry ;
Against the spells of women and smiths and Druids ;
Against all knowledge which blinds the soul of man.’

The same saint is described as having an interview with the daughters of the Irish king, who supposed him and his com-

panions to be *Duine Sidhe*¹—gods of the earth. Then the following questions are put by one of the princes to the evangelist—and they shew traces of the nature-worship of the inquirer :

‘ Who is God ?
 And where is God ?
 And what is God ? . . .
 Is He in heaven or in earth ?
 In the sea ?
 In rivers ?
 In mountainous places ?
 In valleys ?
 Declare unto us the knowledge of Him.’

The Scots and the Picts were in that low religious condition in which Nature and her powers are objects of dread. Their religion was one of fear. It was a fetichism, and can scarcely be called anything more. Polytheism or Monotheism it was not, for they seemed to have had no idea of higher powers than these spirits of evil, governing and controlling all visible things. ‘ They knew not God.’

The religion of the Britons of Strathclyde was not very different from that of the northern kingdoms which we have described ; any Christianity they had been taught had vanished. They were as heathen as their neighbours, and followed the customs of their forefathers. They gave a high place in their society to the bards or poets, some of whose effusions have come down to us, and like the Picts and Scots seem to have venerated natural objects, grafting on their own original paganism some of the superstitions of their Saxon neighbours. In the account given of the preaching at Hoddam, in Dumfriesshire, of Kentigern, who finally converted the Britons to Christianity, there is a reference made to their religious practices,

¹ Todd's *St Patrick*.

which is suggestive enough. That teacher shewed them 'that idols were dumb, the vain inventions of men, fitter for the fire than for worship. He shewed that the elements, in which they believed as deities, were creatures and formations adapted by the disposition of their Maker to the use, help, and assistance of men. But Woden, whom they, and especially the Angles, believed to be the chief deity from whom they derived their origin, and to whom the fourth day of the week is dedicated, he asserted with probability to have been a mortal man, king of the Saxons, by faith a pagan, from whom they and many nations have their descent.'¹ From this extract we can glean an idea of what was the religious condition of the inhabitants of the British kingdom.

Such is a slight sketch of the paganism of the three Celtic kingdoms—those of the Picts, Scots, and Britons. Many traces of this paganism survive to the present day. In the belief in fairies, in charms, in witchcraft, that still lingers in many parts of Scotland, we have the remains of the old Celtic heathenism; and any one who is familiar with what is called folk-lore will find abundant evidence of old druidical superstitions still existing in the midst of our present civilisation. Many of these superstitions were treated not a little kindly by the Christian teachers, and perhaps on this account have survived. Pillar stones had engraven on them the sign of the cross, and became objects of Christian veneration.² Fountains were blessed and became holy wells. Demonology was fully recognised and exorcism practised. Heathen festivals were converted into Christian holidays. Few who observe May-day and All-hallow E'en know that these were festive days before even the name of Christ was heard in this land; and the very ceremonies by which they are still observed have their origin in far-away pagan times. It was

¹ Jocelyn, *Vit. S. Ken.*, chap. xxxii., quoted by Skene.

² Todd's *Life of St Patrick*, p. 500.

an advice given by one of the popes to British missionaries¹ that they should disturb as little as necessary pagan practices. 'The temples, cleansed with holy water, were to be hallowed for Christian worship; and heathen festivals, instead of being rudely abolished, might be devoted to the celebration of the festival of the saints;' for, as he argues, 'you cannot cut off everything at once from rude natures—he who would climb a height must ascend step by step, and not by leaps and bounds.' It is on this principle, so clearly laid down by high authority, that the Christian teachers of Scotland seem to have acted, and hence the existence in our own time of many traces of that paganism against which they contended.

When we turn from Celtic to Saxon heathenism, and come from the mountains of the north, and the regions of the west, to the kingdom of Northumbria and the eastern Lowlands of Scotland, we feel that we are upon sure ground; for the religion of the Teuton or Saxon was well defined, and we have ample information as to its character. It prevailed over a great part of Europe. It was a polytheism; for it had a system of recognised deities, and it also had a cosmogony, or theory of creation, and a doctrine of a future state peculiarly its own.² Let us glance at some of the main features that distinguished it.

The greatest of the Saxon gods was Odin, or Woden, whose name is given to the fourth day of the week—Wednesday, or Wodensday. To him warriors were dedicated; and when they went to battle, they vowed to give him a certain number of souls. He was the supreme deity. The next among the gods was Thor, after whom the fifth day of the week is called Thursday, or Thorsday. He was the thundering god—powerful

¹ Bede, *H. E.*, i. 30.

² This sketch of Saxon heathenism is chiefly founded on the following authorities: *Ten Great Religions*, by F. Clark; Kemble's *Saxons in England*; Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*; *The English*, by the Rev. G. F. M'Lear; and Dasent's *Burnt Njal*.

over the elements, guiding the storms, sending rain. He carried a hammer or club which, as often as he hurled it from him, came back to his hand again. Tiew, whose name the third day of the week bears, was the giver of victory, the god of battle. Frea was the god of fertility, of the life-giving sunshine, of fruitfulness and peace. Balder was the god of light and grace, of splendour, manly excellence, and beauty. The goddess Friege was the wife of Woden, and gave the name to the sixth day of the week. And lastly, there was Saetere, of whom we know little more than that he gave his name to the seventh day.

Inferior to these, there were other gods and goddesses too numerous to mention, and in addition a plentiful supply of demons or evil spirits who wrought woe to the human race, and whose machinations were unending. The chief of these was Loki, who bore a fearful character as 'the calumniator of the gods, the grand contriver of deceit and fraud, the reproach of gods and men,' beautiful in figure, and surpassing all mortals in his powers of craftiness. 'Three monsters owe their birth to him—the wolf Fenris, the serpent Midgard, and Hela or Death. All three are enemies to the gods, who after various struggles have chained this wolf till the last day, when he shall break loose and devour the sun. The serpent hath been cast into the sea, where he shall remain till he shall be conquered by the god Thor; and Hela or Death has been banished into the lower regions, where she has the government of nine worlds, into which she distributes those sent to her. Here she possesses a habitation protected by exceedingly high walls and strongly barred gates. Hunger is her table, starvation her knife, delay her man, slowness her maid, precipice her threshold, care her bed, and burning anguish forms the hangings of her apartments.'

The life and transactions of the various deities are very particularly chronicled. In their manner of life they are thoroughly human. Their court is kept under 'a great ash-tree,

where they distribute justice. Its branches cover the face of the earth. Its top reaches to the highest heaven. It is supported by three vast roots, one of which extends to the ninth world. An eagle whose piercing eye discerns all things, perches upon the branches; a squirrel is constantly running up and down it to bring news, while a parcel of serpents fastened to the trunk endeavour to destroy it. From one of the roots runs a fountain where wisdom lies concealed. From a neighbouring spring (the fountain of past things) three virgins are continually drawing a precious water with which they water the ash-tree. These three virgins always keep under the ash, and it is they who dispense the days and ages of men. Every man has a destiny appropriated to himself, who determines the duration and events of his life; but the three destinies of more special note are Urd¹ (the past), Werande (the present), and Sculde (the future).'

The account of the creation of all things was of the same definite yet imaginative character, and it is instructive to compare it with the Scripture and other cosmogonies. 'In the day-spring of the ages there was neither sea nor shore, nor refreshing breezes. There was neither earth below nor heaven above to be distinguished. The whole was only one vast abyss without herb and without seeds. The sun had then no palace, the stars knew not their dwelling-places, the moon was ignorant of her power. After this there was a luminous, burning, flaming world towards the south; and from this world flowed out incessantly into the abyss that lay towards the north, torrents of sparkling fire, which, in proportion as they removed far away from their source, congealed in their falling into the abyss, and so filled it with snow and ice. From the icy vapours, melted into warm living drops by a wind from the south, came the giant Ymir. From him came a race of wicked giants. Then arose in a mysterious manner Bor, the father of three

¹ Hence the word *weird*.

sons—Odin, Vili, and Ve. The sons of Bor slew the giant Ymir, and the blood ran with such abundance from his wounds that it caused a general inundation, wherein perished all the giants except one who, saving himself in a bark, escaped with all his family. Then a new world was formed. The sons of Bor dragged the body of the giant into the abyss, and of it made the earth; the sea and the rivers were composed of his blood; the earth of his flesh; the great mountains of his bones; the rocks of his teeth and of splinters of his broken bones. They made of his skull the vault of heaven, which is supported by four dwarfs named South, North, East, and West. They fixed there tapers to enlighten it. The days were distinguished; the nights were numbered. They made the earth round, and surrounded it with the deep ocean. One day, as the sons of Bor were taking a walk, they found two pieces of wood floating on the water; these they took and out of them made a man and a woman. The eldest of the gods gave them life and souls; the second, motion and knowledge; the third, the gift of speech, hearing, and raiment. From this man and woman, named Askus and Embla, is descended the race of man who now inhabit the earth.'

Such is the account of creation which the Teutons believed. It resembles the Greek story of the origin of the gods, and in its idea of the origin of all things from nebulous vapours and heat, it reminds us of some of those scientific theories which are frequently set forth at the present day. Not less striking than their cosmogony, was their theory of another world. It is as materialistic as can well be conceived, but at the same time most characteristic of the race that held it. 'The realm of Hel was cold, cheerless, and shadowy. No simulated war was there from which warriors desisted with renovated strength and glory. No capacious quaichs of mead or cups of life-giving wine: chill and ice, frost and darkness, shadowy realms without a sun, without song or wine or feast.' While Hel was of this gloomy character, the heaven of the

Saxon, Waeheal or Valhalla, was very different. 'The heroes who are received into the palace of Odin have every day pleasures among themselves, of passing in review, ranging themselves in order of battle, of cutting one another to pieces; but as soon as the hour of repast arrives, they return all safe to the hall of Woden, and fall to eating and drinking. Though the number of them cannot be counted, the flesh of the boar *Serimner* is sufficient for them all; every day it is served up at table, and every day it is renewed entire. Their beverage is beer and mead; one single goat, whose milk is mead, furnishes enough to intoxicate the heroes. Their cups are the skulls of the enemies they have slain.' It is evident how strongly this conception of the future takes its colour from the whole existence, temperament, and history of the warlike race who believed in it. It was the shadow projected by their life.

The legends of their gods would occupy, and indeed do occupy volumes. They were not, like the classic deities, dwelling in unbending dignity on Mount Olympus; but roamed to and fro, and were as much given to adventure as their worshippers on earth. We will give only one of these legends as a specimen of many. It is supposed to be, like them all, parabolic—to have a deep moral and spiritual meaning—to set forth the 'struggles of the soul against the inexorable laws of nature, freedom against fate, the spirit with the flesh, mind with matter, human hope with change, disappointment, loss.' Thor goes to visit his enemies the giants of cold and darkness. The king of the city where they dwell inquired what great feat Thor and his companions could perform. 'One professed to be a great eater, on which the king summoned one of his servants, called Logi, and placed between them a trough filled with meat. Thor's companion ate his share, but Logi ate meat and bones too, and the trough into the bargain, and was considered to have conquered. Thor's other companion was a great runner, and was set to run with a young man called Hugi, who so outstripped him that he reached the goal before the other had gone half-way. Then Thor was

asked what he could do himself. He said he would engage in a drinking-match, and was presented with a large horn, and requested to empty it at a single draught, which he expected easily to do; but on looking, the liquor appeared hardly diminished. The second time he tried, and lowered it slightly; a third time, and it was sunk only half an inch. Then he was brought to try a new feat. He was asked to lift a cat from the ground, and ignominiously failed. Lastly he wrestled with an old toothless woman, and lost his footing. Afterwards the discomfiture of Thor was thus explained. The triumphant eater was fire itself, the devourer of all things, disguised as a man. The successful runner was thought, whose fleet step none can outstrip. The horn out of which he tried to drink was the ocean, which was lowered a few inches by his tremendous draughts. The cat was the great Midgard serpent which goes round the world, and Thor had actually pulled the world a little way out of its place; and the old woman was old age, with whom the strongest will wrestle in vain.'

In legends like these, through which ran a thread of moral meaning, the Saxon delighted. They were the reflection of the qualities that distinguished him, and the outcome of his own daily life in its struggle with the severities of a northern clime. His worship corresponded to his mythology. Temples of the gods abounded. Plentiful sacrifices of animals were offered to them, and human sacrifices were not spared on occasions of importance. 'Near every gathering-place of a tribe stood the stone of sacrifice, on which the necks of the victims were crushed and broken; and the holy pool, in which another kind of human sacrifices were sunk.'¹ There were great feasts, religious in their character, which were frequently held. At these the people gathered round smoking caldrons, in which the animals that had been sacrificed were boiled, and all in turn partook. The feasts ended with much

¹ Dasent, *Burnt Njal*, xxxviii.

drinking, and cups were solemnly drained in honour of the gods. 'The first bowl, for victory and strength, was drained to Woden; the second to Freye, for peace and good harvests.' All the other gods were remembered in the same way, and the last bowl was drunk to the memory of the dead. The superstitions which clustered round the Teutonic religion were more numerous than we can even mention; and in the laws of Christian times, which denounce them, we have them tabulated with great minuteness. They were of the most grovelling kind.¹ Magic was common. Well-worship, divinations, enchantments, spells² of all kinds are continually mentioned; and in many particulars they resemble the practices to which we have referred as connected with Celtic paganism.

This is an account, necessarily slight, of the state of heathen Scotland in its various parts previous to the advent of Christianity. The heathenism that prevailed was of the darkest kind, and in its best form can hardly be called higher in character than that which exists to-day in China or any other missionary field: but little impulse could come from it to civilisation and progress, hardly any to morality. It seems strange indeed to think that little more than a thousand years ago Scotland was peopled with idolaters, and the greater part of it with idolaters of the most benighted description—that amid the hills and valleys and islands of the north, there dwelt 'savage tribes and roving barbarians,' fierce as the New Zealander, cunning as the Red Indian, degraded in their belief as the Zulu—that here, in the capital of Scotland, perhaps on the site of this ancient Christian church where we now worship, there may have stood a temple to Woden or Thor, and have been witnessed the orgy of an idol's feast,

¹ See Kemble's *Saxons*, vol. i., appendix, where many of these notices are given.

² Such as sticking pins into a clay figure, which was supposed to injure the person represented.

or the horrors of human sacrifice. It is difficult to realise this; to place ourselves even in thought in these dark ages; to pass even in imagination from the light of our Christianity and civilisation under the veritable 'shadow of death' that rested upon our land. Students of comparative theology know how in the heart of many of the old religions there lay a hope of a good time coming to the race; and the 'unconscious prophecies of heathenism,' telling of a great conqueror to come, have been often referred to.¹ Whether these were mere dim longings for something better, that took shape in words, or whether they were the echoes of the Jewish prophecies which had reached distant lands, it is impossible to determine. When we read in Zoroaster that 'Osidgeberga will manifest himself to the inhabitants of the world, promote religiousness, destroy iniquity, and restore the ancient order of things. In his time rest and peace shall prevail, dissensions cease, and all grievances be done away'—Or in the works of Confucius, 'that a great and holy one shall appear in the latter days, to whom nations look forward as fading flowers thirst for rain'—When we hear Plutarch saying that 'the god of the lower world will eventually be utterly deprived of his power, and then men be happy, and will no longer stand in need of nourishment, or throw a shadow'—Or Virgil, as he tells how a child was to come from heaven, a dear offspring of the gods, Jove's great descendant, and the golden age was to arise over the whole world'—we feel as if we were listening to an echo of the sublime strains of Isaiah. 'Unconscious prophecies,' like those of other religions, were not wanting in Scottish paganism: the early Christian missionaries to the Picts and Scots appeal to such prophecies existing among these peoples. There were sages, one of them tells us distinctly, before their own coming, 'who had fore-

¹ *Christianity confirmed by Jewish and Heathen Testimony*, by T. Stevenson (Edinburgh: David Douglas); an interesting work. Also Walsh, *Donellan Lectures*, p. 213.

told the bright word of blessing that would come to the land of the letter; for it was the Holy Spirit that spoke and prophesied through the mouths of just men, as he had prophesied through the mouths of the chief prophets and fathers in the patriarchal law; for the law of nature had prevailed where the written law did not reach.¹ In the religion of the Saxons, there is a very marked and distinct announcement of a great deliverer who was to restore all things, and harmonise those discordant elements which were ever present to the Teutonic mind, and close for ever that warfare which he saw prevailing on every side around him. The central idea of his curious belief was the struggle of the soul against natural obstacles—the conflict of life with death, of freedom with fate, of choice with necessity, of good with evil. The gods of the Teuton were always at war. His religion was a dualism in which sunshine, summer, and growth were waging perpetual battle with storm, snow, winter, ocean, and terrestrial fire.² This conflict was to grow more intense as the ages succeeded each other, and at last to end in harmony. The poetry in which this is expressed is of a lofty character.³

‘ Brothers slay brothers ;
 Sisters’ children
 Shed each other’s blood ;
 Hard is the world ;
 Sensual sin grows huge.

There are sword ages,
 Earth cleaving cold ;
 Storm ages, murder ages,
 Till the world falls dead,

¹ *The Senchus Mor*, vol. i., p. 27.

² Clark’s *Ten Great Religions*.

³ Clark’s *Ten Religions*, p. 366 ; Kemble’s *Saxons in England*, p. 410 ; Brace, *Travels in Norway and Sweden*.

And men no longer spare
Or pity one another.

Black wanes the sun ;
In waves the earth shall sink ;
From heaven shall fall
The friendly stars ;
Round the tree
Red fire shall rustle ;
High heat play
Against the heaven.'

But when all the powers of evil are conquered, a better state shall arise :

' " In Gimle " the lofty ;
Then shall the hosts
Of the virtuous dwell,
And through all ages
Feast of deep gladness.

Then unsown
The swath shall flourish,
Back come Baldr.'

Then shall descend the mighty one from above—He who ruleth over all, whose name man dares not to utter.

Then one is born
Higher than all.
He becomes strong
With the strengths of the earth ;
The mightiest King
Men call him ;
Fast knit in peace
With all powers.

Then comes another
Yet more mighty ;
But him I dare not
Venture to name,
Than to where Odin
To meet the wolf goes.'

With mysterious and weird prophecies like these, familiar to them, sung by their bards, repeated by their priests, our forefathers found themselves face to face with Christianity and its message of hope.

It does not fall within my province to tell how that message was received, or what change its reception wrought on the personal and national life of the inhabitants of Scotland. This much I may say, without trenching on the ground of those who are to follow me, that Christianity took up and consolidated the national characteristics of our forefathers. Among the Celts it enlisted the spirit of clanship in the service of Christianity. Among the Saxons it allied itself 'with what was dearest and what was highest—with their homes, their assemblies, their crowns, their graves.'¹ It fused the different races—Picts, Scots, Britons, Saxons—into one great strong people through the idea of a spiritual society which it inculcated and held up before them, the purest, perhaps, which ever drew men together.² They seem to have embraced Christianity with wonderful facility when it was presented to them, and, though there were occasional relapses into paganism, and some heathen practices were tenaciously retained, the converts appear to have adhered with wonderful constancy to the rites and worship of the new faith. Their teachers were gentle with them, tender to their superstitions, and forbearing with native usages of which they might not altogether approve. Many notices have come down

¹ *Influences of Christianity on National Character*, by R. W. Church.

² Guizot, Lecture xii., p. 230.

to us illustrative on the one hand of the way in which the new religion approached them, and of the manner in which they embraced it. Of these we may give two instances—one from Celtic, the other from Saxon sources. They are voices from out of the heart of the old paganism of Scotland, that touching in their character. In an ancient Gaelic poem the heathen poet Oisín is represented as holding a dialogue with the first Christian teacher of the Scots—St Patrick. This poem is found in many forms in Irish and Gaelic manuscripts, and though it may not be of much historic value, it must, I think, be regarded as a last voice of Celtic heathenism. The old bard rejoices in the worship of nature, and records the prowess of his heroic forefathers; the missionary tells of the power of God beyond all visible things, and speaks in dogmatic terms of the future state.¹

‘Patrick of the solemn psalms,’ begins the old pagan, ‘how great your love for God must be, since you do not close your book and listen to the voice of the blackbird! Sweet blackbird high on yon bending bough, how soothing is your song! Although you never heard mass said by priests, how delightfully you whistle.’ He then goes on to tell of the music of his warlike ancestor, Fionn: ‘He played melodiously with the harp, while I am here in grief with the clergy;’ and then he sings in heroic strains of the prowess of the forefathers, and mourns that he should have survived them and fallen on an evil time. ‘When I think of the men who were so brave, I feel cheerless, without friendship for my heart. Here I am weak, living after the Fenii and Fionn MacCumhal. Small is my esteem for thyself and clergy—O holy Patrick of the crosier. I have greater regard for the white-handed king of the Fenii—but he is not near me now.’ The saint has little

¹ This poem is found in various forms. One version is in the Book of Lismore. We quote from a very interesting translation by Simpson, in *Poems of Oisín, Bard of Erin*.

sympathy with his regard for the heroes of other days—he warns his listener that he has not long to live—his great forefather died a pagan and is in hell, and he will soon follow him unless he accepts the Christian faith.

‘He is now shut up in torment; all his generosity and wealth do not avail him now for lack of piety towards God—for this he is in sorrow in the mansion of pain.’ The old bard rises in incredulity and indignation, and there is something pathetic in the way he refuses to accept the cruel dogmatism of his teacher. ‘Is Fionn in hell—the hero mild who bestowed gold! in forfeit for sins against the great God—is *he* in the house of torment under sorrow? I do not believe it possible for God, though great his power and his strength, nor for any devil who came ever, to put under lock Fionn of the Fenii—Fionn the hospitable to be under locks! heart without malice and without aversion; heart stern in defence of battle! It is plain your God does not delight in giving gold and food to others. Fionn never refused strong or weak, and shall he receive hell for his abode!’ The saint contends against such unorthodox views with an earnestness which would do credit to some modern theologians. ‘However much he may have divided gold and venison, hard are his bonds in the den of pains; no glimpse of light for him, no sight of brightness such as he first received from God!’ The bard replied that he would rather be in hell with his forefathers than in the heaven of the saint.

‘I would rather return to the Fenii once more, O Patrick, than go to the heaven of Jesus Christ to be for ever under tribute to him. I would rather be in Fionn’s court hearkening to the voices of hounds in the morning, and meditating on hard-fought battles, than in the court of Jesus Christ.’ The dialogue goes on at great length. What we have quoted is probably sufficient to indicate its character—the heathen clinging to his old beliefs; the saint entreating him to ‘smite his breast and shed tears, and believe in Him who is above

him.' It exhibits in poetic form the meeting of the old and new. It belongs to the transition time; the dawning hour; the twilight of Scottish Christianity.

Another memorial of the same time comes to us from Saxon sources, and refers to the Saxon kingdom now incorporated in Scotland. In a council of the wise men of the court of Edwin—who gives the name to our own city—of his aldermen and thanes and nobles, the Christian teacher stood ready to plead his cause. No scene in the history of missions is fuller of romance¹ than that which ensued. Coifi, the high-priest of Woden, arose and confessed that he was moved by the new doctrines. He had served his gods long and faithfully, yet there were those in the kingdom who were richer and greater than he—if the deities had power, he would have been richest and greatest of all. He asked that the new doctrine should be explained to them. The missionary declared his message to the assembly, and at the close of his address the high-priest exclaimed: 'Long since have I known full well that what we have been worshipping is naught, and the more diligently I sought after truth therein, the less I found it; but now in what this stranger preacheth I openly confess there shineth forth such truth as can confer on us life, salvation, and eternal happiness. I advise therefore, O king, that we straightway break and burn down those temples and altars which we have hallowed, and whence we have gained no good.'²

The advice was followed. The temple of Woden was thrown down by the high-priest himself, who hurled his spear at it, and bade his men break down the temple, and burn the hedge; but before this demolition of shrines was agreed to, one of the assembled thanes gave his opinion in words that are full of deep feeling, and cannot fail to touch us still, though so many centuries have passed away since they were spoken. They are words which speak, on the one hand, of the hopeless-

¹ M'Lear's *Conversion of the English*, p. 51.

² Bede, *H. E.*, ii. 9.