

THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF THE CELTS

FOREWORD

THE CELTIC GENIUS

I HAVE already explained and justified the division of Hubert's work on the Celts into two volumes.

With the present volume we find ourselves in the La Tène period. It begins by describing a new expansion, then a retreat, the florescence and decline of the Celtic world.

It is about 500 B.C. that the La Tène civilization appears with an increase of the population, which descends from the heights into the plains, an advance in technical processes, and a growth of prosperity which give rise to the great historical expeditions. The movements which now take place are different from those described in the previous volume, about which we have little direct information. From definite evidence it can be seen that operations now assume a "coordinated, concerted, and, one might say, political character", and that is a great novelty among the Celts. All round the circumference of the Celtic world this activity manifests itself - first in Italy, the Danube Valley, and Britain, and then in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, the south-west of France, and even in Spain. They found settlements, or rather the previous inhabitants mingle with them, and they contribute and receive in varying proportions. But what the advanced bodies receive - for example, the idea of a political life in Italy, and intellectual and moral culture in Greece - will benefit the whole Celtic world, doubtless in different degrees. The Celts "enter the history of the world". "Unsettled and unruly elements," bands of barbarians, "great companies," will still break in; the energy, courage, and "roving spirit" of the Celts will make some of them mercenaries in great demand, freelances scattered among many peoples. "Mercenary service was a regular Celtic industry, and a well paid one". But the mass of the race is settled, and the Celts are involved in the politics and economics of the whole world. Being both inventive and receptive, they are agents for the unification and progress of mankind. There are, it is true, Gallic Celts and British Celts, Celts of the Danube and Germany and Italy; but a Celtic civilization has grown up which is comparatively homogeneous and comparatively native in its character.

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From the end of the third century onwards the Celts are in conflict with Rome on every side. Their civilization stands face to face with a different, and in some respects higher, civilization, while from behind they are pressed by a people of lower culture, the Germans, with whom, as we know, they have a real "intimacy". The more active the civilizing and political influence of the Celts is in Germany, the harder they will be pressed by their neighbours, to be finally driven back. There was a twofold process - "a process of assimilation of the German world on the one hand, but on the other, as a result of that very assimilation, a process of penetration by the Germans into the Celtic world". The Cimbri, Teutones, Suevi were Celticized Germans, mixed with Celts to a various extent.

Gradually the Celts are driven back on themselves. The Rhine becomes the frontier of the western Celts. In the course of their disturbed history main peoples and subordinate groups have parted, reunited, mixed, and passed one another. Now they are in what are almost their final positions. The Celtic world has assumed what Hubert strikingly describes as "the face under which it was last known to antiquity, and it was a face of death". At this moment "its features appear in broad daylight and that thanks to its conqueror". The Romans, and Cæsar above all, help us greatly to picture them.

Hubert, in the part of his work describing the civilization of the Celts, begins by studying their social structure. As a sociologist, he compares one Celtic society with another, he compares them with other Indo-European societies and points out their common characteristics, and he looks in them for survivals of primitive organizations, earlier than the Indo-European societies, traces of clan life. For this task he gets valuable information from Irish and Welsh sources, his use of which he justifies. In short, he is concerned with the evolution of society as such, and, if he draws upon his general sociological knowledge for the study of the Celts, he makes repayment in bringing interesting data and confirmations to sociology.

In doing this Hubert followed his natural inclination; he was applying and reinforcing the knowledge born of his wide interest. But he was also adhering to the programme of this series. One feature of this synthesis, *l'Evolution de l'Humanité*, is that it presents sociology and history in intimate association. Not only do we, in the case of each human group, pay due attention to the study of institutions, but we endeavour to determine the role of society as society, to make plain the relations of the social and the individual. Our readers know this; and they also know that, on account either of the subject or of the bent of the author, some volumes more than

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others enable us to set the social in its place in history and to reflect on problems of a theoretical nature.

Hubert's work, in its contribution to the study of the Celtic societies and of society in general, raises some most interesting problems.

Although he speaks here and there of Celtic "nations" and seems in one passage to credit the Celts with a national consciousness, ["But if a nation already existed, it was because that which makes the deep-seated unity of a nation existed - a common ideal, the same ways of thinking and feeling, in short, everything that nations express by symbols and all the most intimate part of their civilization" (*Rise of the Celts*, p. 13).] he points out clearly in several places the distinction between society and nation. There was no more a Celtic nation than a Greek. [See Jardé, *Formation of the Greek People*, in this series, pt. iv. Cf. Jullian, *Histoire de la Gaule*, i, ch. ix.] The Celts are no more a nation than they are a race [See *Rise of the Celts*, Foreword, p. xiii.]; they are "a group of peoples, or, to speak more accurately, a group of societies" (*Rise of the Celts*, p. 33). As the greater Celtic world missed the opportunity to become a kind of great confederation, so the smaller Celtic world of Gaul "missed, in Vercingetorix, the opportunity of becoming, side by side with the Roman Republic, the prototype of the modern great nation". Now - and this is the important point - that was because Gaul "had not at that time acquired the rudiments of a state structure without which a nation cannot be made". [In a Celtic society, the state usually remains rudimentary and almost undifferentiated. . . . The Celtic societies are at the tribal stage, and have only a private law".] A society may have every kind of aptitude for forming a nation but fail to be a nation if it is not strongly rooted in a soil and definitely organized as a state. And, however wide a society, or a collection of societies having the same civilization, may be, one cannot speak of empire (as I have said) [*Rise of the Celts*, Foreword, p. xx.] when no central power has asserted itself, when there is no unifying state.

Of Celtic civilization, on the other hand, we can speak, for the various branches of the Celts had a real sense of oneness, a family likeness, a common language, and we know that language is among the most typical phenomena of a culture. But among all these phenomena a distinction must be made, and this is important. And, although the study of civilization and that of society seem to coincide, all that constitutes a civilization (and goes on *in* a society) is not properly and essentially social.

With the conception of sociology now in vogue (which is ethnographic) and the present conception of history (which is in a certain sense synthetic), the word "civilization" is used more and more in a broad and sometimes rather vague way. No doubt there is no reason why one should not, in describing racial groups and in order to define them, make use of political and economic institutions, arts, crafts,

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and religion, all together and as of equal relevance. There is no reason why one should not, under the word "civilization", include the most diverse manifestations of human activity. From any point of view other than that of scientific causality, of synthesis of the second degree, there is no need for a closer discussion of the valuable information which Hubert presents in the third part of this volume, entitled "Civilization" under the headings "Structure of Society", "Setting of Social Life", and "Social Activities". But for a fundamental *explanation* it is possible and legitimate to consider matters in more detail.

Hubert himself would not deny it; and we found in his work, here and there, statements which enable us to press our explanation deeper. When, for instance, he says: "Every group of men living together forms a physical, social, and moral unit", he makes an interesting distinction. And when he says elsewhere that the love of the Celts for general ideas helped to make the lofty, mellow civilizations of antiquity into the civilization of the world, he quite clearly shows the part played by the logical factor, as distinct from the social.

What strikes one in the Celts is just the fact that the part which they played in history was logical, and civilizing in the limited sense of that term, rather than social in the proper and strict sense of the word. If they do not seem to have excelled as citizens, if they failed politically, "through having no sense of the state or an insufficient sense of discipline," they take their revenge and are important in history by the value of the individual and the development of personality. The tribal system lasted a long time among them; gradually, through contact with the land, it became aristocratic, feudal; then, in town life, an urban class grew up. As always happens where the social organization is not heavy, oppressive, centralizing, and levelling, the conscience was able to waken and the mind to exert activity. The Celts were at once inventors and ready assimilators.

"Eager for everything that was not Celtic", "with their curiosity about civilization", they fell surprisingly quickly into the ways of the more civilized peoples with which they mingled or had dealings of any kind. "The stranger from the Mediterranean always had a special charm for them". So, with their physical mobility and mental elasticity, they acted as middlemen of civilization; they were "torch-bearers" in Europe.

But, receptive though they were, they had their own native character, a common ideal, a "soul of the people", one might say, of course, without giving the words a metaphysical meaning. Camille Jullian has said that Celtic unity was "in the domain of poets rather than of statesmen" [Jullian, *Hist. de la Gaule*, i, p. 381.]; it was,

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indeed, a work of the mind, the work of the poets - and of the Druids. Druidism was the chief uniting factor, the “cement” of Celtic society. There was nothing of the priest-king in the Druids; their part was more specifically spiritual. They were men of God, depositories of wisdom and science, directors of consciences, and teachers of the young and of their whole people. [Cf. Albert Bayet, *La Morale des Gaulois*, pp. 163-4.] Their doctrine turned towards nature, in agrarian festivals, but still more towards man, in its concern for morals. With a high, manly ideal of life, they at once despised death and aspired to the immortality of the soul. “To worship the gods, to do nothing base, and to practise manhood” - this Druidical axiom, which Hubert takes from Diogenes Laërtios, is admirable. Certain elements of Druidism come from the Indo-European foundation and are related to the teaching of the Brahmins, of the Magi, of the Orphicists [See the volumes in this series on Greek religion, ancient Persia, and India.]; but the accent of their religion is thoroughly Celtic, deeply human, as it is in its haunting sense of death and its worship of heroes.

Hubert follow Celticism, after its collapse, in its various survivals. He shows it holding out with its language in the extreme west of Europe, cherishing and writing down its legends, and long afterwards, in the twentieth century, making an independent nation in Ireland.

But the essential survival of Celticism he finds and shows us in Romanized Gaul, in the France of all ages. We cannot conceal the fact that this historian, with all his devotion to objective science, seems to have a sort of tenderness for the Celtic genius. I do not think that it leads him astray, but it infuses emotion into many pages of his work, particularly those which tell of the effects of Celticism on the history of the French nation.

The Celts made the France of to-day; They are responsible for the appropriation of the soil, the judicious choice of dwelling-places and roads. Above all, into this setting they introduced their “soul of the people”. For Gaul to acquire a true national consciousness, only a strongly organized state was needed. We have, too, seen a wonderful agent of unification, social discipline, and energetic but elastic government come into being and grow up in Rome. [*Primitive Italy and Roman Political Institutions*; cf. below, pp. 69, 154.] With a dim sense of what they lacked the Celts welcomed Roman rule with astonishing readiness. For, in the penetrating words of Renouvier, “what they liked was not so much independence as to be dependent only on what they liked.” [*Introduction à la philosophie analytique de l'Histoire*, p. 390; ““ Their devotion to Julius Cæsar, who defeated them for ten years, followed on their devotion to Vercingetorix, who defended their liberty. . . . From the Druids they accepted a kind of Papacy. . . . Of Rome, lastly, that is, of the Empire, they at once

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appreciated the scientific administrative methods and the admirably formulated law, so much so, that they set themselves up as the successors and, when necessary, the substitutes of the last Romans. That, in fact, is what they became, and among modern peoples the principle of the strong state for a long time had them for its champions.”] In their evident superiors the Celts were willing to see friends and guides. They yielded, and at the same time they resisted. They accepted the authority and culture of Rome, but they kept their Celtic soul, or the essential part of it. “The Gallo-Romans mostly continued to be disguised Celts (*Rise*, p. 14).

Like Chapot in his account of Roman Gaul in *The Roman World*, Hubert here in his account of the Gallic Celts finds the intellectual and moral foundations of France. It is true that the Romans, for all their tolerance, seem to have persecuted the Druids, but Romanization, which was accepted partly willingly and partly perforce, allowed certain mental qualities of Celticism to survive, and, indeed, developed them in Gallo-Roman civilization, and those qualities are an essential part of the spirit of France - observation, justice, measure, elasticity.

Plastic art rose to no great heights in Gaul, but decorative art adorned everything with that delicate sense of the beautiful which is called taste.

The Latin language, adopted by the Gauls, not only retained certain Celtic ingredients, but was intimately transformed, becoming analytical. We see the men who gave it a new character as “great talkers”; they had talents for eloquence and poetry, for an eloquence which aimed at action and for a poetry which readily turned to the dramatic or gnostic.

Of the literature of the Celts, which for a long time was popular, oral, a somewhat untrue idea was at first formed, as a result of Renan’s famous article on the poetry of the Celtic races. [In *Rev. des Deux Mondes*, 1st February, 1854.] It was supposed to be elegiac and very feminine in character. This conception was only justified by the state of Celtic studies at the time. Since then, the labours of such men as Gaidoz, d’Arbois de Jubainville, Loth, Ernault, Le Braz, and Dottin have revealed a poetry “bursting with heroic sap”, the expression of “vehement, passionate, almost brutal natures, eager for action and intoxicated with movement and noise”. [Anatole Le Braz, “Le Drame dans l’épopée celtique,” in *Rev. des Deux Mondes*, 1st July, 1904: “A people at once violent and sensitive, imaginative, and pugnacious, greedy for ideals and for action.” Dottin, “La littérature gaëlique de l’Irlande,” in *Rev. de Synth. hist.*, iii, p. 63.] No doubt the Celts gave a very large place to woman, both in life and in lyric poetry. But the romantic and marvellous, the workings of love and fate, those themes which surround the adventures of the British heroes - Arthur, Tristram, Parsifal - must not blind us to a whole side of masculine poetry, nor to one of humorous observation.

When the Celts of Gaul had thrown over their epic tradition, “attracted by the more refined civilization which the Romans brought,” they kept its spirit, and it is

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this spirit, according to Hubert, that animates the work of the French chroniclers and gives them a dramatic character. From Gregory of Tours and the monks of Saint-Denis they made the history of France “the finest historical narrative in the world”. And the actual story of France, like its written history, “the history of that undestroyable people of peasants, warriors, and artists, with its glories and tumults, its hopes and enthusiasms, its discords and rebirths, is surely the story of a nation whose blood and bones are mainly composed of Celtic elements” (*Rise*, pp. 14 - 15).

One cannot lay too great emphasis on the range of the work done by Hubert in this study of the Celts, which will be completed by that of the Germans. It helps one to understand France. It is rich in teaching, without ever revealing a desire to generalize. It makes one see how men, beyond societies, create nations, how they arrive at the feeling and then at the idea of a fatherland. *Patria nostra* will soon become *France dulce*. Perhaps the misfortunes of the third century, “by the suffering of the country,” contributed to the national education of the people of Gaul. “They gave it those venerable wrinkles which men have always loved to see on the face of their motherland” - an exquisite phrase which is the expression of the whole Hubert, historian, thinker, and writer.

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