

# THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF THE CELTS

## PART THREE

### THE CIVILIZATION OF THE CELTS

#### CHAPTER I

##### THE OBJECTS AND METHOD OF A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE CELTS

WE have tried to set forth the main features of the history of the Celts. But another question arises regarding the Celtic peoples; we must inquire what were the bonds which held men together in social organization, how families and clans were constituted, how land was owned (in whole or in part, in precarious possession or in permanent, absolute ownership, in common or individually, in fairly distributed lots or in aristocratic tenures), what was their law, what were their gods, and their priests, how they traded, and travelled, and built. The structure of society; private law; public law and political institutions; religion; economic life; craftsmanship; morphology; art and literature - these are the headings for a description of Celtic society.

#### I

##### THE BASES OF A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CELTIC CIVILIZATION

We shall, of course, deal with the Celts of antiquity, but not only with those of Gaul. We shall look at Gauls, Irish, and British all together, comparing them.

Before starting on an inquiry of this kind, we must first of all reply to an objection which naturally occurs to the mind. In order to make a description such as we are going to attempt, we must look to literary documents, the Irish and Welsh epics, or summaries of epics, which have come down to us and the Welsh and Irish laws, for light on the little which the classical writers tell us about the institutions and life of Gaul. It will then be objected (such was the opinion of Fustel de Coulanges) that these two sets of information come from very different dates. The Irish documents cannot materially have been put down in writing before the conversion of Ireland in the fifth century. A preface to the *Senchus Mor*, the most

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important of the Irish legal treatises, states that it was composed by a commission called by King Loegaire on which St. Patrick sat. The anonymous author of the *Book of Acaill*, which comes next in importance, says that it is of the third century, but it was certainly not written down then; besides, the ancient text is so concise that it cannot be understood without the glossary, which must have been written in the ninth or tenth century at earliest, since it implies the use of the penny, which was not introduced into Ireland before then. Nor can the oldest of the Irish epics have been put together any earlier. It is much the same with the Welsh texts. The compilation of the laws is ascribed in the prefaces to King Howel the Good, who reigned in the first half of the tenth century. The Mabinogion were not compiled later than the first half of the twelfth century, but certainly after the Norman Conquest. [Loth, CCLXX, i, p. 44.] Roughly, then, there is an interval of about a thousand years between the information given us about the Continental Celts and that which the island Celts have themselves furnished.

But what was the nature of these documents? For the mythology and hero-tales of Ireland, there was a tradition preserved orally, like the poems of the Druids of Gaul, which was put into writing because it was beginning to be forgotten, just at the time when the introduction of a new tradition, that of Christianity, threatened to hasten its disappearance. It was said that for the most important of these epics, the *Táin Bó Chuailgné*, the *Cattle-lifting of Cooley*, the ghosts of the dead had to be called in to assist the editor; Fergus, one of the actors in the story, arose from his grave to relate it. [Windisch, CCXCV; *Táin*, introd., p. liii. Cf. d'Arbois, in XXXII, xl, p. 152; Zimmer, in LXXXIII, xxviii, pp. 426 ff.] The Welsh Mabinogion consist of mythological material which had long lost its original character, being transformed to a greater or less extent into tales and romances. But in each case the substance of the stories is several centuries older than the literary version. The same is true of the laws. Neither in Ireland nor in Wales are they legislative texts. They are customs. Now, a custom necessarily has no date in itself. The date is that of the state of society to which it corresponds.

That is why there is no reason for refraining from using the Irish and Welsh documents because they were written late. With their aid, we can make up a picture of much earlier times. We only need to keep our critical faculty awake in dealing with them, as, indeed, we must do with the classical authors, who did not understand the institutions which they described.

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### II

#### THE SOLIDARITY OF THE CELTIC SOCIETIES. THE ACTION OF THE DRUIDS

On the other hand, there are good reasons for studying all parts of the Celtic world together. They were in communication, they were inter-connected, they must have had resemblances. Here is one fact which gives food for thought. It was at the time of the first Roman campaigns in Asia Minor after the Punic Wars. In 197-196 the city of Lampsacos sent envoys to Rome. They landed at Marseilles, which was allied to the Romans, doubtless expecting to receive recommendations and information there. The Senate of Marseilles gave them, among other things for their return journey, a public letter of recommendation to the Galatian Tolistoagii, who lived west of the Tectosages in the valley of the Sangarios, separated from Lampsacos by the kingdom of Pergamon, with which, as we know, they were on friendly terms. The people of Marseilles had relations with the Gauls of Gaul, and they probably made the most of the fact in writing to the Tolistoagii, whose good offices the Lampsaceni must have desired, with a view either to recruiting mercenaries or to persuading them not to supply any to Antiochos III. These facts are related in an inscription in honour of the envoys, which M. Holleaux has recently edited. They show that the Greeks of Marseilles and of Lampsacos knew that they would find among Celtic peoples living very far apart a sense of oneness of which the Romans had been aware some years earlier when they had sent ambassadors to ask the Volcae to be neutral when Hannibal passed through the country. [Holleaux, CCCXL, ii, "Lampsaque et les Galates en 197/6."]

This solidarity of the Celtic peoples, even when distant from one another, is sufficiently explained by the sense of kinship, of common origin, acting in a fairly restricted world, all the parts of which were in communication. But the Celts had at least one institution which could effectively bind them together, namely the Druids, a priestly class expressly entrusted with the preservation of traditions. The Druids were not an institution of the small Celtic peoples, of the tribes, of the *civitates*; they were a kind of international institution within the Celtic world, with provinces corresponding to the great racial or territorial groups constituted by Ireland, Britain, and Gaul. Cæsar tells us that the Druids of Gaul were in touch with those of Britain, and Irish tradition gives evidence of the relations of the Druids of Britain and Ireland. It is certain that this priesthood, provided, as we shall see later, [Cf. below, ch.

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iii.] with a legal doctrine, a moral doctrine, a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and an authority recognized by all, covered the greater part of the Celtic world, and it is almost unthinkable that it did not cover it all. The bonds which united the Celtic peoples were made secure by the spread of Druidism, and we can be sure that those peoples owed to those professional teachers moral ideas, conceptions about the future life, mythological traditions, ritual practices, and legal solutions which they all had in common - that is, that similar principles everywhere governed or reformed the structure and working of society.

### III

#### CELTIC SOCIETIES AND INDO-EUROPEAN SOCIETIES. THE CELTS AND THE INDO-EUROPEAN WORLD

In the course of this account we shall have occasion to compare the various Celtic peoples in respect of their institutions, not only with one another, but with various Mediterranean and Germanic peoples with which they had relations, which gave them something or received something from them. I have already spoken twice of the influence exercised by the Celts, and particularly the Gauls, in Germany. Germanic took from Celtic important terms in the language of politics, law, and economics - the words for king, office, hostage, value.

The peoples of Italy, which once formed with the Celts a single group which, in its undivided state, I made the starting-point of this history, developed rapidly. They took a host of words from their Mediterranean neighbours, and they became city-dwellers like the Greeks and Etruscans. On the whole, they were to the Celts in respect of institutions much what the Gauls of Gaul were to the Irish. For example, they invented the State; they had a clear notion of the *respublica*, of which the most progressive of the Celts certainly had no more than a rather vague idea. Their institutions give the impression of a term of social development at which the Celts would have arrived if only they had remained independent. But there are many things in the civilization of the Celts and the Italicis which recall the times when the two peoples were one. The Latin word for a king, *rex*, is the same as the Celtic *rix*, but the Romans confined it to the religious side of the office. The name of the Latin tribe, *tribus*, another institution becoming fossilized, is probably the same as Welsh *tref* (Irish *treb*), which appears in the name Atrebatas.

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There is another Indo-European group with which the Celtic group is connected by verbal relations and analogies of a particular type - the Indo-Iranian group. The analogies appear especially in the religious and political vocabulary, as M. Vendryes has pointed out. [XCIII, 1918, xxi, pp. 265 - 285.]

There are, moreover, religious scruples and practices which are identical in the two groups, though not designated by the same names. At Kildare, for example, the nuns of St. Brigid (who took the place of a previous goddess) were as careful as the Persian Magi not to soil with their breath the flame of the sacred fire which they kept alight. [R.E.G., 1915, p. 189.]

So, too, in Irish law the pursuer cannot demand the seizure of the goods of a person who is superior to him, who is *nemed* in regard to him, that is sacred (a noble, a *filè*, a clerk). He sits down before his door and patiently proceeds to fast. The person against whom he fasts must, under pain of disqualification, give the pledge desired. This process of coercion by mystical methods is simply the Hindu *dhârna*, which was regularly practised all over India as late as the end of the eighteenth century. *Dhârna* seems to mean the same as Latin *capio*, "taking possession." In *dhârna* the Brahmin sits and fasts at the defender's door until the pursuer has obtained satisfaction, and he has poison, a dagger, or some other means of suicide by him in case violence should be attempted against him. A man who allowed the faster to die would bring down a capital crime on his head for all eternity. *Dhârna* seems to have been used like the old *pignoris capio* of Roman law. One may reasonably suppose that it is very ancient, even if the written formulas regarding it are comparatively recent. [Maine, CCCLII, pp. 40, 291, 297. Cf. CCXLVII, *Senchus Mor*, 113; d'Arbois CCXLVII (Droit), i, 269; ii, 46; Joyce, CCCCXXXIV, i, p. 205.]

A still more striking resemblance is furnished by the very existence of the Druids. Nothing could be liker to the Druids than the Brahmins of India and the Magi of Iran, except perhaps the College of Pontifices at Rome and the Flamens attached to it. The Flamen has the same name as the Brahmin, and M. Vendryès has shown the similarity between the terms relating to priests and sacrifices. The priesthoods are not merely very similar, but exactly the same, and they are preserved nowhere so completely as at the two opposite ends of the Indo-European world. Between the two, the remnants of similar priesthoods once survived, as in Thrace and among the Getae.

All these similarities prove that institutions mentioned even in late texts are of very great antiquity. This will be confirmed by our further analysis.

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### IV

#### CELTIC SOCIETIES AND MORE PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES. PRACTICES DATING FROM BEFORE THE FORMATION OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN GROUP

In addition to these survivals from a past common to all the different branches of the Indo-European stock, Celtic institutions present some strangely preserved relics of a past lying in the depths of prehistory. The Indo-European societies, so far as one can attempt to imagine them in the remote time when the members of the race were beginning to part company, were already societies of a high type. They had chiefs, priests, and a formal law, and their organization of the family implies development through a long past. But these societies had evidently gone through the stage at which men are grouped in clans, which are politico-domestic groups of kinsmen, in which kinship is constituted by the notion of a common origin and often by participation in the nature of a living species or some inanimate thing. That stage is known as totemism. The species or thing is regarded as akin to the men, and provides them with their mythical ancestors, their name, and their heraldic device. In this condition of society, the whole of social life is concentrated, as it were, without political, religious, or even economic differentiation, in the life of the clan and the ceremonies which it entails. [See CCCLX.] As a fact, European societies had long advanced beyond this stage.

Yet we can see, among the Celts, in a state of remarkable preservation, three systems of institutions or rites which correspond to certain forms of early life - head-hunting, the blood-covenant, and the gift.

#### 1. *Head-hunting*

What is head-hunting? The Gauls [CXL, 1919, p. 274. Cf. A. Reinach, in CXL. Cf. Amm. Marc., xxvii, 4, on the Scordisci using skulls as drinking-cups; Livy, xxiii, 24, on the Boii.] cut off the heads of their slain enemies. Poseidonios, who travelled in Gaul, says that horsemen hung them at the necks of their horses, or nailed them to the timbers of their houses like trophies of the chase, [Diod., v, 29, 4; Strabo, iv, 4, 5.] or dressed and embalmed them. He adds that his hosts showed him these trophies with pleasure and boasted of the great sums offered by the families of the victims to buy them back. In the Celtiberian *oppidum* of Puig-Castelar, near Barcelona, human skulls have been found, pierced

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by a nail, [Déchelette, ii, 3, p. 946.] and cut-off heads are depicted on Gallic coins and monuments (for example, at Entremont in Bouches-du-Rhône). The Irish had the same custom [Joyce, op. cit., i, p. 150. Cf. Hull, CCLXII, 75.]; a battle was a “head-harvest” (*árcenn*). The Annals of the Four Masters relate that Aed Finnliath, King of Ireland, having defeated the Danes in 864, caused the heads of the slain to be piled in a heap. When the famous Bishop-King Cormac was killed in 908, somebody cut off his head and presented it to the victorious King Flann Sina, who, as a matter of fact, restored it with honour to Cormac’s party. This collecting of trophies might be an obligatory ritual matter connected with the period when a youth arrived at man’s age and left his school of military training. When a young Ulsterman went to war for the first time, he had to cross the border into Connacht and try to kill a man there. This was what the hero Cuchulainn did. [Joyce, i, p. 99. Cf. *Coir Anmann*, in CCXCV, iii, p. 405.]

We find an exact parallel to this custom in one which is quite general all over the Austro-Asiatic world, from Assam to Papuasias. Among the Dyaks of Borneo, for instance, head-hunting is the consecration of the initiation of the young men, who are grouped in classes according to age like *hetairiai* of *epeboi* and live in the Men’s House. They go off hunting, and when they have brought back their trophies they have proved their worth and can enter on the life of grown men and marry, just as Cuchulainn, having proved his worth, could marry Emer.

### 2. *Blood-covenant*

Another institution which survived among the Celts was the blood-covenant. Giraldus Cambrensis says that the Irish sealed their leagues by a rite of this kind, each party drinking some drops of blood of the other. In spite of assertions to the contrary, that this custom really existed is attested by other documents. St. Cairnech, having succeeded in bringing the Hy Neill and the Cian Nachta to form an alliance, caused blood of the two tribes to be mixed in a vessel, that the treaty might be written with it and so be inviolable. [Giraldus Cambrensis, *De Conquestu*, iii, xxii. Cf. *Silva Gadelica*, 413; *R.C.*, xiii, 73; Joyce, CCLXVI, ii, 463; Martin, CCLXXI, p. 109.] Similar incidents are told of the Scottish islesmen, but we have no evidence about the Gauls.

Now, the blood-covenant is a well-known institution. It was one of the first things to be studied and interpreted by science dealing with the materials furnished by ethnography. Robertson Smith [CCCLXXXIV; CCCLXXXIVa.] was calling attention to it fifty years ago. The object is, however small the quantity of blood used, to make

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the same blood run in the veins of the parties concerned and so to create or confirm kinship between them. In Ireland the rite serves to confirm a contract, making it more solemn and giving it a mystical sense. But it is a relic of an earlier condition, the segmentary condition of society, in which there was no express contract and legal relationships were not distinguishable from those of kinship.

### 3. *Potlatch.*

A third system of facts and rites preserved in Celtic institutions was what we call the system of the gift. It belongs to an order of facts to which attention has only recently been drawn, by M. Mauss [See Mauss, "Le Don," in XIII, N.S., ii; id., "Une forme ancienne de contrats chez les Thraces," in CXXXV, 1921, p. 988. Cf. also Davy, in CCCXVI. All these practices are collected under the name of *potlatch*, taken from the Chinook vocabulary of north-western America, where these phenomena are especially developed. Cf. H. Hubert, "Le Système des prestations totales dans les littératures celtiques," in CXL, xliii, 1925, pp. 330 - 5; Hubert and Mauss, in CXL, 1926.] in *Mémoires de l'Année sociologique* and in a certain number of articles. These are designated by the name of potlatch.

In the Romances of the Round Table, we find that a number of episodes begin in this way. A knight or damsel appears at Arthur's court, goes to the King, and asks for a boon, without saying what, and the King promises it and has to keep his word. What is usually requested is some adventurous or dangerous service on the part of the King or of a knight. Arthur is liberal and anxious to maintain his repute; his table is free to all, and he heaps those about him with munificent gifts.

Similar episodes are found in Irish and Welsh literature, for example the *Tochmarc Etaine* [Windisch, CCXCV, i, p. 127. Cf. d'Arbois, CCL, pp. 218 ff.] (the *Wooing of Etain*), one of the finest Irish stories. Etain is a goddess, the wife of the god Mider, and has become mortal and married King Eochaid Airem. One day Mider appears, and challenges the King to a game of chess. The King accepts. They speak of stakes; Mider offers fifty horses, and the King offers whatever his opponent wishes. He loses, and the god asks for Etain. The King claims a revenge game, which is arranged for a year later. Mider returns punctually and, having won again, takes away his stake at the end of a month.

In the Mabinogion the story of Pwyll turns on a similar episode. Pwyll, the god of the Underworld, is about to marry the goddess Rhiannon. In the midst of the banquet, Gwawl, a god of light, stands up and asks for a boon. Pwyll grants it, and Gwawl demands Rhiannon herself. Here again a future date is fixed, but this time, after a year, Pwyll appears at his rival's wedding and demands a gift. He only asks to be allowed to fill a small bag which he has in his hand, but everything goes into



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it, including Gwawl, who gets a beating. [Loth, CCLXX, i, pp. 26 - 63.]

The fact is that the gift implies a return. The gift is compulsory, but it places an obligation on the asker, and the whole fairy world which revolves round Arthur - knights of the Round Table, squires, ladies, even demons - is involved in an extraordinary round of gifts and services in which all vie in generosity or malice, often by arms. The tourney certainly forms part of this vast system of competition and outbidding, which we also find in the Irish stories grouped round the person of Finn and in what has been called the Leinster or Ossianic Cycle. [Cf. below, ch. v.]

But, if the boon depends on the person of whom it is asked, it cannot be just anything; it must be proportionate to his condition, and a little above it. The donor is challenged to be generous or to be able to be so, and he takes up the challenge. A third feature to note is the sanction of obligations which are granted; a man who does not fulfil his undertaking loses countenance and falls in rank. Rhiannon says as much to Pwyll when he hesitates to keep his promise. The injured or disappointed party has a hold on the other, on his liberty and his life.

For these subjects of romances and myths there were actual practices, of which something survived in all Celtic countries. In Ireland homage is expressed by an exchange of gifts between superior and inferior. [Cf. Joyce, CCCCXXXIV.] The superior chief gives a present called *tuarastal*, to accept which is a sign of allegiance, and the inferior chief gives a present of cattle. Moreover, there is usually some outbidding in the exchange of gifts which constitutes these ties in Gaul, Britain, and Ireland. The whole of Ireland is involved in an unending cycle of obligatory loans and borrowings of cattle at a high rate of interest, which affect the condition of individuals in causing their social position to change.

These practises are explained if they are taken in connection with the state of society in which they first arose. Societies on a clan basis are divided into opposing groups which are, however, united because they exchange wives. This division is as fundamental as the law of exogamy. Often the clans are distributed in two groups, doubtless the two old original clans, which are usually called phratries. The phratries, already united one with the other by the constant exchange of gifts constituted by each supplying the other with wives, are still further united by many other means, but always in the form of gifts, service, both in secular, daily life and in mystical, social, and religious life. In this system of exchanges, the presenting of objects develops, but without prejudice to the furnishing of services. The ceremonial exchange of gifts is so important in these societies that it comes to be performed for its own sake, and by itself to give occasion for feasting, outbidding,

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challenge, ostentation, and competition on the part of individuals and of groups. We must picture these societies as coming together in winter and concentrating their liturgy on that period, spending a large part of the bad season in the exchange of ostentatious entertainments, prepared beforehand, and in a series of operations as speculative as those of a stock exchange, in which gains and losses are paid in social advantages - consideration, rank, the possession of heraldic insignia.

Of this institution of potlatch we find indisputable traces in two Celtic tales, one Irish and the other Welsh. The *Feast of Briccriu* relates how that individual invited King Conchobar and his people to a feast (*fled*). [D'Arbois, CCXLVIII, v, pp. 80 - 147; Windisch, op. cit., i, pp. 235 - 311.] The feast was passed in competitions, mingled with challenges, for the place of honour and the "hero's share" among the heroes and their wives. At the end, the place of honour fell to Cuchulainn and the men of Emain Macha. In the Mabinogion we have the story of Kulhwch and Olwen, the daughter of the giant Yspaddaden. Kulhwch learns that his foredestined bride is Olwen. He goes to Arthur's court and asks for a boon, which is granted, namely assistance in making his suit. Accompanied by the comrades of Arthur, Kulhwch goes to Yspaddaden, who states his terms: a certain number of things must be brought to him for the bride-feast. The things are brought, and Kulhwch kills Yspaddaden and marries Olwen. [Loth, op. cit., i, pp. 175 - 283.]

So it is evident that our sources, the literature and law of the Celts, even though they were compiled very late, contain distinct and quite authentic traces of the law and institutions of a state of society far earlier than the Celtic societies themselves. There is, therefore, no reason for doubting the quality and authority of the Welsh and Irish sources, and we can use them to make up a picture, composite no doubt, but fairly accurate, of the social system of the Celts.