

escapes. I could, as others have done, have sent your Highness some small pieces of gold, falcons, or hawks with which the island abounds. But since I thought that a high-minded prince would place little value on things that easily come to be — and just as easily perish — I decided to send to your Highness those things rather which cannot be lost. By them I shall, through you, instruct posterity. For no age can destroy them.

## ¶ Here begins the first part of the History of Ireland

### 1 ¶ The Position of Ireland

**IRELAND**, THE LARGEST ISLAND beyond Britain, is situated in the western ocean about one short day's sailing from Wales, but between Ulster and Galloway in Scotland the sea narrows to half that distance. Nevertheless from either side the promontories of the other can be fairly well seen and distinguished on a fine day. The view from this side is rather clear; that from the other, over such a distance, is more vague. This farthest island of the west has Spain parallel to it on the south at a distance of three ordinary days' sailing, Greater Britain on the east, and only the ocean on the west; but on the northern side, at a distance of three days' sailing, lies Iceland, the largest of the islands of the north. Ireland, then, lies parallel to Britain in such a way that if you sail to the west from any British port you will meet Ireland at some point.

Nevertheless Britain is twice the size of Ireland. For Britain from south to north is eight hundred miles long, and about two hundred miles broad; while Ireland in the same way stretches in length from the Brendanic mountains to the island of Columba that is called Torach — that is, a distance of eight days at forty miles a day; and in breadth stretches from Dublin to

The distance between Ireland and Britain.

What land it has at a distance to the south.

Britain is double the size of Ireland.

the hills of Patrick and the sea beyond Connacht — that is, a distance of four days. Ireland is, however, in proportion to its size, more round. Britain is seen to be more oblong and narrow.

Ireland is a country of uneven surface and rather mountainous. The soil is soft and watery, and there are many woods and marshes. Even at the tops of high and steep mountains you will find pools and swamps. Still there are, here and there, some fine plains, but in comparison with the woods they are indeed small. On the whole the land is low-lying on all sides and along the coast; but further inland it rises up very high to many hills and even high mountains. It is sandy rather than rocky, not only on its circumference, but also in the very interior.

The character of the country and its unevenness.

### 2 ¶ The fertility of the tillage-land and smallness of the grains of wheat

**T**HE LAND IS FRUITFUL and rich in its fertile soil and plentiful harvests. Crops abound in the fields, flocks on the mountains, and wild animals in the woods. The island is, however, richer in pastures than in crops, and in grass than in grain. The crops give great promise in the blade, even more in the straw, but less in the ear. For here the grains of wheat are shrivelled and small, and can scarcely be separated from the chaff by any winnowing fan. The plains are well clothed with grass, and the haggards are bursting with straw. Only the granaries are without their wealth. What is born and comes forth in the spring and is nourished in the summer and advanced, can scarcely be reaped in the harvest because of unceasing rain.

For this country more than any other suffers from storms of wind and rain.

Exposure to rain.

A north-west wind, along with the west wind to its south,

prevails here, and is more frequent and violent than any other. It bends in the opposite direction almost all the trees in the west that are placed in an elevated position, or uproots them.

The trees in the west bent by the north-west wind.

The island is rich in pastures and meadows, honey and milk, and wine, but not vineyards. Bede,<sup>1</sup> however, among his other praises of the island says that it is not altogether without vineyards. On the other hand Solinus<sup>2</sup> says that it has no bees. But if I may be pardoned by both, it would have been more true if each of them had said the opposite: it has no vineyards, and it is not altogether without bees. For the island has not, and never had, vines and their cultivators. Imported wines, however, conveyed in the ordinary commercial way, are so abundant that you would scarcely notice that the vine was neither cultivated nor gave its fruit there. Poitou out of its own superabundance sends plenty of wine, and Ireland is pleased to send in return the hides of animals and the skins of flocks and wild beasts. Ireland, as other countries, has bees that produce honey; but the swarms would be much more plentiful if they were not frightened off by the yew-trees<sup>3</sup> that are poisonous and bitter, and with which the island woods are flourishing. It is possible, of course, that in Bede's time there were, perhaps, some vineyards in the island; and some people say that it was Saint Dominic of Ossory<sup>4</sup> who brought bees into Ireland — and that was long after the time of Solinus.

The opinions of Bede and Solinus on vineyards and bees.

Neither would it be strange if these authors sometimes strayed from the path of truth, since they knew nothing by the evidence of their eyes, and what knowledge they possessed came to them through one who was reporting and was far away. For it is only when he who reports a thing is also one that witnessed it that anything is established on the sound basis of truth.

98 ¶ *The Irish are ignorant of the rudiments of the Faith*

ALTHOUGH SINCE THE TIME of Patrick and through so many years the Faith has been founded in the island, and has almost continuously thrived, it is, nevertheless, remarkable that this people even still remains so uninstructed in its rudiments.

This is a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all peoples it is the least instructed in the rudiments of the Faith. They do not yet pay tithes or first fruits or contract marriages. They do not avoid incest. They do not attend God's church with due reverence. Moreover, and this is surely a detestable thing, and contrary not only to the Faith but to any feeling of honour — men in many places in Ireland, I shall not say marry, but rather debauch, the wives of their dead brothers. They abuse them in having such evil and incestuous relations with them. In this (wishing to imitate the ancients more eagerly in vice than in virtue) they follow the apparent teaching, and not the true doctrine, of the Old Testament.

99 ¶ *Their vices and treacheries*

MOREOVER, above all other peoples they always practise treachery. When they give their word to anyone, they do not keep it. They do not blush or fear to violate every day the bond of their pledge and oath given to others — although they are very keen that it should be observed with regard to themselves. When you have employed every safeguard and used every precaution for your own safety and security, both by means of oaths and hostages, and friendships firmly cemented, and all kinds of benefits conferred, then you must be especially on your guard, because then especially their malice seeks a chance. For they feel that because of your reliance on your safeguards you are not on the watch. Then at last they resort to the arts of evil and their accustomed weapons of deceit, so that, taking an op-

portunity of your feeling of security, they may be able to injure you when you do not expect it.

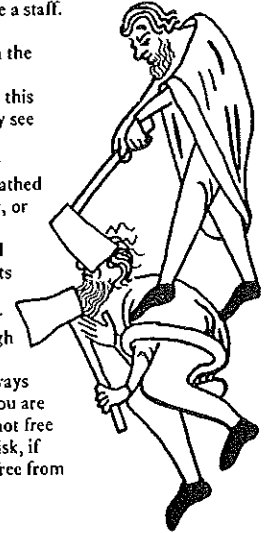
You must be more afraid of their wile than their war; their friendship than their fire; their honey than their hemlock; their shrewdness than their soldiery; their betrayals than their battle lines; their specious friendship than their enmity despised. For this is their principle: "Who asks of an enemy whether he employs guile or virtue?"<sup>66</sup> These are their characteristics: they are neither strong in war, nor reliable in peace.

100 ¶ *How they always carry an axe as if it were a staff in their hand*

FROM AN OLD and evil custom they always carry an axe in their hand as if it were a staff.

In this way, if they have a feeling for any evil, they can the more quickly give it effect. Wherever they go they drag this along with them. When they see the opportunity, and the occasion presents itself, this weapon has not to be unsheathed as a sword, or bent as a bow, or poised as a spear. Without further preparation, beyond being raised a little, it inflicts a mortal blow. At hand, or rather, in the hand and ever ready is that which is enough to cause death.

From the axe there is always anxiety. If you think that you are free from anxiety, you are not free from an axe. You admit a risk, if you admit an axe, and are free from



anxiety. If they see an opportunity of exercising their evil, it would have been better that they had not seen it, or rather that they had not seen anything at all.

101 ¶ *A proof of their wickedness and a new way of making a treaty*

AMONG MANY OTHER TRICKS devised in their guile, there is this one which serves as a particularly good proof of their treachery.

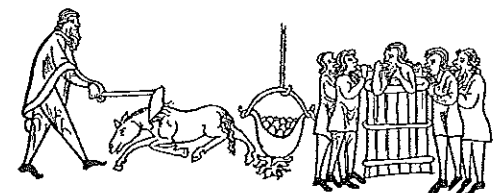
Under the guise of religion and peace they assemble at some holy place with him whom they wish to kill. First they make a treaty on the basis of their common fathers. Then in turn they go around the church three times. They enter the church and, swearing a great variety of oaths before relics of saints placed on the altar, at last with the celebration of Mass and the prayers of the priests they make an indissoluble treaty as if it were a kind of betrothal. For the greater confirmation of their friendship and completion of their settlement, each in conclusion drinks the blood of the other which has willingly been drawn especially for the purpose.

O! how often in the very hour of this alliance has blood been so treacherously and shamefully shed by treacherous blood relations that one or other has been left entirely drained of blood. O! how often a bloody divorce immediately follows within the same hour, or precedes, or even — and this is unheard of elsewhere — interrupts the very ceremony of the 'betrothal'!

Woe to brothers amongst a barbarous people! Woe to kinsmen! When they are alive they are relentlessly driven to death. When they are dead and gone, vengeance is demanded for them. If this people has any love or loyalty it is kept only for foster children and foster brothers.

To such an extent does one seem here to be allowed to carry out whatever one desires; people are so concerned not

They love foster children and foster brothers and drive kinsmen to death.



with what is honourable, but all of them only with what is expedient (although in fact only what is honourable can be said to be entirely expedient); so strongly has the pest of treachery grown and put in roots here; so natural through long usage have bad habits become; to such an extent are habits influenced by one's associates, and he who touches pitch will be defiled by it; that foreigners coming to this country almost inevitably are contaminated by this, as it were, inborn vice of the country — a vice that is most contagious.

This place finds people already accursed or makes them so. For since the road to pleasure is downhill, and nature tends to imitate vice, who has any hesitation about going on the road to perdition, when he is persuaded and convinced by so many examples of sacrilegious men, so many evidences of evil deeds, such frequent transgression of oaths, such complete lack of respect for the Faith, and is continually being invited to do similar things by a precept that inculcates evil?

102 ¶ *A new and outlandish way of confirming kingship and dominion<sup>67</sup>*

THERE ARE SOME THINGS which, if the exigencies of my account did not demand it, shame would

Foreigners are contaminated by the same vice.

discountenance their being described. But the austere discipline of history spares neither truth nor modesty.

There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.

103 ¶ *Many in the island have never been baptized, and have not yet heard of the teaching of the Faith*

**M**OREOVER, although all this time the Faith has grown up, so to speak, in the country, nevertheless in some corners of it there are many even still who are not baptized, and who, because of the negligence of the pastors, have not yet heard the teaching of the Faith.

I heard from some sailors that one time during Lent they were driven by the force of a storm to the northern and unsearchable vastnesses of the sea of Connacht. At length they put in under a fairly small island. They could scarcely keep their position there, even though they threw out their anchor and used ropes of triple thickness and even more. The storm abated within three days and the sea and the weather became calm again. They saw not far away what

appeared to them to be land that was completely unknown to them.

Shortly afterwards they caught sight of a small skiff putting out from the land towards themselves. The boat was narrow and oblong, made of wickerwork and covered on the outside with sewn hides of animals. There were two men in the boat who were altogether naked except for broad belts of the raw hides of animals which they had tied about their waists. Their hair was very long and flaxen, coming down and across their shoulders, as is the Irish manner, and covering most of their bodies. When they had found out from them that they were from some part of Connacht, and spoke the Irish language, they took them on board the ship. They, on their part, began to wonder at everything they saw as if it were new.



They said that they had never before seen a big ship made of wood, nor the trappings of civilization. When they were offered bread and cheese to eat they did not know what they were and refused them. They said that they fed only on meat, fish, and milk. They did not usually wear clothes, but sometimes in great necessity they used the hides of animals. They asked the sailors if they had any meat for a meal on board, and when they were told that it was not allowed to eat meat during Lent, they knew nothing about Lent. Nor did they know anything about the year, nor the month, nor the week, and they were completely ignorant of the names of the days of the week. When they were asked if they were Christians and baptized, they replied that they had as yet heard nothing of Christ and knew nothing about him.

And so they departed and took with them one piece of bread and a cheese, so that they might show to their own people as a wonder the kind of food that other peoples used.

104 ¶ *The Irish clergy, in many points praiseworthy<sup>68</sup>*

**N**OW WE SHALL TURN our attention to the clergy. The clergy of this country are on the whole to be commended for their observance. Among their other virtues chastity shines out as a kind of special prerogative. They diligently carry out their obligations in the matter of the Psalms and the hours, reading and praying. They keep themselves within the enclosures of the church and fulfil the divine offices with which they are entrusted. They practise a considerable amount of abstinence and asceticism in the use of food. Most of them, in fact, fast daily all day long until twilight, when they have completed all the offices of the hours of the day.

But it would be better if after their long fasts they were as sober as they are late in coming to food, as sincere as they are severe, as pure as they are dour, and as genuine as they appear.

105 ¶ *The prelates should be reproved for their neglect of their pastoral office*

**I**HAVE almost only one thing on which to reprove the bishops and prelates, and that is that they are too slack and negligent in the correction of a people that is guilty of such enormities. Because of their not preaching to and reprov- ing their people, I preach that they should be reprov- ed themselves. For the fact that they do not charge others with evil deeds, I charge them. For not reprehending others I reprehend them. If the prelates from the time of Patrick through all those years had done a man's job, as they should have done, in preaching and instructing, chastising and cor-

recting, they would have extirpated at any rate to a certain extent those abominations of the people already mentioned, and would have impressed upon them some semblance of honour and religious feeling.

But there was no one among them to raise his voice as a trumpet. There was none to mount on the other side, and be a wall for the house of Israel. There was none to fight for the church of Christ even to exile, to say nothing of blood – that church which Christ had purchased for himself with his precious blood.

Consequently all the saints of this country are confessors, and there is no martyr. It would be difficult to find such a state of things in any other Christian kingdom. There was found no one in those parts to cement the foundations of the growing church with the shedding of his blood. There was no one to do this service; not a single one.

For they are pastors that wish to be fed, and do not wish to feed. They are prelates that do not wish to be of use, but rather to use. And they are bishops who welcome the honour and name of their calling, but do not welcome its duties and responsibilities.

The prelates of this land, keeping themselves according to an old custom within the enclosures of their churches, give themselves almost always to contemplation alone. They are so enamoured of the beauty of Rachel that they find the blear-eyed Leah disgusting. Whence it happens that they neither preach the word of the Lord to the people, nor tell them of their sins, nor extirpate vices from the flock committed to them, nor instil virtues.

Since nearly all the prelates of Ireland are taken from monasteries into the ranks of the clergy, they scrupulously fulfil all the obligations of a monk. But they omit almost everything to which they are obliged as clerics and prelates. They care for and are mindful of themselves only, but they omit or put off with great negligence the care of the flock committed to them. They either do not know – or conveni-