CHAPTER V

THE MYTHICAL HISTORY OF BRITAIN

'WHEN Britain first, at Heaven's command, arose from out the azure main,' her name was *Clas Myrddin*, that is, the Place, or Enclosure, of Merlin. In later days, she became known as 'the Honey Isle of Beli,'[1] and it was not until safely occupied by mankind that she took her present designation, from Prydain, son of Aedd the Great, who first established settled government. All this is told us by a Welsh Triad, and it is from such fragmentary sources that we glean the mythical history of our island.

With these relics we must make what we can ; for the work has not been done for us in the way that it was done by the mediaeval monkish annalists for Ireland. We find our data scattered through old bardic poems and romances, and in pseudo-hagiologies and hardly less apocryphal

[1] Beli seems to have been sometimes associated in Welsh legend with the sea, which was called the 'drink of Beli,' and its waves 'Beli's cattle.'

histories. Yet, without perhaps using more freedom with our materials than an early writer would have done, we can piece them together, and find in them roughly the same story as that of Ireland-the subjugation of the land by friendly gods for the subsequent use of men.

The greatest bulk of ancient British myth is found in the Mabinogion-more correctly, the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. These tales evidently consist of fragments of varying myths pieced together to make a cycle, and Professor Anwyl[1] has endeavoured with much learning to trace out and disentangle the original legends. But in the form in which the Welsh writer has fixed them, they show a gradual supersession of other deities by the gods who more especially represent human culture.

The first of the Four Branches deals with the leading incidents in the life of Pwyll: how he became a king in Annwn, the Other World of the Welsh; how, by a clever trick, he won his bride Rhiannon ; the birth of their son Prydéri, and his theft by mysterious powers ; the punishment incurred by Rhiannon on the false charge of having eaten him; and his recovery and restoration upon the night of the First of May.

In the second ' Branch ' we find Prydéri, grown

[1] See a series of articles in the *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie.*

up and married to a wife called Kicva, as the guest of Brân, son of Llŷr, at Harlech. Matholwch, King of Ireland, arrives with a fleet to request the hand of Brân's sister, Branwen of the Fair Bosom. It is granted, and Branwen sails- to Ireland. But, later on, news comes that she is being badly treated by her husband, and Brân goes with an army to avenge her. There is parley, submission, treachery, and battle, out of which, after the slaughter of all the Irish, only seven of Brân's host remain—Prydéri, Manawyddan, the bard Taliesin, and four others of less known mythic fame. Brân himself is wounded in the foot with a poisoned spear, and in his agony orders the others to cut off his head and carry it to 'the White Mount in London,' by which Tower Hill is believed to have been meant. They were eighty-seven years upon the way, cheered all the while by the singing of the Three Birds of Rhiannon, whose music was so sweet that it would recall the dead to life, and by the agreeable conversation of Brân's severed head. But at last they reached the end of their journey, and buried the head with its face turned towards France, watching that no foreign foe came to Britain. And here it reposed until Arthur disinterred it, scorning, in his pride of heart, to (hold the island

otherwise than by valour,' a rash act of which the Saxon conquest was the result.

The third Mabinogi recounts the further adventures of Manawyddan, who married the apparently old, but no doubt ever youthful, Rhiannon, mother of his friend Pryderi, and of Pryderi himself and his wife Kicva. During their absence in Ireland their kinsmen had all been slain by Caswallawn, a son of Beli, and their kingdom taken from them by the Children of Dôn. The four fugitives were compelled to live a homeless nomadic life, and it is the 'spiriting away' by magic of Rhiannon and Pryderi and their recovery by the craft of Manawyddan which forms the subject of the tale.

With the fourth 'Branch' the Children of Dôn come into a prominence which they keep to the end. They are shown as dwelling together at Caer Dathyl, an unidentified spot in the mountains of Carnarvonshire, and ruled over by Math, Don's brother. There are two chief incidents of the story. The first tells of the birth of the twin sons of Gwydion's sister, Arianrod-Dylan, apparently a marine deity,[1] who, as soon as he was

[1] Professor Rhŷs is inclined to see in him a deity of Darkness, opposed to the god of Light, *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 387. See in this connection p. 32 of the present book.

born, disappeared into the sea, where he swam as well as any fish, and Lleu, who was fostered and brought up by Gwydion ; the rage of Arianrod when she found her intrigue made public, and her refusal of name, arms, or a wife to her unwished-for son; the craft by which Gwydion obtained for him those three essentials of a man's life ; the infidelity of the damsel whom Mâth and Gwydion had created for Lleu 'by charms and illusion ' out of ' the blossoms of the oak, and the blossoms of the broom, and the blossoms of the meadow-sweet,' and his enchantment into an eagle by the cunning of her lover; the wanderings of Gwydion in search of his protege, and his eventual recovery of him; and the vengeance taken by Lleu upon the man and by Gwydion upon the woman. The second relates the coming of pigs to Britain as a gift from Arawn, King of Annwn, to Pryderi ; their fraudulent acquisition by Gwydion ; the war which followed the theft; and the death of Prydéri through the superior strength and magic of the great son of Dôn.

These 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi' thus give a consecutive, if incomplete, history of some of the most important of the Brythonic gods. There are, however, other isolated legends from which we can add to the information they afford.

We learn more of the details of Gwydion's struggles with his enemies. In his first attempts he seems to have been unfortunate. Trespassing upon Hades, he was caught by Pwyll and Prydéri, and imprisoned in a mysterious island called Caer Sidi. It was the sufferings he endured there which made him a poet, and any one who aspires to a similar gift may try to gain it, it is said, by sleeping out either upon the top of Cader Tdris or under the Black Stone of the Arddu upon the side of Snowdon, for from that night of terrors he will return either inspired or mad.

But Gwydion escaped from his enemies, and we find him victorious in the strange conflict called Cad *Goddeu*, the 'Battle of the Trees.' His brother Amaethon and his nephew Lleu were with him, and they fought against Brân and Arawn. We learn from various traditions how the sons of Dôn ' changed the forms of the elementary trees and sedges ' into warriors ; how Gwydion overcame the magic power of Brân by guessing his name ; and how, by the defeat of the powers of the Underworld, three boons were won for man-the dog, the deer, and some bird whose name is translated as ' lapwing.'

But now a fresh protagonist comes upon the scene-the famous Arthur, whose history and

even existence have been involved in so much doubt. The word *Arthur,* of which several varying explanations have been attempted, is now held to have been originally *Artōrius,* a recognised Latin name found on inscriptions, and as *Artūrius* in Juvenal, which would make him a Romanised Briton who, like many others of his period, adopted a Latin designation. His political prominence, implied not only by the traditions which make him a supreme war-leader of the Britons, but also by the fact that he is described in a twelfth century Welsh MS. as Emperor (*amherawdyr*), while his contemporaries, however high in rank, are only princes (*gwledig*), may be due, as Professor Rhŷs has suggested: to his having filled, after the withdrawal of the Romans, a position equivalent to their *Comes Britanniae.* But his legendary fame is hardly to be explained except upon the supposition that the fabled exploits of a god or gods perhaps of somewhat similar name have become confounded with his own, as seems to have also happened in the case of Dietrich von Bern (Theodoric the Goth) and the Gaulish Toutidrix. An inscription has been found at Beaucroissant, in the valley of the Isère, to Mercurius Artaios, while the name

[1] *Studies in the Arthurian Legend,* p. 7.

Artio appears elsewhere within the limits of ancient Gaul as that of a goddess These names may have been derived from either of two Celtic roots, *ar*, meaning ' to plough,' which would suggest a deity or deities of agriculture, or *art*, signifying a bear, as an animal worshipped at some remote period in the history of the Celts. Probably we shall never know exactly what diverse local myths have been woven into the story of Arthur, but they would doubtless be of the kind usually attributed to those divine benefactors known as 'Culture Heroes,' and it is to be noted that, in the earliest accounts we have of him, his character and attributes are extremely like those of another culture hero, Gwydion son of Dôn.

Like Gwydion, he suffered imprisonment at the hands of his enemies. He ' was for three nights in the Castle of Oeth and Annoeth '-the gruesome structure of human bones built by Manawyddan son of Llŷr in Gower—' and three nights in the prison of (?) Wen Pendragon,[1] and three nights in the dark prison under the stone,' a Triad tells us. Like Gwydion, too, he went pig-stealing, but he was neither so lucky nor so

1 Professor Anwyl suggests that this name may have been originally Uthr Bendragon, i.e. Brân. See p. 71.

crafty as his predecessor. When he had designs upon the swine of March son of Meirchion (the 'King Mark' of the romances) which Trystan was herding, he could not get, says another Triad, even one pig. But in the end he succeeded wholly. An old Welsh poem tells us of his 'Spoiling of Annwn' (*Preiddeu Annwn*)[1] and his capture of the magic cauldron of its King, though, like Bran himself when he went to Ireland, he brought back with him from his expedition only seven of the men who, at starting, had been 'thrice enough to fill Prydwen,' his ship.

But, having accomplished this, he seems to have had the other, and perhaps older, gods at his feet. Llûdd, according to Triads, was one of his Three Chief War Knights, and Arawn one of his Three Chief Counselling Knights. In the story of the hunting of the wild boar Twrch Trwyth, a quest in the course of which he acquired the (Treasures of Britain,' he is served not only by Amaethon and Govannon, sons of Dôn, but also by the same Manawyddan who had been his gaoler and another whilom king in Hades, Gwyn son of Nûdd. This tale, like its similar in Gaelic myth, the 'Fate of the Children

[1] 'Book of Taliesin,' poem xxx., Skene, vol. i. p. 256.

of Tuireann,' is a long one, and the reader is referred to Lady Guest's *Mabinogion* for the full story, which a good judge has acclaimed to be, ' saving the finest tales of the ((Arabian Nights," the greatest romantic fairy tale the world has ever known.' [1] The pursuit of wondrous pigs seems to have been an important feature of Arthur's career. Besides the boar Trwyth, he assembled his hosts to capture a sow called Henwen, which led him through the length of Wales. Wherever she went she dropped the germs of wealth for Britain-three grains of wheat and three bees, a grain of barley, a little pig, and a grain of rye, But she left evils behind her as well, a wolf cub and an eaglet which caused trouble afterwards, as well as a kitten which grew up to be ' the Palug Cat,' famous as one of the ' Three Plagues of the Isle of Mona.' [2]

Of what may have been historical elements in his story, the Triads also take notice. We learn how Arthur and Medrawt raided each other's courts during the owner's absence, and that the battle of Camlan was one of the 'Three Frivolous

[1] Mr. Alfred Nutt, in his notes to his edition (1902) of Lady Guest's *Mabinogion.*

[2] This creature is also mentioned in an Arthurian poem in the twelfth century Black Book of Carmarthen.

Battles of Britain,' because during it the two antagonists thrice shared their forces, and that the usual 'Three' alone escaped from it, though Arthur himself is, in spite of the triadic convention, added as a fourth.

So he vanishes, passing to Avilion (Avallon),, and the end of the divine age is also marked by the similar departure of his associate Myrddin, or Merlin, to an island beyond the sunset, accompanied by nine bards bearing with them those wondrous talismans, the Thirteen Treasures. Britain was now ready for her Britons.

In Gwlâd yr Hâv, the 'Land of Summer'-a name for the Brythonic Other World-dwelt the ancestors of the Cymry, ruled over by a divine hero called Hû Gadarn ('the Mighty'), and the time was ripe for their coming to our island.

Apparently we have a similar legend to the story of the conquest of Ireland from the Tuatha Dé Danann by the Milesians, though there is here no hint of fighting, it being, on the contrary, stated in a Triad that Hû obtained his dominion over Britain not by war and bloodshed, but by justice and peace. He instructed his people in the art of agriculture, divided them into federated tribes as a first step towards civil government, and laid the foundations of literature

and history by the institution of bardism. He put a stop to disastrous floods by dragging out of the lake where it concealed itself the dragon-like monster which caused them, and, after the waters had subsided, he was the first to draw on British soil a furrow with a plough. Therefore he is called the first of the 'Three National Pillars of the Isle of Britain,' the second being the Prydain who gave her his name, while the third was the mythical legislator Dyvnwal Moelmud, 'who reduced to a system the laws, customs, maxims, and privileges appertaining to a country and nation.'

CHAPTER VI

THE HEROIC CYCLE OF ANCIENT ULSTER

IN addition to the myths of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the not less apocryphal stories of her early 'Milesian' kings, Ireland has evolved two heroic cycles. The completest, and in some ways the most interesting, of these deals with the palmy days of the then Kingdom of Ulster during the reign of Conchobar (*Conahar*) Mac Nessa, whom the early annalists place at about the beginning of the Christian era. But, precise as this statement sounds and vividly as the 'Champions of the Red Branch,' as King Conchobar's braves were called, are depicted for us by the story-tellers, there is probably little, if any, foundation of fact in their legends. We may discern in their genealogies and the stories of their births the clue to their real nature. Their chief figures draw descent from the Tuatha Dé Danann, and are twice described in the oldest manuscripts as

'terrestrial gods.' One may compare them with the divinely descended heroes of the Greeks.

The sagas, or romances, which make up the Ulster cycle are found mainly in three manuscripts, the Book of the Dun Cow and the Book of Leinster, both of which date from the beginning of the twelfth century, and the Yellow Book of Lecan, assigned to the end of the fourteenth. The longest and most important of them is known as the *Táin Bó Chuailgne* (the 'Cattle Raid of Cooley') the chief figure of which is the famous Cuchulainn, or Cuchullin, the son of Conchobar's sister Dechtiré by Lug of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Cuchulainn, indeed, *fortissimus heros Scottorum*, is the real centre of the whole cycle. It is very doubtful whether he ever had actual existence. His attributes and adventures are of the type usually recorded of what are called 'solar heroes.' When in his full strength no one could look him in the face without blinking. The heat of his body melted snow and boiled water. It was geis ('taboo') to him to behold the sea. The antagonists whom he conquers are often suspiciously like mythological personifications of the dark shades of night.

He was first called Setanta, but it was while he was still quite a child that he changed his

name to *Cú Chulainn* ('Hound of Culann') as the result of an exploit in which he killed the watch-dog of the chief smith of Ulster, and afterwards acted as its substitute until another could be procured and trained,

Other stories of his youth tell how he assumed arms at the age of seven, and slew three champions who had set all the warriors of Ulster at defiance; how he travelled to Alba (Scotland) to learn the highest skill in arms from Scáthach, the Warrior-Witch who gave her name to the Isle of Skye; how he carried off his bride Emer (*Avair*) in the teeth of a host; and how, by success in a series of terrible tests, he gained the right to be called Head-Champion of Ulster.

But these isolated sagas are only external to the real core *of* the cycle, the *Táin Bó Chuailgne*. This is the story of a war which the other four kingdoms of Ireland-Meath, Munster, Leinster and Connaught-made upon Ulster at the bidding of Medb (*Maive*), the Amazon-Queen of the last-named province, to obtain possession of a magic bull called The Brown of Cualgne. Its interest lies in no promiscuous battles in which the deeds of an individual warrior are dwarfed by those of his compeers. For the mythic raid was undertaken at a time when all Conchobar's warriors

were lying under a strange magic weakness which incapacitated them from fighting. Anthropologists tend to see in this mysterious infirmity a distorted memory of the primitive custom of the *couvade,* and mythologists the helplessness of the gods of vegetation and agriculture during the winter, while the storytellers attribute it to a curse once laid upon Ulster by the goddess Macha. But when the land seemed most at its enemy's mercy, the heroic Cuchulainn, who for some unexplained reason was not subject to the same incapacity as his fellow-tribesmen, stood up to defend it single-handed. For three months he held the marches against all comers, fighting a fresh champion every day, and the story of the *Táin* consists mainly of a long series of duels in which exponents of every savage art of war or witchcraft are sent against him,-each to be defeated in his turn. Over this tremendous struggle hover the figures of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Lug, Cuchulainn's divine father, comes to heal his son's wounds, and the fierce Mórrígu, queen of battle, is moved to offer so unrivalled a hero her love. A short-lived pathos illumines the story in the tale of his combat with his old friend and sworn companion, Ferdiad, who, drugged with love and wine, had rashly pledged his word to

take up the standing challenge. After a three days' duel, during which the courtesies exchanged between the two combatants are not excelled in any tale of mediaeval chivalry, Cuchulainn gives the death-blow to the foe who is still his friend, When he sees him at his feet, he bursts into passionate lament. 'It was all a game and a sport until Ferdiad came; the memory of this day will be like a cloud hanging over me for ever.' But the victory ended his perilous labours; for the men of Ulster, at last shaking off their weakness, came down and dispersed their enemies.

Other stories of the cycle tell of such episodes as Cuchulainn's unwitting slaying of his only son in single combat, an old Aryan *motif* which we find also in Teutonic and Persian myth, or his visit to the Celtic Other World, and his love adventure with Fand, the deserted wife of Manannán son of Lêr; until at last the mass of legends which make up a complete story of the hero's career are closed with the tragedy of his death upon the plain of Muirthemné.

It was planned by Medb with the sons and relations of the chiefs whom Cuchulainn had killed in battle, and no stone was left unturned to compass his downfall. Three witches who had been to Alba and Babylon to learn all. the sorcery

of the world deceive him with magic shows, and draw him out alone into the open; he is tricked into breaking his *taboo* by eating the flesh of a dog-his name-sake, says the story, but perhaps also his totem; satirists demand his favourite weapons, threatening to lampoon his family if he refuses ; and thus, stripped of material and supernatural aid, he is attacked by overwhelming numbers. But, though signs and portents announce his doom, there is no 'shadow of changing ' in the hero's indomitable heart, Wounded to the death, he binds himself with his belt to a pillar-stone, so that he may die standing; and, even after he has drawn his last breath, his sword, falling from his grasp, chops off the hand of the enemy who has come to take his head.

Out of the seventy-six stories of the Ulster cycle which have come down to us, *no* less than sixteen are personal to Cuchulainn. But the other heroes are not altogether forgotten, though their lists are comparatively short. Most of these tales have been already translated, and, taken together, they form a narrative which is almost epic in its completeness and interest.[1]

[1] A list of the tales, extant and lost, of the Ulster Cycle mill be found as Appendix I. of Miss Eleanor Hull's *Cuchullin* Saga, London, 1898.

Probably its growth was gradual, and spread over a considerable time. Some of the redactors, too, have evidently had a hand in recasting the pagan myths of Ulster for the purposes of Christian edification. We are told with startling inconsistency how Cuchulainn, going to his last fight, heard the angels hymning in Heaven, confessed the true faith, and was cheered by the certainty of salvation. The 'Tragical Death of Conchobar,' in the Book of the Dun Cow relates how that king died of wrath and sorrow at learning of the Passion of Christ. Another story from the same source, entitled ' The Phantom Chariot,' shows us Cuchulainn, conjured from the dead by St. Patrick, testifying to the truth of Christianity before an Irish king. But such interpolations do not affect the real matter of the cycle, which presents us with a picture of the Celts of Ireland at an age perhaps contemporary with Caesar's invasion of her sister isle of Britain,

CHAPTER VII

THE FENIAN, OR OSSIANIC, SAGAS

THE second of the two Gaelic heroic cycles presents certain striking contrasts to the first. It depicts a quite different stage of human culture ; for, while the Ulster stories deal with chariot-driving chiefs ruling over settled communities from fortified dúns, the Fenian sagas mirror, under a faint disguise, the lives of nomad hunters in primeval woods. The especial possession, not of any one tribal community, but of the folk, it is common to the two Goidelic countries, being as native to Scotland as to Ireland. Moreover, it has the distinction, unique among early literatures, of being still a living tradition. So firmly rooted are the memories of Finn and his heroes in the minds of the Gaelic peasantry that there is a proverb to the effect that if the Fenians found that they had not been spoken of for a day, they would rise from the dead.

It may be well here to remove a few possible misconceptions concerning these sagas and their heroes. The word 'Fenian' in popular parlance is applied to certain political agitators of recent notoriety. But those 'Fenians' merely assumed their title from the tradition that the original Fianna (*Fēna*) were a band of patriots sworn to the defenee of Ireland. With regard, too, to the second title of 'Ossianic' which the romances and poems which make up the cycle bear, it must not be taken that the Fenian hero Ossian was their author, an idea perhaps suggested by the prose-poem of James MacPherson, which, though doubtless founded upon genuine Gaelic material, was almost certainly that writer's own composition. Some of the poetical pieces are, indeed, rightly or wrongly attributed to Ossian, as some are to Finn himself, but the bulk of the poems and all the prose tales are, like the sagas of the Ulster cycle, by unknown authors. A few of them are found in the earliest Irish manuscripts, but there has been a continuous stream of literary treatment of them, and they have also been handed down as folk-tales by oral tradition,

The cycle as a whole deals with the history and adventures of a band of warriors who are described as having formed a standing force, in the pay of

the High Kings of Tara, to protect Ireland, both from internal trouble and foreign invasion. The early annalists were quite certain of their historical reality, and dated their existence as a body from *300* B.C. to *284* A.D., while even so late and sound a scholar as Eugene O'Curry gave his opinion that Finn himself was as undoubtedly historical a character as Julius Caesar.

Modern Celtic students, however, tend to reverse this view. The name Fionn or Finn, meaning 'white,' or 'fair,' appears elsewhere as that of a mythical ancestor of the Gaels. His father's name Cumhal (*Coul*), according to Professor Rhŷs, is identical with Cămŭlos and the German *Himmel* (Heaven). The same writer is inclined to equate Fionn mac Cumhail with Gwyn ab Nûdd, a 'White son of Sky' who, we have seen, was a British god of the Other World, and, afterwards, king of the Welsh fairies.[1] But there may have been a historical nucleus of the Fenian cycle into which myths of gods and heroes became incorporated.

This possible starting-point would show us a roving band of picked soldiers, following the chase in summer, quartered on the towns in

[1] Rhŷs, *Hibbert Lectures*, pp. 178, 179. But these identifications are contested.

winter, but always ready to march, at the bidding of the High King of Ireland, to quell any disturbance or to meet any foreign foe. For a time all goes smoothly. But at last their exactions rouse the people against them, and their pride affronts the king. Dissensions leading to internecine strife break out among themselves, and, taking advantage of these, king and people make common cause and destroy them.

In the romances, this seed of decay is sown before the birth of Finn. His father Cumhal banishes Goll (Cad), head of the powerful clan of Morna. Goll goes into exile but returns, defeats and kills Cumhal, and disperses the clan of Baoisgne (*Baskin*), his tribe. But Cumhal's posthumous son is brought up in secret, is trained to manly feats, and, as the reward of a deed of prowess, is called upon by the High King to claim a boon. 'I ask only for my lawful inheritance,' says the youth, and tells his name. The king insists upon Goll admitting Finn's rights, and so he becomes leader of the Fenians. But, in the end, the smouldering enmity breaks out, and, after the death of Goll, the rest of the clan of Morna go over to the High King of Ireland—Cairbré, son of the Cormac who had restored Finn to his heritage. The disastrous battle of Gavra is fought, in which

Cairbré himself falls, while the Fenians are practically annihilated.

But attached to this possibly historical nucleus is a mass of tales which may well have once been independent of it. Their actors are the principal figures of the Fenian chivalry-Fionn (*Finn*) himself, his son Oisin (*Ossian*), and his grandson Osgur (Oscar); his cousin Caoilte (*Kylta*), swiftest-footed of men, and his nephew Diarmait (*Dermat*), the lover of women; with the proud Goll and his braggart brother Conan, leaders of the clan of Morna. They consist of wonderful adventures, sometimes with invaders from abroad, but oftener upon 'perilous seas' and 'in faery lands forlorn' with wild beasts, giants, witches and wizards, and the Tuatha Dé Danann themselves. The Fenians have the freedom of the *sídhe*, the palaces under the fairy hills, and help this god or that against his fellows. Even Bodb Derg (Red Bove) a son of the Dagda, gives his daughter to Finn and sends his son to enlist with the Fenians. The culmination of these exploits is related in the tale called *Cath Finntraighe* [1] (the Battle of Ventry), in which Dairé Donn, the High King of the World, leads all his vassals against Ireland,

[1] Translated by Professor Kuno Meyer, in vol. i. of *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, 1882.

and is defeated by the joint efforts of the Fenians and the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Ossian takes, of course, a prominent part in the stories which are so much associated with his name. But he is especially connected with what might be called the 'post-Fenian ballads,' in which the heroic deeds of Finn and his men are told in the form of dialogues between Ossian and St. Patrick. They hinge upon the legend that Ossian escaped the fate of the rest of his kin by being taken to *Tir nan Og*, the 'Land of Youth,' -the Celtic Paradise of old and the Celtic Fairy-land of to-day-by the fairy, or goddess, Niamh (*Neeave*), daughter of Manannán mac Lir. Here he enjoyed three hundred years of divine youth, while time changed the face of the world outside. In the end he longs to see his own country again, and Niamh mounts him upon a magic horse, warning him not to put foot upon earthly soil. But his saddle-girth breaks, Ossian falls to earth, and rises up, a blind old man, stripped of the gifts of the gods.

The ballad 'Dialogues ' recite the arguments held between the saint and the hero. Saint Patrick presses the new creed and culture upon his unwilling guest, who answers him with passionate laments for the days that are dead. Patrick tells

of God and the Angels, Ossian retorts with tales of Finn and the Fenians. It is the clash of two aspects of life, the heathen ideal of joy and strength, and the Christian ideal of service and sacrifice. 'I will tell you a little story about Finn,' replies Ossian to the saint's praises of the heaven of the elect, and relates some heroic exploit of chase or war. Nor is he more ready to listen to Patrick's exhortations to repent and weep over his pagan past. 'I will weep my fill,' he answers, 'but not for God, but because Finn and the Fenians are no longer alive.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

BUT the Gaelic myths, vital as they are, have yet caused no echo of themselves in the literatures of the outside world. This distinction has been left for the legendary tales of the Britons. The Norman minstrels found the stories which they heard from their Welsh confreres so much to their liking that they readily adopted them, and spread them from camp to camp and from court to court, wherever their dominant race held sway. Perhaps the finer qualities of Celtic romance made especial appeal to that new fashion of 'chivalry' which was growing up under the fosterage of poetry and romance by noble ladies. At any rate the *Matière de Bretagne,* as the stories of the British gods and heroes, and especially of Arthur, were called, came to be the leading source of poetic inspiration on the Continent. The whole vast Arthurian literature has its origin in British Celtic mythology.

We find the names of its chief characters, and can trace the nucleus of their stories, in Welsh songs and tales older than the earliest outburst of Arthurian romance in Europe, Arthur himself has, as we have tried to show in a previous chapter, several of the attributes and adventures of Gwydion son of Dôn, while the figures most closely connected with his story bear striking resemblance to the characters which surround Gwydion in the fourth 'branch' of the Mabinogi,[1] a result probably due to the same type of myth having been current in different localities and associated in different districts with different names. Arianrod, who is said to have been the wife of a little-known and perhaps superseded and half-forgotten Sky-god called Nwyvre ('Space'), seems to be represented in Arthur's story by Gwyar, the consort of the Heaven-god Llûdd, and from comparison with later romance we may fairly assume that Gwyar was also Arthur's sister. In Gwalchmai and Medrawt, the good and evil brothers born of their union, we shall probably be right in recognising similar characters to Arianrod's sons, the gods of light and darkness, Lleu (Llew) and Dylan. This body of myth has passed down

[1] See Rhŷs, Studies *in the Arthurian Legend*, chap. i. 'Arthur, Historical and Mythical.'

almost intact into the mediaeval Arthurian cycle. The wife of King Lot (Llûdd) is sister to Arthur; Lleu's counterpart, Gwalchmai,[1] appears as Sir Gawaine, certain descriptions of whom in Malory's *Morte Darthur* are hardly comprehensible except as a misunderstood fragment of a mythology in which he appeared as a 'solar hero'; Medrawt has scarcely changed at all, either in name or character, in becoming Sir Mordred; while the stately figure of Math, ruler of the children of Dôn, is paralleled by the majestic Merlin, who watches over, and even dares to rebuke, his protege, Arthur.

We are upon uncertain ground, however, in attempting to discover in the Arthurian cycle the other personages of the Mabinogian stories. Professor Rhŷs, in his *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (1891), has devoted great ingenuity and learning to this task, but his identifications of Pwyll, of Rhiannon, of Prydéri, of Arawn, of Gwyn, and of Amaethon with characters in the mediaeval romances, whatever may happen to them in the future, cannot at present be considered as otherwise than hazardous. The transformations of Brân seem less open to doubt.

[1] In Welsh legend, Gwalchmai (the 'Hawk of May') has a brother, Gwalchaved (the 'Hawk of Summer'), whose name is the original of 'Galahad.'

The name of King Brandegore may probably be resolved into Brân of Gower, and of Sir Brandiles into Bran of Gwales (Gresholm Island); he is perhaps King Ban of Benwyk, and Bron, who brought the Grail to Britain; as Balan, he is brought into contact with Balin, who seems to be the Gallo-British Bĕlĕnos ; while 'Uther Pendragon himself may have been originally Bran's 'Wonderful Head' (*Uthr Ben)* which lived for eighty-seven years after it had been severed from its body. But there can be little question as to other personages who surround Arthur both in the earlier and later legends. Myrddin as Merlin ; March as King Mark ; Gwalchaved as Sir Galahad ; Kai as Sir Kay ; and Gmenhwyvar as Guinevere have obviously been directly taken over from Welsh story.

But here we are confronted with a notable exception. It is of Sir Lancelot, King Arthur's peerless knight and the lover of Queen Guinevere, that no trace can be found in earlier legend. He is not heard of till the latter part of the twelfth century, when he appears as a knight who was stolen in infancy, and brought up by, a water-fairy (whence his title of *Du Lac*),[1] but thenceforward he supersedes in popularity all the others of the

[1] See Miss J. L. Weston's ***The*** Legend *of* Sir Lancelot *Du Lac.* London, 1901.

Table Round. In his rôle of the lover of the Queen, he pushes his way into, and shatters, the older traditions. According to early story it was Melwas, the Cornish equivalent of the Welsh Gwyn ab Nûdd, who stole Gwenhmyvar, and Arthur himself who recaptured her. But in the *Morte Darthur*, though Melwas, whose name has become 'Sir Meliagraunce,' is still the abductor of Queen Guinevere, it is Sir Lancelot who appears as her deliverer. Nor can Sir Mordred, or Medrawt, another traditional rival of Arthur's, hold his own against the new-comer.

Probably we shall never solve this mystery. Some literary or social fashion of which all record is lost may have dictated Lancelot's prominence. It matters less, as it is not the core and centre of the Arthurian legend, What has given the cycle its enduring interest, as testified by its attraction for author, artist, and composer down to the present day, is not the somewhat commonplace love of Lancelot and the Queen, but the mystical quest of the Holy Grail. And here we can clearly trace the direct evolution of the Arthurian legend from the myths of the Celts.[1]

[1] The chief anthorities for the study of the Grail legend in its relation to Celtic myth are Professor Rhŷs's *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* and Mr. Alfred Nutt's *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail.*

Both in Gaelic and British **mythology,** prominence is given to a cauldron which has wondrous talismanic virtues, It was one of the four chief treasures brought by the Tuatha Dé Danann to Ireland ; Cachulainn captured it from the god Mider, when he stormed his stronghold in the Isle of Man; and it reappears in the Fenian stories. Its especial property in these myths was that of miraculous food-providing-all the men in the world, we are told, could be fed from it-and in this quality we find it on British ground as the basket of Gwyddneu Garanhir. But certain other such vessels of Brythonic myth were endowed with different, and less material, virtues. A **magic** cauldron given by Brân son of Llŷr to Matholwch, the husband of his sister Branwen, would restore the dead to life; in her cauldron of Inspiration and Science, the goddess Kerridwen brewed a drink of prophecy ; while from the cauldron of the giant Ogyrvan, the father of Gwenhwyvar, the three Muses had been born.

In what is perhaps the latest of all these varying legends, the qualities of the previous cauldrons have been brought together to form the trophy which Arthur, in the early Welsh poem called 'The Spoiling of Annwn,' (see p. 50) is represented as having captured from the Other World King.

'Is it not the cauldron of the Chief of Annwn?' 'What is its fashion?' asks the bard Taliesin, and he goes on to describe it as rimmed with pearls, and gently warmed by the breath of nine maidens. 'It will not cook the food of a coward or one forsworn,' he continues, which allows us to assume that, like such vessels as the Dagda's cauldron or the basket of Gwyddneu Garanhir, it would provide generously for the brave and truthful. It was kept in a square fortress surrounded by the sea, and called by various names, such as the Revolving Castle (*Caer Sidi*), the Underworld (*Uffern*), the Four-cornered Castle (*Caer Pedryvan*), the Castle of (?) Revelry (*Caer Vedwyd*), the (?)Kingly Castle (*Caer Rigor*), the Glass Castle (*Caer Wydyr*), and the Castle of (?)Riches (*Caer Golud*). This stronghold, ruled over by Pwyll and Prydéri, is represented as spinning round with such velocity that it was almost impossible to enter it, and was in pitch-darkness save for a twilight made by the lamp burning before its gate, but its inhabitants, who were exempt from old age and disease, led lives of revelry, quaffing the bright wine. Evidently, as may be ascertained from comparison with similar myths, it stood for the Other World, as conceived by the Celts.

This cauldron of pagan myth has altered

strangely little in passing down through the centuries to become the Holy Grail which had been filled by Joseph of Arimathea with Christ's Blood. It is still kept in a mysterious castle by a mysterious king. In Malory's *Morte Darthur* this king is called Pelles, a name strangely like that of the Welsh Pwyll, and though in other versions of the Grail story, taken perhaps from variant British myths, the keeper of the mystic vessel bears a different name, he always seems to be one of the rulers of the Other World, whether he be called Bron (Bran), or Peleur (? Prydéri), or Goon (? Gwyn), or the Rich Fisher, in whom Professor Rhŷs recognises Gwyddneu Garanhir.[1] It still retains in essence the qualities of 'the cauldron of the Chief of Annwn.' The savage cooking-pot which would refuse to serve a coward or perjurer with food, has been only refined, not altered, in becoming the heavenly vessel which could not be seen by sinners, while the older idea is still retained in the account of how, when it appeared, it filled the hall with sweet savours, while every knight saw before him on the table the food he loved best. Like its pagan prototype, it cured wounds and sickness, and no one could grow old while in its presence. Though, too, the

[1] *Arthurian* Legend, pp. 315-317.

place in which it was kept is but vaguely pictured by Sir Thomas Malory, the thirteenth century Norman-French romance called the *Seint Greal* [1] preserves all the characteristics which most strike us in Taliesin's poem. It is surrounded by a great water; it revolves more swiftly than the wind ; and its garrison shoot so stoutly that no armour can repel their shafts, which explains why, of the men that accompanied Arthur, 'except seven, none returned from Caer Sidi.'

'The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force' ; this is the spiritualised meaning of the Celtic myth, and in this has lain the lasting inspiration of the story which attracted Milton so strongly that it was almost by chance that we did not have from him a *King Arthur* instead of *Paradise Lost.* In our own times it has enchanted the imagination of Tennyson, while Swinburne, Morris, and Matthew Arnold have also borne witness to the poetic value of a tradition which is as national to Britain as the Veda to India, or her epic poems to Greece.

[1] Edited and translated by the Rev. Robert Williams, M. A. London, 1876.