



CROSS AND CHAIR OF ST. FORGAS.

LOUGH FORGAS (OR FERGUS) Co. CLARE.

BY DR. GEORGE U. MACNAMARA, M.R.S.A.I.

One of the most curious phenomena connected with the development of the human mind is the persistence with which it clings to ancient superstitions, no matter how unreasonable and perverse they may be. That pagan customs and beliefs should still linger on in Ireland—a country which has enjoyed the light of the Gospel from the fifth century of our era to this, the twentieth—is a fact which certainly cannot fail to strike the imagination as something extraordinary and difficult of belief. Such, however, is the case; and not only in the British Isles, but in all European countries, traces more or less distinct are found of those ancient cults which for unknown centuries preceded the introduction of Christianity.

We know as a historical fact that the early Church made continuous and strenuous efforts to erase these unholy beliefs from the people's minds, and penalised all practices which savoured in any way of paganism. But finding herself powerless to suppress them all by frontal attack, she strove to gain her object by, as it were, a flank movement, without sacrificing, however, any doctrine essential to the faith. Sacred fountains, lakes, and river-sources, objects of pagan worship and veneration, were transformed by her influence into Christian shrines. The commemoration of Christian saints and martyrs was substituted for the cult of the old deities, and Christian prayers and exercises supplanted idolatrous rites and sacrifices. For example, the pagan festival held in most, if not all, European countries at the Summer solstice, at which fires were lit, and cattle passed through or over them, was generally changed into one in honour of St. John the Baptist, but in some parts of France the cult was transferred to St. Cyr or some other saint. The difficulties of the Church in eradicating the long-ingrained habits of paganism were great, and often insurmountable, but its policy was always the same, and carried out with great tenacity and perseverance. Saint Gregory the First, surnamed the

Great (Pope 596—604), in one of his letters, shows very plainly the attitude of Christendom in his day towards Anglo-Saxon paganism :—

“When you shall come nigh our Brother Augustine,”* he writes, “tell him that, after having long considered the case of the English, I have come to the conclusion that not their temples but the idols within them should be thrown down. Let holy water be consecrated, their pagan sanctuaries sprinkled therewith, altars erected and relics placed in them; the temples, provided they are well built, should be transformed from the worship of demons to the service of the true God, in order that this nation, seeing that the places they are accustomed to are preserved, may come thither more willingly, and, because they are in the habit of slaughtering many oxen in sacrifice to the demons, let those solemn rites be performed proper to the consecration of churches or to the festivals of the martyrs. Let them decorate with foliage the temples transformed into churches and celebrate the festival with a moderate repast. Instead of sacrificing animals to the devil let them kill them for food, and return thanks to God who satisfies them, so that allowing them some palpable enjoyments one may instil into them more readily interior joys, for it is impossible to remove from dull minds all their habits at the one time. One does not mount a high place at a jump, one goes up step by step.”†

So much for the condition of things in Britain *circa* A.D. 600. Matters were no better on the continent. The councils and the bishops never let an opportunity pass without warning the people of the sinfulness of all practices savouring of paganism, and in this they were occasionally assisted by the secular powers. I cite the following examples :—

The council of Arles, 452; the council of Tours, 567; the Homilies of St. Eloi (Eligius), bishop of Noyon (*c.* 640—659); the Capitularies of Carloman, son of Charles Martel, 742; the council of Nantes (against menhir-worship), about the same year; the edicts of Charlemagne (742—814);‡ the council of Mayence, 743; the council of Aix-la-Chappelle, 816; the councils of Paris, 822 and 829; the Faculty of Theology, Paris, 1398; Rouen, 1445; the Provincial Council of Bourges, 1528; the Bishop of Valence, 1557; the synod of Chartres, 1559; the Provincial Council of Cambrai, 1565; the Provincial Councils of Rheims and Bordeaux, 1583.

To this list doubtless many other instances could be added, but enough has been quoted to prove how earnest were the powers, both lay

* This was Saint Augustine, the apostle of the Anglo-Saxons, first Archbishop of Canterbury, *circa*. 600. *Ob.* at Canterbury, 26th May, 604.

† Translation from the French of Mons. Alex. Bertrand, *La Religion des Gaulois*, p. 113.

‡ B x, 24.

and clerical, in endeavouring to eradicate all superstitions, and what a strong and firm hold these had on the masses.

The exact nature of these superstitions, survivals of ancient paganism, is very fully set out in one of the Homilies of St. Eloi* above-mentioned, on the authority of St. Ouen (Audoneus), who wrote his life, and the list is well worth quoting in full, for it shows unmistakably what a mass of pagan practices and beliefs had survived in France, and were in full swing, as late as the seventh century, and how far, perhaps, we have advanced since then—

“Above all things, my brethren, I warn and implore you not to observe any pagan customs, not to give heed to engravers of amulets, nor to soothsayers or enchanters, and not to consult them on any subject or malady whatsoever ; for he who commits this crime loses forthwith the grace of baptism. Do not observe omens, or sneezings, and when you shall be on a journey do not heed the song of certain birds, but whether you travel or do anything else, make on yourself the sign of the cross, and recite with faith and piety the Creed and Lord’s Prayer, and the enemy cannot hurt you.

“Let no Christian remark what day it is on which he leaves his house, nor on what day he returns, because God has made all the days. Do not take notice of the day of the moon when you are about to commence some business. Do not practice the sacreligious and ridiculous ceremonies which the pagans do on the Kalends of January, either with a heifer or with a fawn,† or by setting tables at night, or by giving new-year gifts, or by getting up superfluous entertainments. Let no one believe in bon-fires,‡ nor seat himself while singing, for all these practices are but works of the devil. Do not cease work at the solstices, and let none of you dance, jump, or sing diabolic songs on the day of the feast of St. John, nor on that of any other saint.

“Let none of you invoke the names of demons, nor those of false gods, nor have faith in such follies. Do not spend the Thursday§ in idleness, either during the month of May or any other time, at least when no feast falls on that day. Do not abstain from work except on Sunday. Do not carry torches to the temples of idols, to stones,|| to wells, to trees, or to cross-roads, and do not offer prayers at any of these places. Do not tie strings round the necks of women or beasts, even should you see a clergyman do the like, and a person should tell you that this practice is a holy one, and that it [the string] only holds words of scripture, because such a remedy does not come from Jesus Christ, but from the devil. Do not offer expiatory sacrifices ;¶ do not perform enchantments with herbs, and do

* Born near Limoges, the Roman Augustoritum, circa. 588.

† “*Soit avec une génisse, soit avec un fan*” (sic). Whether “fan” is an error for “faon” or not, a fawn is here meant.

‡ “*Bûchers.*”

§ *i.e.* “*Dies Iovis,*” “*Thor’s*” or “*Thunder’s*” Day.

|| *i.e.* to the *menhirs*.

¶ “*Ne faites point d’expiation.*”

not cause the flocks to pass through holed trees or into a hole in the ground,* inasmuch as this might look like consecrating them to the devil.

“Let no female hang amber round her neck, or invoke Minerva or any other such wretched being, either when sewing, or dyeing, or doing any other kind of work, but rather let her implore the grace of Jesus Christ in all her acts, and place all her confidence in the virtue of His name. Let no one shout when the moon is eclipsed, for it suffers eclipse at certain times by the command of God. Let no one make any difficulty about undertaking work at new moon, inasmuch as God created the moon to mark the time, and to moderate the darkness of night, not for the purpose of suspending work of any kind, nor to make men mad, as some fools imagine, in the idea they have that those who are possessed by devils are tormented by the moon.

“Let no one call the sun or moon, lord, nor swear by those two stars, † which are the creatures of God, and, as He has ordained, serve the necessities of men. . . . If any sickness should attack you have recourse neither to enchanters, nor to soothsayers, nor to engravers of amulets. Have nothing to do with wells, trees, or cross-roads, with the object of performing charms, but let him who is sick have confidence in the mercy of God alone.”

But old faiths die hard. The Church was successful in eradicating many of these beliefs altogether, but in some cases she failed, and was only able to divert the worship attached to them from a pagan to a Christian object, leaving a good deal of ungodly ancient ceremonial intact. Even yet she has only partially succeeded in her war with paganism, and the widespread education of modern times—although bringing in its train other evils peculiar to itself—appears to be the only power capable of totally eradicating these hoary superstitions. Some at least of those enumerated by St. Eloi were not of purely Celtic origin, but were the result of Greek, Latin and German influences. Many appear harmless enough to us, and his last words savour strongly of that modern fad, “Christian Science.” But in his day, I have no doubt, each and every one of them had a special pagan significance, well understood by his flock. Were the Saint a bishop nowadays in the west of Ireland, he might possibly add the following to his list, although, of course, the necessity for doing so is not now so pressing as in his time :—

(1) Let no one go before sunrise on May morning to his neighbour’s byre, and by milking his cows, or by other diabolical arts, try to take away his butter for the year, and increase the return from his own cows

* “*Dans la terre percée.*”

† Compare the death of king *Laeghaire Mac Neill*, in 458,—“and it was the sun and wind that killed him, because he had violated them,” that is, because he had sworn by those two things, or rather gods, and broken his oath. *Vide* A. iv. M. for that year.

in proportion. (2) Do not resort to certain lakes or wells before sunrise on that day to bring away "May-water," and do not compel your cattle to drink of, or swim in, the waters when suffering from murrain or any other disease, with a view of curing them. (3) Do not refuse the traveller a coal for his pipe on May-day, lest he take the luck of your house away. (4) Do not sacrifice a cock on St. Martin's Eve, nor a goose at Michaelmas. (5) Do not practice the melting of lead and pass the molten metal through the ring of a key into a basin of water on the eve of All Saints,* and by the shapes so produced attempt to tell your future fortune. (6) Do not attribute your neighbours prosperity to the fact that his wife gathers the cream off the pans in her dairy with a dead man's hand. (7) If an unfortunate man happens to lose his life by drowning, and his body cannot readily be found, do not believe that by getting a sheaf of straw blessed, and casting it into the current higher up, it will be arrested over the exact spot where the body lies.† (8) Do not be afraid to see the new moon for the first time through glass, lest it be a harbinger of ill luck, for such beliefs and practices are not of Christ, but come straight from the devil.

Owing to many causes it is difficult to find denunciations of magic by the saints, bishops, or councils of the Irish Church, but no doubt such were made. St. Patrick himself, if he really was the author of the hymn attributed to him, prayed to be protected from the "spells of women, of smiths, and of druids,"‡ and we know on the authority of *Cormac Mac Cuillenain*, King-bishop of Cashel (sl. 903), that the saint condemned the incantation called *Imbas Forosnai*, or "Illuminations by the palms of the hands," and "prohibited this ceremony because it is a species of *Teinm Laeghdha*; that is, he declared any one who performed it should have no place in heaven nor on earth."§

A rather interesting survival of a pagan cult, modified, yet ineffectually submerged by Christianity, may still be found in the superstitions attached to Lough Fergus (*recté* Forgas), a small and otherwise uninteresting-

* Corresponding in time of year to the pagan festival of *Damhain* among the Gaels.

† I knew this thing to be done in Ennis, in the year 1894, and was assured by one who ought to know (the drowned man's widow) that the operation was quite successful. It is in a way roughly scientific, and, although mixed with superstition, not altogether so ridiculous as at first sight may appear. Was this a survival of the *Dlui-fullon*, or "Fulla's wisp" of the Irish Druids? Vide O'Curry's *Man and Cust.*, vol ii, p. 203-4.

‡ Vide, Petrie's *Hist. and Ant. of Tara Hill. Trans. R.I.A., vol. xviii, p. 64.*

§ Cormac's Glossary.

looking lake, in the townland of Kylemore, parish of Kiltoraght, and barony of Corcomroe. It lies about three miles north-west of Wilbrook* railway station, on the left of the road leading from Ardrush to Ballinacarragh, on sheet 16, Ordnance Survey 6-inch map. The lough is at present only 5·163 statute acres in extent, but formerly was much larger, probably by four acres. Its present small size is due to the deepening in recent years of the small stream which issues from its eastern end. But although the lake does not possess any scenic beauty it is remarkable, besides the superstitions connected with it, as being the head source of the river Forgas (now Fergus), the name of which is undoubtedly derived from this lake. The only fish found in it are eels and an excellent breed of trout, speckled with numerous red spots, and marked by a reddish line along the sides, which, it is locally said, distinguish this from all other trout.

The religious cult of the lake, however, now chiefly concerns us, and in order to make no mistake, I have been careful to obtain information from reliable sources, among others from Mr. John McMahan, a most intelligent countryman, who dwells close to the lake.

Along its northern shore, in an irregular line, are twelve cairns or heaps of rough stones, of various sizes. On the principal cairn which is the eighth counting from the east, is a stone exactly shaped like a small chair, and another upright one which, by a stretch of imagination, might be called a cross. The total height of the "chair" is twenty-two inches, the part corresponding to the back is fourteen inches high, and the seat in height and width the same. The "cross" is three feet high, and fixed loosely in the cairn. These are the so-called "cross" and "chair" of St. Forgas, or Fergus. In a small niche, or canopy, formed by a single stone, somewhat in the shape of half a hollow pyramid, is a modern footy china statue. This image and its niche is usually placed in a recess in the cairn, with bits of iron, buttons, crockery, etc., but for the purpose of the photograph they were temporarily put on the top. All the stones, including the "chair," "cross," and niche, are of natural formation, showing no trace whatever of hammer or chisel, and their unusual shapes are altogether due to a certain peculiarity of fracture and to weathering by wind and water.

* The old and real name of Wilbrook is *Doire-teampuil*, the "Oak grove of the Church."

Sitting on the chair is said to be an excellent remedy for severe lumbago. "Rounds" are performed at the cairns on Sundays and Thursdays, as my informant said—"like at any other holy well." The *Creed* and *Lord's Prayer*, etc., are said, commencing at the cross and chair, and making the circuit of the other heaps of stones until the cross is reached again. There is no trace of a church anywhere in the neighbourhood, but three hundred yards south-west of the lake is a small "*Lisheen*," used for the burial of children until the last fifteen or twenty years, and where some adults were buried "in the bad times," that is, during the Great Famine.* There is, however, a holy well one-and-a-third miles to the south-west as the crow flies, and about one hundred and fifty yards west-south-west of the old church of Clooney, called *Tiobar-Londinn*. It is the general belief of the people that rounds performed at this well are not properly finished off until further rounds are made at Lough Forgas, and it is also said an underground passage connects the two.

But the water of the lake is the chief attraction at Lough Forgas. It is firmly believed by many of the people to possess healing properties of a very pronounced kind. It will not boil, and no person will ever be drowned in the lake. Before the place was drained, the supposed medicinal virtues of the water were frequently availed of for the cure of cattle, the *modus operandi* being as follows :—The sick beast was made to drink the water, and then was forced out into the lake beyond its depth, when, *if it swam to the right hand it was certain to be cured, but if it turned to the left it was a hopeless case, and would surely die.* Of late years, since the drainage, this ceremony could not be performed, because the margin of the lake became so soft, owing to the shrinkage of its area, that cattle could not walk on it without danger of being engulfed in the mud. The old people say, that about sixty or seventy years ago, a sick cow was put out to swim in order to be cured of some disease, when she sank under the water and disappeared from view. The owner gave her up for lost, and went home. Next morning, to the surprise of every one, she was found grazing on the other side of the lake, and in perfect health !

Every May morning, before sunrise, upwards of a hundred people come to the lake and bring away bottles of the water, which they call

* This *Lisheen* may have been a pagan cemetery or temple, perhaps, in pre-historic times.

May water, and keep it in their houses until the May-day following. It is believed to be a sovereign remedy for cattle who "take a worm," or who suffer from any other complaint. It is sprinkled on butter when in process of making, to ensure a successful churning. The water is also scattered on cabbages infested with the caterpillar, in order to kill it, for which purpose it is said to be very effectual.

What an extraordinary mixture of Christianity and pagan ritual. How are we to account for the blending? This much is certain, that two such opposite cults as paganism and Christianity could not have originated simultaneously, and this being admitted, the pagan must have preceded the Christian in order of time. May morning, before sunrise, being selected as the proper time to take away the water in order to be effective, and the turning of the cattle when about to be cured to the right, the course of the sun, point strongly to sun-worship of some kind or another. We also know that in ancient Greece, and among the Gauls—at least during the subjection of their country to the sway of Rome—the cult of Apollo was intimately connected with the cure of disease, and often associated with curative springs.

The Irish word for the first of May, *Beltine*, is said by Mons. D'Arbois de Jubainville to mean the feast of the God of the Dead,* and is derived according to him from the old Irish *epeltu*, "dead."† With all due respect to this great Celtic scholar, I venture to think that this derivation is by no means appropriate. Another Celtic scholar, just as great in his day, *Cormac Mac Cuillenain*, gives a very different explanation of the word:—

"*Beltine*, i.e. *Bil-tine*, i.e. lucky fire, i.e. two fires which used to be made by the law-givers or druids, with great incantations, and they used to drive the cattle between them, against the diseases of each year. Or *Beldine*; *Bel* was the name of an idol god. It was on it [i.e. on that day] that the firstling of every kind of cattle used to be exhibited as in the possession of *Bel*."—*Glossary of Cormac*.

The first day of summer, when all nature is bursting into new life, and the sun begins to assert his power in the heavens, is the very last which a primitive people would associate with death. The superstitions, also, connected with *Beltine* point very distinctly, not to decay, but to light and life renewed, the produce of the dairy, and the fruits of the

* *Ir. Myth. Cycle* (R. I. Best), p. 21.

† *Ibid note*, p. 136.

earth. It is peculiarly a time of hope and joy, and although I do not pretend to be a philologist, I am strongly inclined to think that *Cormac's* explanation is the nearer to the truth.

As for "St. Forgas," I have searched, as well as my opportunities permitted, for an ancient saint of that name, but failed to find him.* The fact of Lough Forgas being the prime source of the river Fergus, *rectè* Forgas,† and that both are identical in name with the supposed saint, incline me to the belief that "St. Forgas" is but a myth, an invention of late mediæval times. It is well-known that wells, fountains, rivers and lakes were among the antient pagans the objects of religious worship. Many examples could be quoted to show their association with gods and goddesses, and that they were often actually identified with the tutelary deities that presided over them.

It is well to note here that formerly in Ireland nearly every lake and river had its divinity, which popular tradition hands down to us as the *piast*, or monster, slain or put in chains at the bottom of the lough by St. Patrick, or some other saint.‡ A curious example of the cult of a lake in Gaul is given in the writings of St. Gregory, Bishop of Tours (ob. 594)§:—

"At the foot of Mount Helanus was a large lake|| to which the people of the neighbourhood resorted on certain days, with the object of making offerings to the divinity of the place, to whom as *libamina*, some offered, by throwing them into the lake, men's garments of linen and of cloth, and even whole fleeces; others cheeses, beeswax, loaves of bread, and a thousand other articles, each according to his means. These ceremonies were followed by the sacrifices of animals. It was the occasion of a *fête*. They brought into this place carts of provisions, during three days, which they spent entirely in good living. On the fourth, when everybody was about returning home, a furious storm never failed to arise, mingled with thunder and lightning, at the onset of which so much rain and stones fell that people despaired of their lives, and of their ever reaching home again. The peasants of the villages no longer continued to resort on said day to the brink of the lake, and to perform their impious ceremonies there, when [says

* There is, however, a *Kilfergus* in parish of Lough Hill, half a mile east of Glynn, Co. Limerick, but the two names are not, I think, identical.

† *Vide* A. iv. M., years 1564, 1573, 1600 and 1601.

‡ E.g. *Vide* account of the *Broic-sighe*, said to be slain by St. *Mac Creiche*, near the lake of Rath, not far from Corofin, in O'Curry's M. & C., vol. iii, p. 322; and Journ. R.A.S.I., Sept. 1899, p. 249. Compare also *Sil. Gad*, p. 519, and O'Curry's *Man. and Cust.*, vol. ii, p. 142 for origins of the rivers Boyne and Shannon.

§ This is another valuable extract from the admirable work of Mr. Alexander Bertrand before quoted, *La Religion des Gaulois*, p. 211.

|| The lake of *Saint Andréol*.

Gregory of Tours], a bishop of the country, inspired by God, took the notion of building a chapel on the margin of the lake to St. Hilaire of Poitiers, in which he deposited relics of that saint, saying to the people, 'Do not continue, my beloved children, to sin before the Lord. There is no virtue whatever in the lake which would warrant rites like these.' "

Something like this, I believe, must have happened once upon a time at Lough Forgas. The lake was in pre-Christian times the object of a pagan cult, and, in the Christian observances so inextricably interwoven therewith, we can recognise unmistakably an attempt, not altogether successful, of some early Christian whose name is now lost (except it be *Londann*, whose holy well is associated with the rounds at Lough Forgas), to Christianise the gross superstitions once practised there. Regarding the etymology of the word *Forgas*, I can offer no solution, except that it may be connected with the Irish word *forgo*, "a heifer," which, on account of the reputed power of the lake to cure the diseases of cattle, looks probable enough.

One word in justice to the people. Although they feel there is something uncanny in the practice of these *pishogues*, they are perfectly unconscious of doing anything connected with paganism and its rites. They believe certain things to be lucky, without knowing exactly why, and are positive that the cures are effectual.
