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# The Féine or Goidels.

By LIAM Ó BUACHALLA.

*Editor's Note*—The following article deals with the history of the early Goidels, in general, and was originally intended to serve as an introduction to a more detailed paper on the Érna Mumhan. Owing to the exigencies of space we are compelled to hold over Mr. Ó Buachalla's second contribution to the July–December issue of the *Journal*.

When records of historical events of this country were first committed to writing in the seventh and eighth centuries, the kingship was firmly in the hands of a ruling caste known as Goídil. The name by which this people-group was originally known was Féine, or Féni as it is written in the earliest manuscripts still extant, their laws and customs being known as Fénechas.

The term Féni survived longest in the legal language, in which it was used to designate the class of free landholders, for such the Goidels were in contradistinction to the older peoples whom they had subjugated. But while these latecomers called themselves “Féni,” the older non-Goidelic peoples called them “Goídil” and their language “Goídelg,” names which were probably of Welsh origin.<sup>1</sup> Likewise the twelfth century invaders of this country were by their own writers called “Francii” and “Angli,” but they were popularly known as Normans.

Many attempts have been made to explain the origin of the Féni or Goidels from the early compilers of the *Leabhar Gabhála* (who derived them from the “sons of Mil,” who after much travelling came to Ireland from Spain), to the latest study by Professor O’Rahilly,<sup>2</sup> which derives them from the Helvetian Gauls, who occupied what is now Switzerland and who in Caesar’s time were migrating to the west coast of Gaul.

Curiously enough, the most obvious starting point for the Goidelic migration to Ireland is all but overlooked. The north-west coast of Gaul facing towards Ireland and the Irish Sea was inhabited by seafaring tribes of Gauls, who must have been very thoroughly acquainted with the southern and eastern coasts of this country. In this connection it is interesting to note that in an early account of the coming of the Munster Goidels—the Eoghanachta of Cashel—which appears in a single MS. only,<sup>3</sup> we are told that the ancestor of that people-group—Eoghan Mór—came to Ireland with some followers in a trading vessel and obtained a settlement of lands here, apparently about 200 A.D. This account is carefully expurgated from all later histories of that sept; on the contrary, we are led to believe that the ancestors of the Eoghanachta were settled in this country since 1000 B.C., or even earlier.

Returning to the seafaring peoples of N.W. Gaul, Caesar, in his account of his Gaulish campaign, tells us that the leading people of this district

<sup>1</sup> See O’Rahilly, “The Goidels and their Predecessors,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXI (1935), 3–52.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Laud, 610, folio 97a.

was the Veneti and that they had 200 ships. This people-name survives as "Vannes," the name of a town on the west coast of Brittany. "The influence of this state," Caesar says, "is by far the most considerable of any on the whole sea coast, because the Veneti both have a great number of ships with which they have been accustomed to sail to Britain and thus excel the rest in their knowledge and experience of nautical affairs; and as only a few ports lie scattered along the stormy and open sea, of which they are in possession, they hold as tributaries all those who are accustomed to traffic in that sea."<sup>1</sup>

We are further told that when Caesar's forces prepared to attack them, the Veneti "send for auxiliaries from Britain, which is over against those regions"<sup>2</sup> This latter statement seems to imply that the Veneti had settlements on the British coast. On examining the early records of south and west Britain, we find an extensive area called Venedotia or Guenidotia<sup>3</sup>—the later form being Gwyned, that is, North Wales.

There is hardly a doubt but that the Venedotia were a section of the Venetian sea-traders. Directly across the Irish Sea, on the east coastal districts of this country, were located the Féni—"Féni" being probably the Irish equivalent of the Welsh "Venedotia" and Gaulish "Veneti." Whitley Stokes, in 1891, points out that the Irish "Féine" was probably a cognate of the Welsh "Gwyned" or Venedotia.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the Féni or Goidil were firmly established at both sides of the Irish Sea and that there was constant intercourse between both sections during the early centuries of the Christian era is borne out by many early authorities. For instance, in the glossary compiled by Cormac Mac Cuileinnáin, who was slain A.D. 908, we find the following entry:

Mug Éime—that is the name of the first lapdog that was in Ireland. Cairbre Musc, son of Conaire, brought it from the east from Britain; for when great was the power of the Gael in Britain, they divided Alba [*i.e.*, Britain] between them into districts, and each knew the residence of his friend, and not less did the Gael dwell on the east side of the sea quam in Scotia [*i.e.*, Ireland]. And their habitations and royal forts were built there. Inde dicitur *Dinn Tradui* [there is a fort called Dun Tradui], *i.e.*, Triple-fossed Fort, of Crimthann the Great, son of Fidach, king of Ireland and Alba to the Ictian sea... and it is in that part is *Dinn map Lethain* in the lands of the Cornish Britons, *i.e.*, the Fort of Mac Liathain, for *mac* is the same as *map* in the British. Thus every tribe divided on that side, for its property to the east was equal (to that on the west) and they continued in this power till long after the coming of Patrick.<sup>5</sup>

The Cairbre Musc, son of Conaire, mentioned above, was a poet of the Muscraighe, which, as will presently be shown, was one of the Féine septs on the Meath coast.

<sup>1</sup> *Gallic War*, III, Ch. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, Ch. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Vide, Fragments of Irish Annals* (Edited O'Donovan), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> *Vide*, "Etymology of Fian and Féine" in *The Academy*, February 16th, 1891.

<sup>5</sup> *Sanas Chormaic* (edited Stokes), 111.

It does not seem unlikely that the settlements of Féni on the Welsh-Cornish and Irish coasts were contemporaneous, or that this people spread from the Welsh-Cornish coast to Ireland, but some scholars think otherwise, as, for instance, Meyer, who says<sup>1</sup>: "whether we take history for our guide or native tradition or philology, we are led to no other conclusion than this: that no Gael ever set foot on British soil, save from a vessel that had put out from Ireland."

The power of the Goidels of the Welsh coastal regions came to an end in the middle of the fifth century when, as the *Historia Brittonum* relates, a chieftain named Cunedda and his sons (apparently Britons) coming from Manau Guotodin in the north drove out the Irish from the region of Guenidotia or North Wales, "so that they never returned to dwell there."

Which Irish septs were of the Féni or Goidil? It is evident that the term Féni, used as a people-name, became obsolete at a very early period. In existing MSS. its use as a people-name occurs only in a few instances in portion of the *Seanchus Mór*, and in a few of the early tales. Fortunately, these few references give much valuable information, especially that in the *Seanchus Mór*. It is probable that material preserved in the latter was more likely to be preserved intact than it would have been in the histories or tales.

In the *Seanchus Mór*<sup>2</sup> it is stated that at the time of certain incidents related therein (evidently the first two centuries of the Christian era), there were three *saerchlanna* or free-peoples in Ireland, viz.:—the Féine Temhrach, the Ulaid and the Gáileóin or Laighin. It further states that there was a conflict between the Féine themselves, i.e., "between Conn Cédchathach (also called Conn Céd-corach) and his brother Eochu Bélbhuidhe, son of Tuathal Techtmhar—Eochu being at the time a *Rí-chuiced* or provincial king. Eochu "after many depredations" was expelled by Conn and fled for protection to Fergus Mac Lédi, king of the Ulaid. Long afterwards Eochu set out to return to his tribe to demand justice, but was met by Asal, son of Conn, and a number of his followers, at Sliabh Fuaid and slain.<sup>3</sup>

From this passage we learn that the Goidels of Meath were originally known as the Féine Temhrach, i.e., the "Tara Féine," and that Conn Cédchathach and his people—the Connachta or Dál Chuinn—belonged to that group. The term "Féine of Tara" would also seem to imply that others, if not all, of the *saerchlanna* or free-peoples mentioned were of the Féine. In a gloss which appears further on in the same law-tract<sup>4</sup> the Érna Dedadh or Érainn are included among the free-peoples—"... the free peoples, i.e., the Ulaid and Féine Temhrach and Érna Dedadh, or the Ulaid and Gaileoin and Érna..." This alternative reading can, however, be reconciled with that already given, as the Féine Temhrach was not a single sept, but a composite group made up of a number of septs and portions of septs, located in different parts of Meath about the hill of Tara. A

<sup>1</sup> *Y Cymmrodor*, XIV (1901).

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, I, 64–81.

<sup>3</sup> This is the substance of the ancient story, "Oidheadh Chuinn Cédchathaigh," in *Book of Lecan*, 183v.

<sup>4</sup> *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, I, 80.

portion of the Érna or Érainn—a well-known people in early Irish history—was included in this Féine Temhrach group.

This is evident from the ancient tract, “De Maccaib Conaire,” in *Book of Leinster*, 292a, which contains one of the few references to the Féine, and which tells why Conaire Mór’s people—a portion of the Érna—migrated to Munster in the third century A.D. Following is an extract from this tale: “The three sons of Conaire at Temhair in the Féinne portion of territory, in the province of Cairbre Niafer. For these are the Féine peoples there: the Muscraighe and Dál Maitti and Coreu Duibni, and the Laighen from Buais to Commur-Tri-nUisce.” The Muscraighe and Corco Duibhne mentioned here, with the Dál Riada and Corco Baiscinn, were the Síl Chonaire Mhóir, which, as the genealogies indicate, was the most important branch of the Érna or Érainn in historical times. A portion of the Laighin or Leinstermen it will be noticed was also included in the Féine Temhrach group. Thus it is evident from the early sources so far quoted that the Dál Chuinn or Connachta, the Érna Dedadh and the Laighin were all of the Féine or Góidil.

This explains how Cairbre Niafer, king of Temhair (Tara) at the Táin period, was of Leinster stock. This has also led many historians to the conclusion that Meath was then portion of Laighin territory, which they identify with the “Laighin Tuathgabhair,” or North Leinster, of many early histories. It is evident, however, from all the references to Laighin Tuathgabhair given in the *Onomasticon* that it consisted of that part of Leinster territory immediately south of the Liffey and Rye rivers in the counties of Offaly, Kildare and Dublin.

We have so far seen that the Dál Chuinn, Érna, and Laighin were of the Féine: there is another point yet to be cleared—were the Ulaid, or Ulstermen, also of the Féine? By the Ulaid we mean the group or groups to whom that name originally belonged, as distinct from the Cruithni (or Picts) who after the eighth century are also called Ulaid. An examination of the earliest MS. sources reveals that the name was originally borne by the people of Emhain of the Táin period, that is, Conchobhar Mac Nessa and his kindred. It is this group which is referred to as Ulaid in the *Seanchus Mór* text quoted above. As all the other *saerchlanna* mentioned in that text were Féine, as has been shown above, it is only natural to conclude that the Ulaid of Emhain were also of the Féine. This view is further borne out by the Táin Bó Cuailnge, in which Cúchullain addresses his uncle and tutor—Conchobhar Mac Nessa—as “rí Féine,” and the noble youths of the Ulaid who practised their games at Emhain are “óac Féine.”<sup>1</sup>

This Emhain dynasty either became extinct shortly after the Táin period, or, what appears more likely, it was absorbed by the more dominant Cruithni or Picts of that district who were in possession of Emhain at the time of its destruction by the Three Collas about 350 A.D. At that time these Gaelicised Picts were driven into the present county of Down. The chief sept of that group was the Dál Araidi. In the early historical period the persons who bore the title “king of the Ulaid” belonged to a sept known as Dál Fiatach, who lived about Sliabh Breagh on the Meath–Louth border

<sup>1</sup> Vide, “How Cuchullain took Arms,” in *Mac Gnimrada Con Culainn*.

north of Slane, but who later were located on the coastal districts of Down. In the most ancient MS. sources, as for instance in early parts of *Annals of Ulster*, the Dál Fiatach are referred to as the Ulaid, in contradistinction to the Dál Araidi who are referred to as "Cruithne."<sup>1</sup> It is therefore probable that the Dál Fiatach also belonged to the original Ulaid of the Féine. It is a curious fact that this sept is in all the genealogies traced to an Érna ancestor.

A point to be noted concerning the Seanchus Mór lists of *saerchlanna* above, and which speaks well for their being genuine early tradition, is the fact that the Goidels of Munster—the Eoghanachta—are not included. In this matter they are in keeping with the early traditions, as expressed in the Ulidian Cycle, which goes to show that these Munster Goidels were comparatively late settlers. A further point to be noted is that the genealogical scheme concerning the Goidels drawn up by the later school of historians is in its main points in keeping with the accounts of the Féine quoted here. Thus, the Dál Chuinn, the Érna and the Laighin—the Goidels of Meath and Leinster—are assigned as ancestor Eireamhón son of Míl. The Ulaid genealogy is a composite one of Goidels and Cruithni, hence a separate ancestor—Ír, son of Míl—is supplied. Lastly, the Munster Goidels, being a separate and later settlement, are also assigned a separate ancestor—Eber, son of Míl. This latter group apparently belonged to that section of Goidels who in the early centuries of the Christian era were settled on the Welsh-Cornish coast, and who migrated to this country as a result of the gradual break-up of that settlement.

<sup>1</sup> See MacNeill, "Early Irish Population Groups," *P.R.I.A.*, XXIX (1911-12), 94-98.

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