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170

THE  
History and Topography  
OF  
IRELAND



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GERALD OF WALES

*Translated with an Introduction by  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

## INTRODUCTION

**G**IRALDUS DE BARRI, called Cambrensis from Cambria (Wales), the country of his birth, was born at the castle of Manorbier, in Pembrokeshire, about A.D. 1146. His father was William de Barri, whose ancestors had taken their name from the little island of Barri, off the coast of Glamorgan-shire. His mother was Angharad, daughter of Nest who was the celebrated mistress of Henry I and was described as the 'Helen of Wales'. Through her marriage with Gerald de Windsor, castellan of Pembroke, Nest had become the mother of the first members of the illustrious and powerful Norman family of the fitzGerald. Among her other children were David fitzGerald, later bishop of St David's, and Maurice fitzGerald, one of the principal leaders of the Norman invasion of Ireland. Here I describe no more of Giraldus' life and works than will provide a brief context for his *Topography of Ireland*.

Little is known of his early upbringing and education. Indeed J. S. Brewer in his introduction to the first volume of Giraldus' works (*Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, Rolls Series, 1861) is of the opinion that Giraldus could have got very little learning in Wales, either from the Welsh or the Normans there. But he does tell us himself in his *De Rebus* that he received the equivalent of a high-school education under Master Haimon at the Benedictine abbey of Gloucester. From the beginning he was drawn to literature and an ecclesiastical career. He went to Paris in 1162, where he may have been affected by the literary and artistic move-

- 49 ¶ *That a long time after the Flood and then not suddenly but gradually and as it were through inundation islands came to be*

WHETHER ISLANDS CAME TO BE before the Flood or because of the Flood, when all the parents of animals were enclosed in the ark, it is nevertheless very difficult to answer why harmful animals, and among them poisonous reptiles, came to fill the remoter islands. It is clear that no one in his senses would have brought them there. On this point we can say with some probability that it was long after the Flood, when the earth was already full everywhere of the animals that had multiplied, that the islands were formed, and then not suddenly, or violently, but gradually and as it were through inundation.

- 50 ¶ *Thule an island of the West very well known in the East but entirely unknown in the West*

REMARKABLE THING about Thule, which is said to be the farthest of the western islands, is that it is very well known among the eastern people both in name and for its nature, although it is entirely unknown to the people of the West. Solinus says<sup>29</sup> that it is the farthest island among the many around Britain. He says that there, during the summer solstice, there is no night, and, during the winter solstice, there is no day.

But whatever may be said of its name, it is quite clear that none of the western islands has such a nature. In the farthest parts, however, of the northern region, the sun turning round from Cancer seems to revolve around the edge of the earth, but over the horizon, for the space of a few nights. And when it is returning from the constellation of Capricorn, the brightness of its longed-for light disappears, as it were, beneath the dark limits of the Antarctic pole for the space of the same number of days.

- 51 ¶ *The Giants' Dance which was transferred from Ireland to Britain*

THERE WAS in ancient times in Ireland a remarkable pile of stones which was called the Giants' Dance, because giants brought it from the farthest limits of Africa to Ireland, and erected it, according to some on a mountain of Kildare,<sup>30</sup> according to others at Ophela near the castle of Nas, employing truly remarkable skill and ability. It is amazing how so many great stones were ever brought together or erected in one place, and with what skill upon such great and high stones others no less great were placed. These latter seem to be hanging, as it were, and suspended in space, so as to rest rather on the skill of the craftsmen than on the base of stones beneath.

According to British history,<sup>31</sup> the king of the Britons, Aurelius Ambrosius, arranged through the divine help of Merlin that these stones be brought over from Ireland to Britain. He got them put up in exactly the same order and with the same skill as before — so as to leave behind some memorial of a great crime committed when the flower of Britain's manhood was cut to pieces by the concealed daggers of the Saxons, who, coming in the guise of peace with the weapons of treachery, killed the youth of the kingdom that had been so carelessly guarded.

- 52 ¶ *The wonderful happenings of our own time; and first about a wolf that talked with a priest*

AND NOW WE SHALL GIVE some account of the things that occurred in our own time and seem worthy of wonder.

About three years before the coming of Lord John into Ireland,<sup>32</sup> it happened that a priest, journeying from Ulster towards Meath, spent the night in a wood on the borders of Meath. He was staying up beside a fire which he had prepared for himself under the leafy branches of a tree,

and had for company only a little boy, when a wolf came up to them and immediately broke into these words: 'Do not be afraid! Do not fear! Do not worry! There is nothing to fear!'

They were completely astounded and in great consternation. The wolf then said some things about God that seemed reasonable. The priest called on him and adjured him by the omnipotent God and faith in the Trinity not to harm them and to tell them what kind of creature he was, who, although in the form of a beast, could speak human words. The wolf gave a Catholic answer in all things and at length added:

'We are natives of Ossory. From there every seven years, because of the imprecation of a certain saint, namely the abbot Natalis, two persons, a man and a woman, are compelled to go into exile not only from their territory but also from their bodily shape. They put off the form of man completely and put on the form of wolf. When the seven years are up, and if they have survived, two others take their place in the same way, and the first pair return to their former country and nature.'

'My companion in this pilgrimage is not far from here and is seriously ill. Please give her in her last hour the solace of the priesthood in bringing to her the revelation of the divine mercy.'

This is what he said, and the priest, full of fear, followed him as he went before him to a certain tree not far away. In the hollow of the tree the priest saw a she-wolf groaning and grieving like a human being, even though her appear-



ance was that of a beast. As soon as she saw him she welcomed him in a human way, and then gave thanks also



to God that in her last hour he had granted her such consolation. She then received from the hands of the priest all the last rites duly performed up to the last communion. This too she eagerly requested, and implored him to complete his good act by giving her the viaticum. The priest insisted that he did not have it with him, but the wolf, who in the meantime had gone a little distance away, came back again and pointed out to him a little wallet, containing a manual and some consecrated hosts, which the priest according to the custom of his country carried about with him, hanging from his neck, on his travels. He begged him not to deny to them in any way the gift and help of God, destined for their aid by divine providence. To remove all doubt he pulled all the skin off the she-wolf from the head down to the navel, folding it back with his paw as if it were a hand. And immediately the shape of an old woman, clear to be seen, appeared. At that, the priest, more through terror than reason, communicated her as she had earnestly

demanded, and she then devoutly received the sacrament. Afterwards the skin which had been removed by the he-wolf resumed its former position.

When all this had taken place – more in equity than with proper procedure – the wolf showed himself to them to be a man rather than a beast. He shared the fire with them during the whole of the night, and when morning came he led them over a great distance of the wood, and showed them the surest way on their journey. When they parted he gave many thanks to the priest for the benefit he had conferred upon him, and promised to give him much more tangible evidence of his gratitude, if the Lord should call him back from the exile in which he was, and of which he had now completed two thirds.

Almost two years later I happened to be passing through Meath where the bishop of that region had called a synod. He had also summoned the neighbouring bishops and abbots so that, advised by their counsel, he might more clearly see what he should do in the matter recounted and which he had learned on the confession of the priest. When he heard that I was going through those parts, he sent two of his clerics to me, asking me to come in person, if I could, to discuss so serious a matter. If, however, I could not come, I was at least to indicate my view in writing. When I had heard the whole account (which I had, as a matter of fact, heard already from others) in due order from them, and since I could not be present because of urgent business, I gave them the benefit at least of my advice in writing. The bishop and synod agreed with it, and sent the priest to the Pope with his documents, in which were given an account of the affair and the priest's confession, and which were sealed with the seals of the bishops and abbots that were present.

53 ¶ *A woman with a beard and a mane on her back*

**D**UVENALDUS, the king of Limerick, had a woman that had a beard down to her waist. She had also a crest

from her neck down along her spine, like a one-year-old foal. It was covered with hair.

This woman in spite of these two enormities was, nevertheless, not hermaphrodite, and was in other respects sufficiently feminine. She followed the court wherever it went, provoking laughs as well as wonder. She followed neither fatherland nor nature in having a hairy spine; but in wearing her beard long, she was following the custom of her fatherland, not of her nature.



54 ¶ *A man that was half an ox and an ox that was half a man*

**I**N THE NEIGHBOURHOOD of Wicklow at the time when Maurice fitzGerald got possession of that country and the castle,<sup>33</sup> an extraordinary man was seen – if indeed it be right to call him a man. He had all the parts of the human body except the extremities which were those of an ox. From the joinings of the hands with the arms and the feet with the legs, he had hooves the same as an ox. He had no hair on his head, but was disfigured with baldness both in front and behind. Here and there he had a little down instead of hair. His eyes were huge and were like those of an ox both in colour, and in being round. His face was flat as far as his mouth. Instead of a nose he had two holes to act as nostrils, but no protuberance. He could not speak at all; he could only low. He attended the court of Maurice for a long time. He came to dinner every day and, using his cleft hooves as hands, placed in his mouth whatever was

given to him to eat. The Irish natives of the place, because the youths of the castle often taunted them with begetting such beings on cows, secretly killed him in the end in envy and malice – a fate which he did not deserve.

Shortly before the coming of the English into the island a cow from a man's intercourse

with her – a particular vice of that people – gave

birth to a man-calf in the mountains around

Glendalough. From this you may believe that

once again a man that was half an ox, and

an ox that was half a man<sup>34</sup> was produced.

It spent nearly a year with the other calves following its

mother and feeding on her milk, and then, because

it had more of the man than the beast, was transferred to the society of men.



55 ¶ *A cow that was partly a stag*

NEAR CHESTER in Britain a cow that was partly a stag was born in our time from the intercourse of a stag

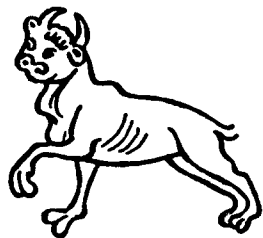
with a cow. All the fore parts as far as the groin were bovine,

but the thighs and the tail, the hind legs and the feet, were

clearly those of a stag, especially in quality and colour of hair.

But since it was more

of a cow than a wild animal it stayed with the herd.



56 ¶ *A goat that had intercourse with a woman*

ROTHERICUS, king of Connacht, had a tame white goat that was remarkable of its kind for the length of its coat and height of its horns. This goat had bestial intercourse with a certain woman to whom he was entrusted.

The wretched woman, proving herself more a beast in accepting him than he did in acting, even submitted herself to his abuse.

How unworthy and unspeakable! How reason succumbs so outrageously to sensuality! That the lord of the brutes, losing the privileges of his high estate, should descend to the level of the brutes, when the rational submits itself to such shameful commerce with a brute animal!

Although the matter was detestable on both sides and abominable, yet was it less so by far on the side of the brute who is subject to rational beings in all things, and because he was a brute and prepared to obey by very nature. He was, nevertheless, created not for abuse but for proper use. Perhaps we might say that nature makes known her indignation and repudiation of the act in verse:

Only novelty pleases now: new pleasure is welcome;

Natural love is outworn

Nature pleases less than art; reason, no longer reasoning,

Sinks in shame.



57 ¶ *A lion that loved a woman*

ISAW IN PARIS a lion which a cardinal had given when it was a whelp to Philip the son of Louis, then a boy. This lion used to make beastly love to a foolish woman called

Johanna. Sometimes when he escaped from his cage and was in such fierce anger that no one would dare to go near him, they would send for Johanna who would calm his anger and great rage immediately. Soothing him with a woman's tricks, she led him wherever she wanted and changed all his fury immediately into love.

O Beasts! Both! Worthy of a shameful death! But such crimes have been attempted not only in modern times but also in antiquity, which is praised for its greater innocence and simplicity. The ancients also were stained with such unspeakable deeds. And so it is written in Leviticus: 'If a woman approaches any beast to have intercourse with him, ye shall kill the woman, and let the beast die the death.'<sup>35</sup>

The beast is ordered to be killed, not for the guilt, from which he is excused as being a beast, but to make the remembrance of the act a deterrent, calling to mind the terrible deed.

58 ¶ *How the cocks in Ireland crow differently from those in other countries*

DOMESTIC COCKS do not here, as elsewhere, distinguish the third and last part of the night from the two preceding by crowing three times at intervals. They are heard here rarely before daylight; and as elsewhere the day is known to be at hand from the third, so here it is known from the first crowing of the cock. Nevertheless it is not to be thought that the cocks have here a different nature from those of other places. For if they are brought here from



outside they crow the same as the others here. But as Britain is content with a short night, so too is Ireland, and in fact it is shorter here, since Ireland is nearer the setting of the sun. And therefore, by how much shorter the night is here, so is the day nearer at hand after the crowing of the cock. Consequently during the summer-time the heavens above the horizon are always bright all night long from the brightness of the sun which scarcely dips under the land. One would think it was daylight with the dawn coming up.

59 ¶ *Wolves that whelp in December*

WOLVES IN IRELAND generally have their young in December, either because of the extreme mildness of the climate, or rather as a symbol of the evils of treachery and plunder which here blossom before their season.

60 ¶ *Ravens and owls that have their young about Christmas-time*

ABOUT CHRISTMAS-TIME of the year when Lord John first left the island,<sup>36</sup> ravens and owls in many parts of the country had their young. Perhaps they foretold the occurrence of some new and premature evil.

61 ¶ *About miracles; and first about the fruit<sup>37</sup> and ravens and blackbird of Saint Kevin*

NOW LET US COME to miracles, and let us begin with Saint Kevin, a great confessor of the Faith, and abbot. At the time when Saint Kevin was distinguished for his life and sanctity at Glendalough, a noble boy, who was a student of his, happened to be sick and to ask for fruit. The saint had pity on him and prayed for him to the Lord. Whereupon a willow-tree not far from the church brought forth fruit that was health-giving to the boy and to others