

The Bardic Families of Ireland

by

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Education in Ireland has a long and fascinating history. Ever since the days of the druids and ancient poets Irish people have had a deep regard for learning. So much so, that when the monastic schools were at the height of their fame here in the 7th and 8th centuries students came from far and wide to be educated in this country. Among them were a future king of France and a future king of England. Some of the foreign students were even provided with free accommodation and free books! This age of the monastic schools has often been referred to as Ireland's Golden Age of Saints and Scholars. However, neither sanctity nor scholarship are the prerogative of any one age and our possession of a vast amount of historical and other information today is due to the labours of successive generations of Irish scholars down through the centuries. Of course, there were many changes that occurred during the passage of time.

Annals

The monastic scholars developed a method of recording historical information called Annals. These were descriptions of noteworthy events recorded in manuscripts under the year in which they occurred. The first contemporary records of this type have been traced back to the sixth century, although they also embody even older material. These ancient documents record the changes that happened in Irish society. One change that occurred was that the monastic schools ceased to function as centres of secular learning and their place was gradually taken over by learned families who specialised in a particular type of education.

Surnames

The annals record a continuous process of evolution and development among Irish learned families. They first appear in succession to the poets, taking on some of the educational functions of the monastic schools. This process came about as a result of the widespread religious reform of the monasteries in the 12th century. This century was a time of particularly dramatic social change in Irish history. Political events were only one facet and in Ireland today we can trace at least two social structures directly back to the developments that occurred then. One of these is the organisation of the church into dioceses and parishes. The other is the use of Surnames. Irish surnames can generally be traced back as far as the 10th century, although some of their genealogical descents can go much further back in history. In general, a surname beginning with O' is older than one beginning with Mac. Very often an O' surname dates to the 10th century, and a Mac surname to the 12th century.

Bardic Families

Following the changes in the monasteries many schools came to be run by particular families who were associated with certain areas of education. The schools run by such families developed into a remarkably uniform educational system without having any centralized administration. They were the equivalent of a university and provided a pool of talent consisting of educated scribes and bards (poets). For this reason the families that ran these schools came to be called Bardic Families.

The bardic families and their schools became one of the mainstays of Irish society and used a standard formal language to unite both Gaelic-speaking Scots and Irish in one cultural area. Their schools were what formed and maintained the classical period of Irish literature for half a millenium from about 1150 to about 1650. They provided their patrons with advisors, ambassadors, clerks, lawyers and counsellors and no ruling family could afford to be without the service of at least one bardic family for very long.

Specialist Areas

The complete list of surnames of bardic families can be roughly classified on the basis of the subject-areas most commonly associated with each of them. Thus there were approximately 40% poets, 30% doctors, 20% historians, 8% lawyers and 2% musicians. The main areas of study in their schools were Filfocht (poetry), Seanchas (history), Féineachas (law), and Leigheas (medicine). Ceol (music) was practised as a speciality by only a few families. Bardic families tended to specialize in one area although several of the wealthier families and some individuals became expert in more. The Mac Fírbis family specialised in the study of Seanchas or history, although they were also interested in other areas of endeavour e.g. poetry and law. As well as being known for their expertise in areas such as law and history the family of Mac Egan were noted for their musical skills. Some of them also established a reputation for their poetry. However, they became particularly famous for their skill as lawyers or brehons, specialising in the Féineachas or brehon law. The Mac Eigans, like the O'Daly poets, became spectacularly successful in their chosen subject area and spread out all over Ireland.

List of Names

The following is a list of many of the bardic families and is based on that given by Duaid Mac Fírbis in his work "Údair Éireann" (Irish Authors, 1657). The names are grouped under the subject areas most closely associated with each particular family and an English version of each name is also given. Further names are added from the sources cited and the date of earliest reference to each family is given where possible. Also listed are the counties where they usually lived or originated.

English Description

A description in English of the bardic system survives from the year 1561. It gives us a picture of an Ireland densely wooded and dangerous for English settlers with an incessant guerilla warfare. It starts off by describing

"The **Brehon**, which in English is called the judge; and before they will give judgement, they will have pawns (pledges) of both the parties,....and then they will give judgement according to their own discretions. These men are neutral, and the Irishmen will not prey on them. They have great plenty of cattle, and they harbour many vagabonds and idle persons....

The **Seanchaí** (Historian), which is to say in English, the Pedigreeer, they have great plenty of cattle, wherewithal they do succour the rebels. They make the ignorant men of the country to believe that they be descended of Alexander the Great, or of Darius, or of Caesar, or of some other notable Prince; which makes the ignorant people to run mad, and care not what they do; the which is very hurtful to the Realm.

The **Aos Dána**, which is to say in English, the bards or the rhyming septs (poetic families), these people be very hurtful to the commonwealth, for they chiefly maintain the rebels.....

Their first practise is, if they see any young man descended from the families of O's and Mac's, who has half a dozen men about him, they will make him a rhyme (poem) wherein they will commend his fathers and his ancestors.... and in the end they will compare him to Hannibal or Scipio or Hercules, or some other famous person; wherewithal the poor fool runs mad and thinks indeed it is so. Then will he gather a rabble of rakehells to him and he must also get a **Prophet**, who shall tell him how he shall speed, as he thinks. Then will he get him lurking to a side of a wood and there he keeps himself close until morning; and when it is daylight they will go to the poor villages not sparing to destroy young infants, aged people; and if the women be ever so great with child, her they will kill, burning the houses and corn and ransacking of the poor cottages. They will drive all the cattle and plough horses, with all other animals and drive them away. Then must they have a **bagpipe** blowing before them.... and when he is in a safe place they will fall to the division of the spoil, according to the discretion of the captain. And the **messengers** that go on their errands claim the guts for their parcel - because it is an ancient custom they will not break it.

Now comes the **Rhymer** that made the rhyme, with his **Reacaire** (Reciter). The Reacaire is he that shall utter the rhyme; and the Rhymer himself sits by with the captain very proudly. He brings with him also his **Harper**, who plays all the while that the Reacaire sings the rhyme. Also he has his **Bard**, which is a kind of foolish fellow, who must also have a horse given him; the Harper must have a new saffron shirt and a mantle (cloak) and a hackney (horse); and the Reacaire must have twenty or thirty cattle. And the Rhymer himself a horse and harness, with a nag to ride on, a silver goblet, a pair of beads of coral, with buttons of silver.... (Another) sort of rhymers is called **Fili**, which is to say in English, a poet. These men have great store of cattle and use all the trades of the others (Brehon, Seanchai, Aos Dána), with an addition of prophecies. These are great maintainers of witches and other vile matters; to the great blasphemy of God and to great impoverishing of the commonwealth".

Honour and Patronage

These bardic families depended on a system of patronage for their support. This means that for each of the families listed there was at least one other family associated with them as their chief patron. This system was a peculiarly Irish phenomenon that had its roots far back in our Celtic past. It was an important concept of the ancient Celts and of the Irish that a man's name or honour was of great significance and that, whatever happened, his name should be remembered after his death. This idea was the mainstay of thousands of poets and scholars whose main source of income and support for hundreds of years was closely bound up with the production of what can only be described as propaganda. It is because of this that we know so much of ancient Irish history today.

Final Decay and Salvage

The bardic system reached the peak of its development in the period from the mid-14th to the mid-16th centuries. From then on, however, it declined in response to the expansion of English Government power in Ireland. A revival at the end of the 16th century was cut short by a catastrophic military defeat at Kinsale which marked the advent of ruin and hardship to patron and scholar alike. The very fabric of the old Irish society was falling apart. The Government recognized the important role of the bardic scholars in that society and made a determined effort to suppress them, especially the poets. The poets attempted to revive a dispirited nation with their elaborate 'dispute' or contention during the years 1616-1624, but it was too late and Gaelic Ireland was already crumbling into decay. Attempts were made to halt the process but by the time the wars of the mid-17th century were over a new era was beginning. The work of many of the 17th century scholars consisted essentially of salvage operations. They did their utmost to save for us their descendants and for posterity all that remained of their ancient heritage.

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