

WOMEN IN ANCIENT IRELAND

(By CHARLES O'FARREL, in *Irish World*.)

We know that with the introduction of chivalry the position of women underwent a distinct change for the better.

In Ireland, the position of women even from the earliest times, seems to have been comparatively good. They were never the drudges or mere chattels of their lord and master. True what was considered the lowliest work of all, that of grinding corn, was performed by the women slaves, or bond women; but then, on the other hand, they took part in the government and the learned professions.

Women took an active part in warfare—the schools of the Amazons Aiofe and Scathach in Scotland were famous, and those champions who wished to excel all others went to study under these female warriors. We read that the mother of King Conorma Nessa was a woman warrior and wandered through Ireland executing deeds of valor, and queens frequently went into battle beside their husbands.

This practice lasted down even as late as the 7th century, when St. Adamnan put an end to compulsory military service for women. He was travelling one day and carrying his mother on his back when they came across two armies fighting, near them were two women belaboring each other with reaping hooks. The saint's mother was so shocked that she slid to the ground and made her son promise before they moved another step that he would do his utmost to redress this evil.

A thing that points to the fact that women were held in esteem is that in all families except those of the very poor the best part of the house was set apart for the women. It was called the "Grianan," which means "Sunny Chamber," Grian being the Irish for sun. Here the women lived, worked, or studied, and here the men came to visit the ladies when they were weary of their stiff rooms, and here they played chess and enjoyed music. The Grianans were made as pretty and bright as possible, they were frequently thatched with birds' feathers, sometimes entirely white, but that was according to individual taste. In the description of the beautiful Grianan built by Cairbre, King of Kerry, for his daughter Crede, we read that it had green door posts and a carved silver lintel. The thatch was brown and crimson, and the porch was thatched with birds' feathers, beautifully arranged in stripes of blue and yellow. The Grianans were not only artistic outside, but inside they were hung with beautifully embroidered hangings, and there were couches inlaid with silver and gold, and cushions with beautiful covers.

Such were the surroundings in which the women of ancient Ireland lived and moved, and from such we may be able to estimate the position of women before the dawn of the golden age of Ireland.

In the absence of alarm clocks the girls of that period were awakened in the mornings by a woman servant playing sweet music, similarly at night she was lulled to sleep by the music of slumber.

Like the women of Greece they took great care of their personal appearance, and were renowned for their beautiful hair which they usually wore in two or more long plaits. These plaits were not confined by a ribbon, but by a flexible gold ornament, many examples of which may be seen in the Dublin Museum.

Women also wore a gold ornament on their head called a "mind," and we have remaining to us many specimens of collars, bracelets, waist ornaments, etc. One hears little nowadays of any but the Tara Brooch, whereas there were at least 15 different types of brooch. These were worn by both men and women to keep the cloak in place.

Even in those days Ireland was famous for fine linen, and it was largely employed for wearing apparel. The women wore a loose overdress of the Princess style of fine wool or silk, richly embroidered and fastened on the left side by eyelet holes and a lace, buttons and pressions being as yet unknown. The dress was confined at the waist by a hoop of twisted gold, or a belt

of leather often richly chased and studded with stones. Over this was worn a cloak richly embroidered, or trimmed with fur or perhaps entirely of skins. On their feet they wore sandals or shoes of fine leather. A king in one place was described as wearing "two shoes of net work of gold with golden buckles."

Even the men deemed it a disgrace to have red hands and unkempt nails, and there were skilled manicurists among the women servants. Deirdre lamenting for her dead husband, says:

"I sleep no more, no more do I crimson my nails, no more shall joy come into my mind."

As in this instance our knowledge of the ways and habits of the women of ancient Ireland is not mere surmise, it is gathered from the old manuscripts. The bards were often very exact in their details, and when they were describing a feast or a meeting between two chiefs, they would describe what the king wore and what the queen wore as if they were writing for a society paper, and it is thanks to them that we can now construct for ourselves an accurate picture of those times.

Here is a description from an old tale of the Princess Etain: "She stood on the edge of the well combing her hair with a bright comb of silver adorned with gold. The hue of her hair was like that red gold after burnishing. It was plaited in two locks and a bead at the point of each lock. She wore a mantle folded and purple, and in the mantle silver fringes arranged and a brooch of the finest gold. A kirtle long and hooded of green silk with red embroidery of gold was seen beneath it. Marvellous clasps of gold and silver in the kirtle on the breast."

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