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The Lost Irish Tribes In the South

Noted American Writer Delved Into History and Found
that Dixie Wasn't as Anglo-Saxon as It Thought

By IRVIN S. COBB

An Address delivered before the American Irish Historical
Society of New York two years ago, which is now
attracting countrywide attention

Irish National Bureau, Washington, D. C.

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THE FIRST WISH TRIP IN THE SOUTH
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THE LOST IRISH TRIBES IN THE SOUTH

By IRVIN S. COBB

MR. PRESIDENT, AND LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: I am speaking but the plain truth when I tell you that I would rather be here tonight facing an assemblage of men and women of Irish blood and Irish breeding than in any other banquet hall on earth. For I am one who is Irish and didn't know it; but now that I do know it, I am prouder of that fact than of any other thing on earth except that I am an American citizen.

I wonder if it ever occurred to you what differences are to be found in many a country and in almost any country, between the temperaments and the spirits and the customs of those who live in the North of it and those who live in the South of it? To the North, to Prussia, the German Empire has always looked for its great scientists and its great mathematicians and its propounders and expounders of a certain cool and analytical philosophy; but it was to the South, to Bavaria and to Saxony, that Germany had to turn for its poets and its story-tellers.

It was the North of France that produced and yet produces those men who have harnessed the forces of nature, who have made the earth tremble to the pulse-beat of their factories, who took the ore from the earth and the coal from the hillsides, and with them wrought out the great steel industries of that country; but it was out of the South of France that there came its marvelous fiction writers and minstrel-bards, its greatest poets and its greatest dreamers; and out of that same South once upon a time there came, too, a fiery outpouring of shock-headed men and women who wore wooden shoes on their feet and red caps on their heads and who marched to the words of a song which has become the fighting song of every nation, craving liberty and daring to march and to die for it—the "Marseillaise Hymn." (Applause.)

The names of the Poid Milanaise and the Lombards and the Venetians of Northern Italy are synonymous with frugality in domestic affairs and energy in commercial pursuits, but it is down in the tip of the toe of the Latin boot that we find the Italian who loves the hardest and sings the loudest and fights for the very love of the fighting.

The North of Ireland, as we all know, has fathered the great business men of that little island, and the great manufacturers and the great theologians, many of them; and, regretful to say, it has also produced a spawn of human beings who, in the face of the fact that in every other land where men have equal opportunities, the Irishman has won his way to the front and has held his own with prince and potentate, yet cling to the theory that in Ireland, of all the spots of the world, the Irishman is not capable of governing himself. But it was to the South of Ireland, and it is to the South of Ireland today, that one must turn to find the dreamer and the writer, the idealist and the poet. It is to the South of Ireland also that one must turn to seek for a people whose literature and whose traditions are saddened by the memory of the wrongs they have withstood and the persecutions they have endured and still endure, and yet whose spirits and whose characters are uplifted and sanctified by that happy optimism which seems everywhere on this footstool to be the heritage of the true Southerner. (Applause.)

In a measure these same things are true of our own country. The North excels in business, but the South leads in romance. The North opens wide the door of opportunity to every man who comes to its borders with willing hands and eager brain, and commands him to get busy. The South opens a door, too, but it is the door of hospitality, and it bids the stranger enter in, not so

much for what he can give, but for what he can take in the way of welcome. I think there is a reason, aside from topography and geography and climate and environment, for these differences between the common divisions of our great country. And I am going to come to that reason in a minute.

As a boy, down South, there were two songs that stirred me as no other songs could—one was a song that I loved and one a song that I hated, and one of these songs was the battle hymn of the South, "Dixie-land," and the other was "Marching Through Georgia." But once upon a time when I was half grown, a wandering piper came to the town where I lived, a man who spoke with a brogue and played with one. And he carried under his arm a wierd contraption which to me seemed to be a compound of two fishing poles stuck in a hot-water bottle, and he snuggled it to his breast and it squawked out its ecstasy, and then he played on it a tune called "Garryowen." And as he played it, I found that my toes tingled inside my shoes, and my heart throbbed as I thought it could only throb to the air of "Dixie." And I took counsel with myself and I said, "Why is it that I who call myself a pure Anglo-Saxon should be thrilled by an Irish air?" So I set out to determine the reason for it. And this is the kind of Anglo-Saxon I found out I was:

My mother was of the strain, the breed of Black Douglas of Scotland, as Scotch as haggis, and rebels, all of them, descendants of men who followed the fortunes of Bonnie Prince Charles, and her mother lived in a county in North Carolina, one of five counties where up to 1820, Gaelic was not only the language of the people in the street, but was the official language of the courts. It was in that selfsame part of North Carolina that there lived some of the men who, nearly a year before our Declaration of Independence was drawn up, wrote and signed the Mecklenburg Declaration, which was the first battle cry raised for American independence. On the other side, I found, by investigation, that my father's line ran back straight and unbroken to a thatched cottage on the green side of a hill in the Wicklow Mountains, and his people likewise had some kinsmen in Galway, and some in Dublin, with

whom, following the quaint custom of their land, they were accustomed to take tea and fight afterwards. (Applause and laughter.) I found I had a collateral ancestor who was out with the pikes in the Rebellion of '98, and he was taken prisoner and tried for high crimes and misdemeanors against the British Government, and was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead and might God have mercy on his soul! And he was hanged by the neck until he was dead, and I am sure God did have mercy on his soul, for that soul of his went marching on, transmitting to his people, of whom I am proud to be one, the desire to rebel against oppression and tyranny. (Applause.) I had three great grandfathers, two of them Irish and one of them Scotch, who were Revolutionary soldiers, and I had a father who was a Confederate soldier. And of these facts, too, I am quite proud, for I find that my strain, being Irish, is always intent either on trying to run the government or trying to pull it down.

You Irish-descended people of the Northern States are proud of Shields, the Irish emigrant, who, if my memory serves me aright, helped to direct the destinies of three American commonwealths and was United States Senator from all three. But I like to think of another Irishman, Matthew Lyon by name, an humble Wicklow peasant, who was sold as a slave to the New England plantations because he, an Episcopalian, dared to raise his voice and arm in defense of the rights of his Catholic neighbors and kinsmen in the County of Wicklow; and he bought his freedom with a black bull, which, according to family tradition, he first stole, and he became a United States Senator from Vermont and cast the vote, against the wishes of his constituents, which made Thomas Jefferson President of this country over Aaron Burr, and by so doing altered the entire course of our country's history; and while he was in jail in a town in Vermont for his attacks on the odious alien and sedition laws, he issued a challenge for a duel to the President of the United States, and, being released, he moved down to Kentucky and became a Congressman; and later, having quarreled with all his neighbors there, he moved on to Arkansas and was named as Arkansas' first territorial

delegate to Washington, and he might have moved still farther west and might have filled still more offices had he not in the fullest of his maturity, when he was 70 years young, been thrown from a mule and had his neck broken. I like to think of Matthew Lyon and his career because he, also, was an ancestor of mine. (Applause and laughter.)

Well, as I said a bit ago, I set out to trace my Irish ancestry. In that undertaking I found a ready helper in a distant kinsman who was not carried away by the fetish that the South was all Anglo-Saxon, whatever that is; and he worked me early and late on family records. Indeed, he worked me so hard that sometimes I think I might have likened my position to that of a colored brother in a little town in my State who was the only member of his race at the local election who voted the Democratic ticket. It was felt that such loyalty should be rewarded, so the incoming administration created a Department of Street Cleaning—an institution hitherto unknown in that community—to consist of a boss or foreman, and a staff. Quite naturally, the job of foreman went to a white man, but upon the worthy colored person was conferred the honor of being the staff. Now, he held to the theory, common even among those of the more enlightened races, that a political office meant much honor and much pay but mighty little work. Nevertheless, as a matter of form he carried a shovel with him on the morning when he reported for service. But the white man who was to serve over him had very different ideas regarding the obligation owing to the municipality. No sooner had the darkey cleaned up one pile of debris than the foreman would find another and yet another for him to wrestle with. It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon before the darkey so much as straightened his back or wiped the sweat off his brow or blew on the new-formed blisters in the palms of his hands. Finally he said: "Boss, ain't you got nuthin' to do but jes' to think up things fur me to do?"

"Yes," the white man said: "that's all my job—just to keep you busy."

The darkey said: "Well, suh, in that case you will be pleased to know you ain't goin' to be workin' tomorrow." (Laughter.)

But I kept on working, and I discovered a lot of things about the lost tribes of the Irish in the South. The State of Kentucky, from which I hail, has been called the cradle of the Anglo-Saxon race in America, and it has been said that the mountaineers of that State, with their feuds and their Elizabethan, Chaucerian methods of speech, represent the purest strains of English blood to be found today on this continent. Now, then, let us see if that is true. I have looked into that matter, and I tell you that 50 per cent, at least, of the dwellers of the mountains of the South and notably of Kentucky and Virginia are the lineal descendants of runaway indenture men, Irish rebels mainly, from the Virginia plantations. I know a mountain county in Kentucky of which half of the population bear one of three names. They are either Mayos, or Patricks, or Powers. And I once heard an orator stand up before an audience of those Mayos and Powers and Patricks and congratulate them on their pure English descent, and they believed it! (Laughter.)

I wish you would pardon me once more for referring to my line of ancestry, for it is testimony to prove my claim. On my father's side I am descended from a group of men who went from New England to Kentucky, and the names of these men were Lyon and Cobb, which is a Danish corruption of O'Connor, and Machen, and Clendenin, and O'Hara, and Glenn, which is a corruption of Glynn. What a hot bunch of Anglo-Saxons! (Laughter.)

The congressional district in which I was born and where I used to live has thirteen counties in it, and all but two of them have Irish names.

What is true of my own section of Kentucky is true of many of the States. Daniel Boone has been called the first explorer of Kentucky, and it has been said he was of English descent. Both of those statements are wrong. Daniel Boone was not the first explorer of Kentucky. The first man to explore Kentucky was an Irishman by the name of John Finley. But before him was still another Irishman by the name of James McBride, the first white man known to have paddled a canoe down the Ohio River. That was in 1754, while Daniel Boone was still

a boy. He lingers in State history as a shadowy figure, but I like to think of him as a red-haired chap with a rifle in one hand and possibly a demijohn in the other, coming out through the trackless wilderness alone and landing from his canoe on what was afterwards to be known as the Dark and Bloody Ground. Aside from his name, it is proven that he was an Irishman by the legendary circumstances that immediately after coming ashore he carved his name in deep and enduring letters in the bark of the largest beech tree of the forest and claimed all of the land that lay within his vision as his own, and shot an Indian or two and went on his way rejoicing. As for Daniel Boone, the great pathfinder, he really was descended from the line of Buhun, which is Norman, and his wife was a daughter of Morgan O'Bryan, or Bryan, as it came to be called, an Irish Catholic immigrant to Pennsylvania in Colonial days.

The records show that several of the officers and more than half the men of that dauntless band who, under the leadership of George Rogers Clark, waded through the floods to take Vincennes and thereby won all the great Northwest Territory away from the British and gave to the American colonies what today is the richest part of the United States, were Irishmen—not Scotch-Irish, nor English-Irish, but plain Irish-Irish, men who were rebels and patriots by instinct and born adventurers by reason of the blood which ran in their veins.

Among the earliest colonizers of my native State were men named McAfee, Sullivan, Casey, Hogan, Mooney, O'Bannon, Fitzpatrick, McMahan, Cassidy and a host of other pioneers bearing similar names, at once indicating their Celtic origin, and according to our leading historian, Judge Lewis Collins, when the McGarrys, Dentons and Hogans came through the wilderness from North Carolina and located at Harrodsburg, in 1774, Mrs. McGarry and Mrs. Hogan were the first domestic circle in Kentucky. One of the most heroic figures in the early history of our State was Captain Hugh McGarry, the brave but impetuous Irishman, who led the charge at the desperate battle on the banks of Licking River on the 19th of December, 1782, and among the officers of the expedition against

the Indian allies of the British were Majors Bulger, Harlan and McBride and Captains McMurtry, Doyle, Phelan and McMahon. The "fighting race" was well represented among the enlisted men in the rolls of Kentucky's soldiers of the Revolution, and in after years some of the leading judges, legislators and other leading citizens of the State were descendants of those early Irishmen who first penetrated the wilderness and planted the seeds of civilization in our fruitful soil.

The first settlement of English-speaking Catholics beyond the Allegheny mountains was not located in the North but in the South, and in my own State of Kentucky at that. It endures today, after having given to this country one of its greatest and most scholarly churchmen, Bishop Spaulding. (Applause.) The children of the pioneers of Kentucky, almost without exception, learned their first lessons in log cabins, under the teachings of that strange but gifted race of men, the wandering Irish schoolmasters, who founded the old field schools of the South and to whom the South is largely indebted for the seeds of its culture.

Irishmen from Kentucky, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland bore the brunt of the western campaigns in 1812 against the British. Irishmen from Kentucky fell thick at the disastrous battles of the Thames and the Raisin, and their Irish bones today rest in that ground, sanctifying it and making of it an American shrine of patriotism. It was the hand of a Kentucky descendant of an Irishman, Col. Richard Johnson, afterwards Vice President of the United States, that slew the great Tecumseh. A good share of the Kentucky and Tennessee riflemen who at New Orleans stood behind Andrew Jackson's cotton-bale breastworks, mowing down Pakenham's Peninsular Veterans and making their red coats redder still with the life-blood of those invaders, were Irishmen, real Irishmen. They proved their Irish lineage by the fact that they well out and quarreled with Old Hickory, because he denied them all the credit for winning the fight, and he quarreled back, for he was by way of being an Irishman himself. (Laughter and applause.)

It was a Kentucky son of an Irish immigrant, Dr. Ephraim McDowell, who performed

the first operation for ovariectomy—performed it on a kitchen table with a mad husband standing over him with a drawn revolver, threatening to shoot him if his wife died under the knife. But he went ahead, and it was a successful operation, and it has brought relief and life and sanity to millions of women all over the world. It was a Kentucky Irishman and a soldier, Theodore O'Hara, who penned perhaps the most beautiful lyric poem, and certainly the sweetest tribute to the brave in our language, the immortal "Bivouac of the Dead." It was another Kentucky Irishman, the saintly poet-priest, Father Ryan, whose hand wrote those two fondest poems in memory of the Lost Cause, "The Conquered Banner" and "The Sword of Robert E. Lee."

In the Civil War it was a Kentuckian of Scotch and Irish descent who led the North—Abraham Lincoln—and it was another Kentuckian of mingled Irish and Scotch blood—Jefferson Davis—who was President of the Confederacy.

The historian, Collins, said the five greatest lawyers Kentucky ever produced were Barry, Rowan, Haggin, Breckenridge and Bledsoe—four Irish names and one Indian name—and yet these five have been called Anglo-Saxons, too.

What is true of Kentucky is to a greater or less degree true of the rest of the South. It was Patrick Henry who sounded the first keynote of the American Revolution, and who, at the risk of his life, by his words paved the way for the Declaration of Independence. The South Carolina Irishman, John C. Calhoun, son of Patrick Calhoun, a patriot refugee from County Donegal, who first raised the slogan of Nullification, and it was another Irishman, Andrew Jackson, of Tennessee, who swore by the Eternal to hang him higher than Haman if he carried out his plan.

Tonight you have heard a tribute, and a deserved one, to little Phil Sheridan of the North, but I want to couple his name with that of a Southern Irishman, the son of an Irish refugee, Pat Cleburne of Arkansas, one of the most gallant leaders that the Civil War produced. (Applause.) Pat Cleburne died on one of the bloodiest battlefields of Christendom in his stocking feet because, as

he rode into battle that morning he saw one of his Irish boys from Little Rock tramping barefooted over the frozen furrows of a wintry cornfield and leaving tracks of blood behind him. So he drew off his boots and bade the soldier put them on, and fifteen minutes later he went to his God in his stocking feet. Raleigh laid down his coat before Good Queen Bess, and has been immortalized for his chivalry, but I think a more courtly deed was that of the gallant Irishman, Pat Cleburne. For one was kow-towing before royalty and the other had in his heart only thoughtfulness and humanity for the common man afoot.

Sam Houston, the first President of the Lone Star State, was a Tennessee Irishman, Irish through and through, and the present President of the United States, a Southerner also, is half Irish. One of the most distinguished members of the Supreme Court in recent years was a descendant of a Kentucky Irishman, John M. Harlan, and today two of the men who sit on that tribunal are Irishmen—White of Louisiana, the distinguished and honored Chief Justice, and McReynolds of Tennessee.

(Voice) How about McKenna?

MR. COBB: He is not a Southerner, I regret to say. I suppose I could go on for hours, if your patience held out—and my throat—telling of the achievements of Irishmen and of the imperishable records that Irishmen have left on the history of that part of the Union from which I came, but to call the roll of the great men who have done great things and won achievement and fame south of Mason's and Dixon's line since there was such a line, would be almost like running through the parish registers of the counties of Ireland, both North and South. Indeed, in my opinion, it is not altogether topography or geography or climate that has made the South what it is and given it those distinguishing characteristics which adorn it. The soft speech of the Southerner, his warm heart and his hot head, his readiness to begin a fight and to forgive his opponent afterwards; his veneration for women's chastity and his love for the ideals of his native land—all these are heritages of his Irish ancestry, transmitted to him through several generations. The North has put her heroes

on a pension, but the South has put hers on a pedestal. There is not a Southern hamlet of any size today that has not reared a bronze or marble or granite monument to its own defenders in the Civil War, and there is scarce a Southern home where at the knees of the mother the children are not taught to revere the memories and remember the deeds of Lee and Jackson and Forrest, the Tennessee Irishman, and Morgan, the Kentucky Irishman, and Washington and Light Horse Harry Lee and Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox of the Carolinas. I believe as firmly as I believe anything on earth that for that veneration, for that love of heroism and for that joying in the ideals of its soil, the South is indebted mainly to

the Irish blood that courses through the veins of its sons and of its daughters.

No, ladies and gentlemen; the lost Irish tribes of the South are not lost; they are not lost any more than the "wild geese" that flew across the Channel from Ireland were lost; they are not lost any more than the McMahons who went to France, or the O'Donnells who went to Spain, or the Simon Bolivars and the O'Higgins who went to South America, or the O'Farrells and the O'Briens who went to Cuba. For their Irish blood is of the strain that cannot be extinguished, and it lives today, thank God, in the attributes and the habits and the customs and the traditions of the Southern people.

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