

# The Castlecomer Plateau

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**T**HE Castlecomer Plateau is the tableland that is the watershed between the rivers Nore and Barrow. Owing to the erosion of carboniferous deposits by the Nore and Barrow the Castlecomer highland coincides with the Castlecomer or Leinster Coalfield.

Down through the ages this highland has been variously known as Gower Laighean (Gabhair Laighean), Slieve Margy (Sliabh mBairrche), Slieve Comer (Sliabh Crumair). Most of it was included within the ancient cantred of Odogh (Ui Duach) later called Ui Broanain. The Normans attempted to convert this cantred into a barony called Bargy from the old tribal name Ui Bairrche. It was, however, difficult territory and the Barony of Bargy never became a reality. The English labelled it the Barony of Odogh but this highland territory continued to be march lands.

Such lands were officially termed "Fasach" at the close of the 15th century and so the greater part of the Castlecomer Plateau became known as the Barony of Fassadinan i.e. Fasach Deighnin, which is translated the "wilderness

of the river Dinan" but which officially meant "the march land of the Dinan." This no-man's land that surrounds and hedges in the basin of the Dinan has always been a boundary land. To-day it is the boundary land between counties Kilkenny, Carlow and Laois and between the dioceses of Ossory, Kildare and Leighlin. The Plateau is divided in half by the Dinan-Deen river which flows South-West from Wolfhill to Ardaloo. The rim of the Plateau is a chain of hills averaging 1,000 ft. rising steeply from the Barrow and not so steeply from the Nore. The Deen valley to the junction with

the Dinan at Dysart bridge was the central Cumar or valley which gives Castlecomer its name. This is the main corridor in the Plateau. A potential opening for evil from outside the Plateau, it was known as the Valley of the Black Pig. The next most convenient approach to the Plateau is from Ballinakill by the Valley of the Owveg alias Ounbeg (Abha or Abhain Bheag) river. A branch of this valley is called Gleann A Mhurdair i.e. Murder Valley so that it does not appear that this was a popular gateway to the Plateau. The Plateau includes the Barony of Fassadinan and part of Gowran : in Kilkenny. parts of Cullenagh and Slieve Margy in Laois and part of Idrone West of Carlow.

### SCOPE

It offers excellent scope as a unit for antiquarian study. Its hills offered suitable ground for the settlement of primitive peoples before the Iron Age cleared the valleys of forests. Its hills offered a sanctuary to conquered tribes. In early Christian times monastic cells found seclusion at Tis-coffin, Old Leighlin, Killeshin, Sletty, Kilgorey, Timahoe, Dysart Gallen, Dysart Odogh, Lowhill and Killcronan. For geological study abundant data is available owing to the numerous borings that have been made over a great number of years in connection with the mining industry. Cairns and dolmens on the peaks, ancient customs and beliefs among the hills have remained unmolested by the centuries.

### BOUNDARY HILLS

To go conveniently right round the Castlecomer Plateau travel from Kilkenny by Paulstown, Leighlin Bridge, Carlow, Ballickmoyler, Stradbally, Abbeyleix, Durrow and Ballyragget back to Kilkenny. To travel along the elevated rim that runs round the Plateau Freestone Hill is the nearest peak to Kilkenny. Travel from there by Ballysallagh (Baile Salach; Dirty Abode) 900 ft., junction of Knockshanbally (Cnoc Sean Bhaile; old abode hill), Mount Nugent and Tullowbrin (Tulach Bhroin; Byrne's Tumulus).

(Shearman says that the tumulus here is associated with the legendary Birn Buach ancestor of Ossory. Whoever called the adjoining hill Ossory Hill, a couple of centuries ago, apparently held this view also) 1,100 ft., source of the Douglas river whence Kilkenny's water supply, Reeavanagh (Reidh Mheanach; mid-level) 900 ft., Baunreagh (Ban Riach; streaked bawn) 1,035 ft., Gallows Hill 978 ft., Tomard (Tuaim Ard: high mound) 1,000 ft., Rossmore (Ros Mor: great bluff) 1,105 ft., Ardateggle (Ard A' Tseagail: Rye Hill).

[Water supply for Carlow town originates here. Sometimes the water of the 'Comer Plateau is not welcome. It caused disastrous floods at Kilkenny, Thomastown and Carlow in 1947 when torrential rains melted the great snow drifts of that year and the combined snow water and rain spread desolation in the valleys].

Drumagh (Dromach: Ridge-Back) 700 ft., Fairymount 750 ft., Wolf hill 950 ft., Crissard (Crois Ard: High Cross-Roads) 1,000 ft., Brennan's Hill 1,077 ft., Fossy (Fasach: Wilderness), Timahoe (Teach Mochua: St. Mochua's House), Cullenagh Mt. (Cuileannach: Holly Place) 1,044, Drumashellig (Drom Seilge: Hunt Ridgeback) 625 ft., Ballinakill (Baile na Coille: Wood Abode), Loughill (Leamh Choill: Elm Wood) by Cromwell's Road at Ballinalacken (Baile na Leacan: Hill Side Abode) 1,027 ft., Toor More (Tuar Mor: Great Green Field) 856 ft., Conahy (Con Achaidh: Hound Field), Bullock Hill 400 ft., Sandford's Court and so back to Ballysallagh. There are here outstanding peaks:—Cullenagh Mts., Tullowbrin, Rossmore and Ballinalacken which define the Plateau North, South, East and West. Cullenagh overlooks the valley of the Baiteog river and Timahoe with its fine round tower and old monastic site. Dunamase the stronghold of the O'Moore's is to the north. Tullowbrin gives a fine view of Kilkenny city. It is almost the same height as Rossmore the highest peak of the Castlecomer Plateau. Rossmore looks down directly on Carlow town and on the plain of Carman at the junction of the Burren and Barrow where the

great fair of Carman was attended by the Kings and Chiefs of Leinster. Rossmore and anciently called Teamhair mBairrche i.e. Hill of the Bairrche or in short Hill of Margy

More anciently still it was Druim Conchind (Conchind's Hill) beloved of Fionn and cursed by Patrick. Prince Alfrid's Itinerary refers to this peak in the lines :—

*“ I found in Leinster the smooth and sleek;  
From Dublin to Slew Margey's peak;  
Flourishing pastures, valour, health . . . ”*

It will be noticed here that Slew Margy is considered to be on the boundary of Leinster i.e. between Leinster and Munster. Ballinalacken on Cromwell's road commands a very striking view of the Upper Valley of the Nore—the Magh Airgid Ros (Plain of the Land of Silver). At the North-East corner of the Plateau is the isolated hill called Doon of Clopook (Dun Cloch A' Phuca-Pooka: Stone Fort) anciently called Sliabh Lugh (Lugh was ancestor god of the Firbolg). The nearby dolmen-topped Brennan's Hill and cave of Luggacurren would provide an interesting group for an archaeological outing.

## UNDERGROUND

A study of the geological and industrial significance of the Castlecomer Plateau would follow the lines of the lecture given by Mr. O'Brien at Ballingarry, adding details of the long standing iron industry that left us place names such as Iron Mills, Smithstown and Glenmagoo (Gleann Maighe Gabha: Glen-of-the-Smith Plain) and of the fire-clay seams that provide the raw material for the Swan factory. The coal seams tell a tale of about 200 million years. Most of the coal seams have now been worked out. The seam now being mostly worked is the second horizon counting upwards from the limestone floor. Nine horizons in all have been recorded at Coolbawn. The farthest down horizon is not considered to be workable economically. The most profitable horizon in the Leinster coalfield was the Jarrow seam which

was nearly six feet average depth. A large number of fossil remains were collected from the Jarrow workings in 1865 by Messrs Galvan and Brownrigg in a special survey. Among their finds was a hitherto unknown snake-like reptile which was given the name "Ophiderpeton Brownrigii." With reference to the Jarrow collection Dr. Ed. Wright of Trinity College wrote in 1903. "They (Jarrow collection) had yielded more genera than were known in 1866 from all the American coalfields and nearly as many as had been obtained from Europe generally. The illustrations of these fossils by Mr. Dinkel are well worthy of notice more especially because the original specimens presented to the museum of Trinity College have in great measure disappeared by chemical change in the sulphur pyrites which form a great portion of the matrix in which the remains were embedded."

#### MOLYNEUX'S DESCRIPTION

In 1709, Dr. Thomas Molyneux describing a journey across the Comer Plateau from Kilkenny to Killeslin wrote: "Two hours and a half brought us to a wild mountainy sheepwalk country along the river Dinon to Castle Comber which is now a sad old ruined village. About a mile beyond this is one of the collieries belonging to Lord Castlecomber. The pit is about 20 yards deep. The vein of coal was about two feet thick. They first drive a long drift through the vein and after on each hand clear out the coal leaving at every five or six feet an interstice, standing about two feet thick, to support the roof of slate and this coal is left forever. He gave me several samples of different sorts of iron mine which they meet in digging. Some in clay near the surface, some in slate and veins at different heights from the coal; the lowest they esteem best though what they find in the clay is the mine they dig in great quantities and every place of the mountains hereabouts and sell to the neighbouring ironworks where 'tis found very good and fusible when mixed with a little English mine. 'Tis a stone found in coal-shaped flat cakes, looks when exposed to the weather like rusty iron.

In going from this colliery to the other you ride along the hill where the old works were, where yet remain the works of a multitude of exhausted pits. This colliery is much the same coal as the former and the iron made in the same manner. From whence, crossing a small river you arrive at the Queens Co. where at a place called Donan stand the other coalpits belonging to Mr. Hartpole. The number of pits going here is four. Here also they have iron mines. One hour and a half brought us to the end of the mountain giving view to Co. Carlow, Kildare and Queens. Near the foot of the mountain on the road stands the very old church of Killeshin. Here lately stood over against the door of the church one of the old round steeples.

## IRON

Molyneux lays emphasis on the iron-works of the 'Comer Plateau. It was the mineral wealth of the Plateau which attracted the Strafford plantation of Castlecomer in 1636. At this time there were already "ancient" furnaces and "anciently erected" forges in the valley of the Owveg river, now Ironmills near Ballinakill, and in the valley of the Clohogue river, now Glenmagoo (Gleann Maighe Gabha: Smith's Valley Glen) near Castlecomer. These works were leased to Sir Christopher Wandesforde at the plantation of 'Comer and by 1638 Sir Christopher had produced all kinds of iron goods from nails to ordnance at Castlecomer. Great quantities of Castlecomer ore were transported to the iron works of Sir Charles Coote at Mountrath.

## CAVES

The lime-stone base of the Castlecomer Plateau is denoted at Killeshin by the caves of Killeshin. Similar caves occur at the junction of Luggucurren and Mothel (Caves of Dunmore). These caves north, south and east figure prominently in the lore of the Plateau.

## CHARACTERISTIC PLACE-NAMES

A circuit of the base of the Plateau would include within the circuit about 300 townlands as shown on the ordnance maps. Each townland would average at least 3 subdistricts making a total of about 1,000 place-names. Approximately 250 townland names are included within the elevated rim of the Plateau. The coal measures have been estimated to cover more than 200 square miles. The place-names of the Plateau reflect its character and history. Moyhora (Maigh Theamhrach: Hill Plain), Muck'alee (Magh Thulaighe: Hill Plain) and Reevanagh (Reidh Mheanach: Middle Level), lying within the outer rim all convey the idea of "Plateau." Dromgoyle (Drom Guail i.e. Coal Ridge) now Upper Hills, Coolbawn was the old name of the district where the greatest number of coal seams have been proved. Glenmullen (Gleann A Mhuilinn: (Iron) Mill Glen) recalls the great quantities of iron-rock that were taken from this locality. A great variety of "hill" names is found in the names listed above along the rim of the Plateau. The marsh and bog lands of the Plateau are pictured in the many variants of "Moin" "a bog" and in such names as Curragh (Currach: A Marsh), Kayreerk (Ce Riach: Streaky Moor), Seskin (Seiscin: Marsh), Slough, Red Bog etc. Booley (Buaile) is defined as "a mountain pasture to which herds were moved from the lowlands in Summer and Autumn." We are told that 'Comer people first learned to hay make when scythes were manufactured in Sir Christopher Wandesforde's iron mills. The system of "booleying" that existed in mountainy districts in Spenser's time is recalled in Booley, Booleybeg, Booleybawn, Booleyvanan, etc. The sound and colour of mountain rivers is caught in the river-names Dian (Swift), Cloghnagh (Cloghnach: Stony), Clohogue (Clochog: Stony) Douglas (Dubh Ghlaise: Black Stream), Glashagal (Glaise Gael: Bright Stream), Fishoge (Fuisseog: Lark), Red River, Black River etc. Dinan is said to be a diminutive of "Dian" above. It seems to me that the name Dinan is suggested by the two branch rivers that meet to form the Dinan. Irish Dha

**Aighnin**—Two little rivers. Pronounced together Dha Aibhnin yields Deighnin, the Irish spelling suggested by the Irish pronunciation.

The name by which the 'Comer Plateau was most anciently known was Gower (Gabhair, a derivative of Old Irish "Gobor" "A Horse"). Early 17th century maps locate the Plateau as "Ardgore" i.e. Ard Gabhra or Ard Gabhair "Horse Height." The name is now preserved in the Laois townland Knock-Ardigur (Cnoc Airde Gabhra: Horse-Height Hill) at the northern tip of County Kilkenny.

### PAGAN RELICS

There are no effigies of horses, like those found in the South of England embossed on the Castlecomer Gabhair but tales of dragons and phantom white horses are still current in the northern part of the Plateau, where a cromlech at Luggacurren is called "The Ass's Manger" from a phantom white ass that is alleged to haunt the site and where dolmens at Knockbawn, Ironmills, Cleanagh and Dysart Gallen commemorate prehistoric hill settlers. In this locality also are Gorreelagh (Gabhair Ui Elaigh) and Clontycoe (Cluainte Cuaich: Meadows of Cuach) which seem to be associated with Cuach which Professor O'Rahilly describes as a "ghost-name" and who was said to be of the Ui Elaigh.

When the horse-folk of Ulster came from the Antrim hills they gave their names to Lough Neagh and Iveagh (Uibh Eachach: Horse Folk). Similarly the Barrow Valley adjoining the 'Comer Plateau was called (Imleach n-Each: "Horse Folk Boundary-land"). The pass along the Barrow Valley on the east side of the 'Comer Gabhair and on the south side connecting with the valley of the Nore was Bealach Gabhran i.e., The Pass of the Gabhair. This derivative of "Gabhair" is preserved in the name of the town of Gowran which lies midway along the pass at the south of Gabhair, Rathgarvan and Dungarvan also lying in the pass are most probably by metathesis Rath Gabhran giving Rath Garbhain and Dun

Gabhran giving Dun Garbhain (c.f., Magen Gabhair alias Magen Garbhain one of the four "duns" of Cuach in Gabhair Laighean). The 'Comer Gabhair is qualified as Gabhair Laigean, i.e., Leinster Horse-Ridge. Compare with this the alternative name Maing Laighean (Sliabh mBairrche Laighean) which, as noted above, conveys the information that the 'Comer Gabhair was on the Leinster boundary.

### UI BAIRRCHE GRAND JURY

Some fun and not a little anger was caused when the Ordnance survey were deciding the orthography of the name Slieve Margy. The Grand Jurors of Maryboro' had accustomed themselves to spelling it "Slievemarigue," and they wrote to Thomas Larcom, director of the Ordnance Survey, expressing great dissatisfaction on discovering that the Ordnance Survey had decided on "Slieve Margy." Larcom replied: "If the maps were made solely for the present day and for the use of the Grand Jury their opinion would be final but in a national work I am sure they will be as anxious as I am that every authority be consulted." The Grand Jury, learning that their attitude was being treated as a joke in the Ordnance Survey Office, expressed their annoyance. George Petrie wrote, July, 1841: "The Grand Jury spelling would be opposed to the analogies of Irish sounds and to all authorities. If the Grand Jury was right the Barony of Bargy should be spelled Barigue." Further provoked, he wrote: "Mariga or Marigue is only an attempt to express a vulgar drawing pronunciation." The final blow was left to Eugene O'Curry, who forwarded to the Grand Jury an extract from the Book of Leinster giving the derivation of Slieve Margy. He added: "From the derivation of the name which is the same in the Book of Ballymote, Lecan and other Irish M.S.S., there will be little difficulty in finding the proper anglicised form which should be Sliabh, Slew or Sliev Margy or Margie. This is the way they pronounce it on the mountain itself (i.e., Slew or Sliev Margy) and the orthography adopted by the Grand Jury rests on no better foundation than the ignorance

of some clerk in their employment who without any authority or precedent transposed some of the letters and added one to the last syllable."

### BRIGANTES

The Ui Bairrche tribe, whence the name Slieve Margy (Sliabh mBairrche) were in pre-Christian times settled in Aigid Ros and gave their name to Tullabarry, the ancient name of the neighbourhood of Ballyragget, so called from Tulach Ua mBairrche (Ui Bairrche Hill) now Moat. Ptolemy places the Ui Bairrche in Wexford under the tribe name Brigantes. The present barony of Bargy Fort in Wexford preserves the name Ui Bairrche and Ptolemy's location. We have noted that the Normans attempted to establish a barony of Bargy to include most of the Castlecomer Plateau. The Brigantes Belgic tribe were located in central England in pre-Roman days. They were also located thousands of years ago on the shores of Lake Constance, where the town of Bregenz preserves their name to this day.

### LEINSTER TRIBES

Relics of the Leinster or Gailleon conquest which succeeded the Firbolg or Belgic occupation, are found East and West of the Castlecomer Plateau. Dinnree (Dionn Righe : King's Palace), Ptolemy's Dunum and now Ballyknockan Rath on the west of the Barrow at Leighlin, is the site of the residence of Labhraidh Loingseach, who led the invasion of Leinster men from Gaul. We are told that he had an "iron house" at Dinn Ri (alias Dioma Slaine, alias Tuaim Tenebræ). This brings us to the age of iron and to the habitation of valleys which were cleared with iron implements and the term "Magh" is applied to places so cleared. The Leinster settlers from Gaul termed "Gailleoin" have given their name to Gallen which included the north-west corner of the Castlecomer Plateau and is retained in Dysart Gallen at Ballinakill. A link between "horse folk" and the Iron Age is found in the legend of the horse's ears of Labhraidh Loingseach.

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## TRANSITION

The Ui Bairrche occupation of the Upper Nore and the Dinan basin was replaced by that of the Ui Duach tribe who mark the transition from Pagan to Christian times. St. Patrick's "curse" of Druim Conchind (now Rossmore) of the Dinan and of Ui Duach, no doubt owes its origin to Patrick's eradication of pagan cult, the tradition being preserved in a "Punch and Judy" rhyme where the original Pontius and Judas have completely lost their identity. It is quite probable that the "Luachair" and "Cruach" mentioned in the "Curse of Ui Duach" refer to Arch-Druid and Arch-God of paganism respectively.

## UI DUACH

The territory of Ui Duach was ruled by the Brenans from the Danish period or 10th century so that the terms Ui Duach and Ui Braonain and Brenan became synonymous. The territory of Ui Duach extended across the Castlecomer Plateau from Three Castles to Killeshin (Cill Uissen, which, incidentally, with the neighbouring Gleann Uissen preserves the most ancient form of the root of the name Ossory). They were driven into the hills by the Norman Invasion. They maintained considerable independence in the hills until the Strafford Plantation of Castlecomer and the institution of the Lordship of Castlecomer, and the Loon branch of the Brenans were known as "The Edouchs" until the last male member of the family died at Woodview in recent times. The ancient territory of Ui Duach is sign-posted by names such as Durrow (Darmhagh Ua nDuach), Lowhill (Leamhchoill Ua nDuach), Doonane (Dunan Ua nDuach), Odagh (Ban Ua nDuach), Firoda (Fioghair Ua nDuach), Knockanadoge (Crocán Ua nDuach), Dysart (Diséart Ua nDuach), Curragh (Currach Ua nDuach) and Monediuch (Moin Ua nDuach). The Slieve Margy range was otherwise known as "Brenan" from Rossmore southwards.

The Norman family that gained most of Ui Duach were the Purcell's, whose tombs are found at Donoghmore, Cool-

craheen, Muckalee, Rosconnell and Clogh. The gateways to the Castlecomer Plateau were closed by wooden Norman castles in the very first years of the Norman occupation.

Though Norman and Gall seemed to merge more easily than Irish and English, the Castlecomer Plateau reflects a story of continual strife from the time of the Pictish Leixmen to the founding of Castlecomer town, which was a "sad old ruined village" 60 years after its destruction in 1641, and which was again destroyed in '98. The reflections of this story would be much less varied and colourful had the fields of the Plateau been more fertile or had its boundary lands been less turbulent.

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