

# Tubhríobritain and Muircheartach Mac Neill

By MR. T. WALDRON, N.T.

WE stand here at Tobar Phadraig or Patrick's Well at the foot of the Sliabhardachadh. Before us stretches the Magh Airbh or Plain of Airbh bounded on the North by the Clomantagh range of hills. A well-populated area in ancient times, Magh Airbh was a plain of strategic importance as the easiest road from Munster to Ossory, not only when Ossory served as a buffer state between the Eoghanacht of Cashel and Leinster, but in later days also as witness the number of keeps and castles in the area. Not far from us is the Hill of Grane or Grian Airbh, the old boundary between the dioceses of Ossory and Cashel and the scene of a slaughter of the Eoghanacht in 891 A.D. by the men of Ossory.

Muircheartach Mac Neill, known to history as Muircheartach of the Leathern Cloaks, was son of Niall Glundubh and King of Aileach, and as such, in accordance with the Ui Neill agreement on succession to the High-Kingship, was heir-apparent to the throne, then held by the aged Donnchadh of Meath. Muircheartach had displayed his military talents by a brilliant series of victories over the Danes. In 921, 926, 932, 938, he won especially fine victories, and when in 939 he was captured by the Danes in an unexpected raid on his royal dun at Aileach, he escaped, to the great joy of the Irish. In 940, he and Donnchadh forced hostages from Leinster and Munster. In the Spring of 941 he ravaged Ossory and the Deise and compelled both to submit. He then made a naval expedition to the Hebrides and returned with great booty. During his absence, Ceallachan, King of Munster, wrought bloody vengeance on the Deise for having submitted to Muircheartach and slew two thousand of them. Hearing this, Muircheartach lost no time

in avenging the outrage and determined to set out on the famous Circuit in the Winter of 941.

The slaughter of the Deise by Ceallachan of Cashel would seem to be the immediate cause of the Circuit, but Muirheartach had a wider aim. He was the lawful successor to the aged High-King Donnchadh. He determined by a bold move to facilitate his accession to the throne by impressing the conviction on the minds of the Irish in general that he was the next most powerful as well as the most legitimate heir to the monarchy.

Accordingly, in the depth of a hard winter, when he knew he could depend on the element of surprise, he set out with 1,000 picked warriors to make the Circuit of Ireland and collect hostages from all likely opponents. He was brilliantly successful. He led the provincial kings or their sons captive, the King of Uladh, Sitric of Dublin, Lorcan of Leinster, his arch-enemy Ceallachan of Cashel in fetters, and the son of the King of Connacht. He detained them for five months at Aileach and then dutifully sent them to Donnchadh, who, as a mark of goodwill to Muirheartach, returned them to Aileach. His labours were in vain, however, for he never ascended the throne. The Annals of Ulster record: "943 A.D. Muirheartach of the Leather Cloaks, the son of Niall and Hector of the West, was killed by the Gentiles (Pagan Danes), i.e. by Blacar, son of Godfrey, King of the Danes, at Glassliathan near Ardee."

"He had as great a genius for war as any man that this island has ever produced," writes the historian Charles O'Connor. John O'Donovan speaks of him as "a hero most eminent in his day for consistent patriotism and valour, who has not received that justice from the popular historians of Ireland to which he seems to have been in all fairness entitled." The extent of Muirheartach's achievement may be overlooked nowadays, when the blitzkrieg is of the recent past. War in Winter was not militarily acceptable. A small force of 1,000 men subduing all Ireland might be regarded as militarily impossible. But Muirheartach succeeded in achieving the impossible, marching over 600 miles in 30 days (if we are to take the list of nightly camps as enumer-

ated by Cormacan Eigeas as the full number), averaging over 20 miles per day and having to prepare for battle on at least two occasions. This was the blitzkrieg of Irish history. Nothing like it had been done before nor has it been emulated since. The other famous Winter marches of Irish history—the March to Kinsale and the Retreat of O'Sullivan Beare were forced on the participants by external circumstances. Muircheartach's march may be compared, though certainly neither in difficulty of execution nor in handling of massive forces, but in the display of military genius, opportunity, speed and boldness of conception, with the famed crossing of the Alps by Hannibal. In both enterprises, the element of surprise was the main weapon; with Hannibal, the terrain—with Muircheartach, the season.

The passage of the "Leathern Cloaks" through Ossory was marked by a great show of loyalty and friendship. And why not a show of friendship? This friendship, forged by the hostility of Cashel, had been cemented by the marriage of Dubhdara, the daughter of Ceallagh, King of Ossory, to Muircheartach, and so the Bealach Gabhran was clamorous with welcome.

The whereabouts "of the clear Fliodais," mentioned in line 79 of the poem as the site of Muircheartach's first encampment in Co. Kilkenny, has been a cause of much speculation. The Fliodais lay between Bealach Gabhran and Tubbridbritain. The name has since completely disappeared and it has been suggested that the Nore was the Fliodais, or that the latter name was mistakenly applied to the Nore by Cormacan. Since Muircheartach marched by Bealach Smechuin as the Barrow-Nore crossing was called, he probably crossed in the vicinity of Kilkenny, and camped on the bank of the Nore. From there to Tubbridbritain would not be much less than the average daily march. This, however, is purely conjecture; I may be forgiven, therefore, if I put forward another conjecture.

Local people still call the Pass of Barna by its full name --Barnaleesha. This can be Bearna Fhliodhaise, or the Gap of the Fliodais. This, of course, identifies the River Nuenna with the Fliodais, or makes the Fliodais an older name for

the river. The obvious objection to this solution is that a day's march between Barnaleesha and Tubbridbritain would be ridiculously short. But if the camp were situated along the lower reaches of the Nuenna, it would entail a march of from seven to nine miles. Is this still too short, and the march from Bealach Mughna in Co. Carlow to our suggested site too long for credence? I suggest the answer is "No," for here are examples of other daily marches according to Cormacan's account: **Long Marches** (i) Aileach to Oenech Cros (at least 32 miles); (ii) Dun Eachdadh to Magh Rath (approx. 30 miles); (iii) Caiseal to Magh O gCairbre (approx. 33 miles). **Short Marches** (i) Dun Liamhna to Dun Ailinn (about 9 miles); (ii) Cill Da Lua to Ceann Cora (about 4 miles); (iii) Ath Seanaigh to Bearnas (about 13 miles). Compare these with Bealach Mughna to R. Nuenna (about 31 miles); Nuenna to Tubbridbritain (7-9 miles).

There may have been reasons for the short march to Tubbridbritain. At the camp on the Fliodais there was feasting with allies and marriage relations; an Assembly was held; the Men of Aileach were, for the first time in Leinster, in truly friendly territory, all sound reasons for a delay of a forenoon, necessitating a short Winter afternoon's march. Why stop at Tubbridbritain? (i) Magh Airbh was a comparatively populous place, as instanced by the number of raths in the district. Canon Carrigan says: "Probably there is no district of the same extent in Ireland where raths so much abound;" (ii) They were nearing the borders of enemy territory where they might expect (and actually did get) a show of force. Here at Tubbridbritain was an ideal camp site, amid food, water and friends. Opposite us is the large field still known under its Irish name—Ban a' Champa, or The Camp-field. Canon Carrigan suggests that this was possibly the site of Muirheartach's camp. This may be so, but Ban a' Champa must have been a recognised camp site down through the centuries, situated as it was near a stream, a magnificent well, in a populous valley, protected in later centuries by castles and keeps and in an important pass. Around 1900, British regiments camped there on two occasions during manouvres and, during the Truce, the

Volunteers paraded here for inspection by Ernie O'Malley, who, however, did not arrive.

**Is Tobar Phadraig Tiobraid Britan?** Eugene O'Curry has this note on Tobar Phadraig dated September 1, 1839: "The people call this well Tubber Patrick . . . but hold it in no veneration for sanctity. This well was probably the Briotan's Well, which gave its name to the parish, but that name, which is a very un-Irish one, in the lapse of ages is very likely to have been forgotten and the well called by its present and more popular one" (i.e. Tobar Phadraig). John O'Donovan himself, in his name-books, translates it in the singular as Britan's Well. He gives his source as the poem of Cormacan. But in the poem the camp-site is referred to as a plural "Ag tiobrattibh Briotan buain," which O'Donovan translates as "At the **wells** of the long-lived Britan." Note that here he uses the plural in translation. The Leabhar Gabhala also uses the plural "Tipretta Britain." Cormacan and the Leabhar Gabhala are the earliest known references to Tubbridbritain and we may assume, then, that Tobar Phadraig is but one of the Wells of Britan and not an alternative to Tubbridbritain as O'Curry suggests. The latter's suggestion that the un-Irish word "Britan" gave way to the more popular Padraig hardly deserves consideration. We may take it, so, that by Tubbridbritain is meant the district in which the Wells of Britan are situated.

**What can be understood by the word Britan?** That it refers to a person is evident from Cormacan's poem. But who was this long-lived Britan? O'Curry suggests very tentatively a St. Briotan of Rath. Father Healy, in Vol. I of the Transactions of the Ossory Archaeological Society, says: "In early times St. Patrick was believed to have been a Britan and to have lived to the advanced age of 120 years." Father Healy believed that the "long-lived Britan" was Patrick.

This name "Britan" is a very ancient and very confusing name. According to Professor T. F. O'Rahilly in his "Early Irish History and Mythology," the Greeks applied the name Pretanoi to the inhabitants of both Ireland and Gt. Britain as early as 500 B.C. The Pretanoi are the earliest

inhabitants of these islands known to us historically. In Welsh the name appears as Prydyn or Prydain; in Irish as Cruithin or Cruithnigh. The Pretanoi of England were driven west and north by Belgic and other Gaulish invaders. These latter were styled "Brittani" by Julius Caesar, who got the name from the Gauls. "Brittani" was adopted by these post-Pretanoi invaders from the Romans, and is a name which, according to Prof. O'Rahilly, should be reserved for the original inhabitants of these islands. Thus we see that the name "Britan" is very ancient and pre-Gaelic, and who the "long-lived Britan" of Tubbridbritain was will always remain a matter of controversy.

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## The High Crosses of Western Ossory

BY HELEN ROE, M.A.

**D**URING the year Miss Helen Roe published a booklet on The High Crosses of Western Ossory. She describes in great detail and with many illustrations the High Crosses of Ahenny, Kilkieran, Killamery and Kilree and the inscribed stone of Tibberaghny. Miss Roe gives first an introductory essay on the special features of this group of crosses. Then she deals with each cross in detail, giving historical notes in each locality.

An important feature of the book is the large number of illustrations. Richard Lahert designed the cover and also the map showing the various sites. In addition there are sixteen full page illustrations showing the crosses in general and also special features of the crosses.

The Kilkenny Archaeological Society are to be congratulated on undertaking the publication of this valuable booklet. A note states that the Society wishes to thank Bord Failte Eireann and all those who contributed towards the cost of publication. The price is only three shillings.