

Three Castles

T. P. LYNG

CROSSROADS

The present townland and demesne of Threecastles are approximately bounded on the north by the river Nore and occupy some 650 acres between the Nore and the townlands of Ballydaniel and Killaree. Threecastles Demesne is bounded by the Kilkenny road from a point opposite the Shot — where the Dinan meets the Nore — to within a hundred yards of Threecastles post office. Lying thus strategically at the junction of the natural passes through the valleys of the Nore and the Dinan we expect to find this locality associated with castles. A very early reference to these passes is found in the story of the duel between the mythological Conal Cearnach and Lughaidh Mac Con. They agreed to fight in Airgid-ros i.e. Silver Wood — the ancient name of the Nore valley from Ballyragget to Threecastles — and to approach the meeting point by different routes from the neighbourhood of Kilcullen. Lughaidh came by Bealach Gabhran (1)—Gowran pass, by the Barrow — to Bealach Smechuin, which must have been the pass from Gowran to Threecastles. Conall came across GABHAIR(1) i.e. the 'Comer Hills, by the Dinan pass to meet Lughaidh somewhere in the neighbourhood of Threecastles. Lughaidh lost and "LAOI NA LEACHT" (2) informs us that he was buried under "the carn" in the "plain of Airgidros" i.e. "The Plain of the Silver Wood".

"Ata lecht Luighdeach Ce Tois,
Fo'n Carn (3) h-i Muig Argatrois."

SILVER LAND

A tradition of silver has been well established in this

1. Gabhair; gen. gabhra, gabhron; a hill name associated with gobhar a horse. c.f. Knockardigur i.e. Cnoc-airde-gabhra c.f. ardgour in Scot., Killgorey, i.e. Cill Gabhra and Gowran from Bealach Gabhran.

2. Song of the Burials. Book of Leinster.

3. Toormore i.e. Teamhair Mor, was Coroneduff i.e. Carn Ui Duach, The Ui Duach Cairn.

locality. Enna Airgtheach according to the Four Masters, made silver shields here in A.M. 3817. When the Munster men invaded Ossory, at the beginning of Christianity, they plundered from the Ui Bairche, (4) who inhabited Airgidros, "bars and ingots of silver, cups and vessels, chess men and chess boards". We may note here that a boring for oil at Lismaine, last year did not give evidence of either silver or oil.

MUNSTER RELICS

The Munster invasion of Ossory is believed to be reflected in the name *Banta na Muimhneach* (5), of a townland which lies between Threecastles and Freshford. Gowran was long regarded as the north-east limit of Munster. Traditions of St. Kieran, kinsman of the invading Munster O'Driscolls are strong in the Nore valley. A Munster Dui or Da gave us the tribe name *Ui Duach* of one of Ossory's best known sub-kingdoms, and the background to the history of Threecastles. Numerous variations of the name *Ui Duach* are found with reference to Threecastles and to the tribal lands that brought it to prominence. The territory of *Ui Duach* extended from *Durrow* and *Doonane* in Leix to *Ballydaniel* and *Dunmore* in Kilkenny. Today the Gaelic glory of *Ui Duach* is tombstoned by the 1½ acre townland of *Odagh* (6) that is hidden in *Ballycarran* and the Norman glory of *Ui Duach* is tombstoned by the 1 acre townland of *Purcell's Garden* that is surrounded by *Threecastles*. Today's road signposts carry the Gaelic *Darmhagh Ui nDuach*. (7) (*Durrow*) and the name *Ui Duach* is fossilized in the present day *Firoda* (8) and *Knockanadogue* (9) in Kilkenny, and

4. *Ui Bairche* tribe name, gave *Slievemargy* i.e. *Sliabh mBairche* name of hills on Kilkenny-Leix-Carlow boundary i.e. *Gower* or *Gabhair* above at 1. c.f. Barony of *Slievemargy*, *Beanna Boirche* and *Bargy* in *Wexford*.

5. *Bawntanameenagh* — Munstermen lands.

6. Fossilized form of *Ui Duach*, Church of *Odagh* built 1796. £500 from First Fruits fund, Topog Dict. Lewis.

7. Oak Plain of *Ui Duach*.

8. *Fir* (pron *feez* in Kilkenny Gaelic) *O Duach* i.e. Border of *Ui Duach*.

9. *Cnocan Ui Duach* written *Knockane Idogh* in Survey and Distribution, *Ui Duach* (Border) Hill.

Arduagh (10), on the Carlow border and *Threecastles* post-office displays the Gaelic *Ban Ua nDuach*. In Irish historical sources the places *Lowhill* (11) *Doonane* (12), *Coolcullen* (13) and *Dysart* (14) also carry the designation "*Ua nDuach*" or some variation of it.

COURT

Ban Ua nDuach translates *Court of Ui Duach* as we use *Sanfords Court* or *Foulk's Court*. The Red Book of Ossory at various dates from 1300 to 1500 uses "Castellum" or "Castrum" instead of Ban (Bawn) and uses *Odogh* or *Odock* as a place rather than as a people which the Gaelic usage conveys. We may compare "*The Bawn of Dummore*". (Dunmore Castle) which was built by Edmund Butler in 1483.

LUNASA

A versified legend concerning St. Patrick's annoyance with the pagans of Ui Duach might be interpreted as a summary of pagan practices in the district:—

Mallaim, mallaim, Ui Duach!

Biodh san or Dhion (15) a gcruach,

Mallaim, mallaim, Ui Duach!

Biodh san ar bharr luachair (16)

Mallaim, mallaim, Ui Duach!

Biodh san ar an Daibhnin Rua (17).

If we equate "cruach" here with Crom Cruach alias Crom Dubh, the Celtic stone idol, and equate "Luachair" to Hugh,

10. Pron, locally Araduch and Araduff, Ard Ui Duach i.e. Height (on border) of Ui Duach.

11. Leamh-Choill O nDuach — Elm Wood of Ui Duach.

12. Dunan O nDuach i.e. fort (on border) of Ui Duach.

13. Coolcullen-duff i.e. Cul Cuilinn Ui Duach, Holly Hill (on border) of Ui Duach.

14. Desard-in-Dogh i.e. Disart Ua nDuach. Corrigan II 163.

15. Suggest Dithin i.e. Destroyer i.e. name of River Deen at Castlecomer.

16. Hill sources of River Deen were known as Slieve Loo i.e. Mountain of ugh.

17. Daibhnin is Dubh-aibhnin i.e. Blackriver which is called Dinan.

the Celtic god of light and weather, and if we add to these the folklore that Patrick cursed the *stones* of the *Dinan* and that a "*piast*" or serpent was changed into the river, we get a pretty picture of paganism.

The *Fair of Roighne*, (*Airgidros* was part of *Roighne*) which was a celebration associated with the festival of *Lugh* or *Lunasa*, was resurrected by Carroll (859 A.D.), King of Ossory and father of Brenan, first of the Brenan chiefs of *Ui Duach*. The "*Pattern of the Dinan*" was traditionally celebrated on the banks of the *Dinan* on *Crom-dubh Sunday* i.e. the last Sunday in July or the advent of *Lunasa* (August). *Lunasa* is now celebrated at *Threecastles* dancing-board by having the publichouse licence extended to midnight on the Sunday before August. The *Pattern of the Dinan* has been traditionally associated with thunder and lightning. Perhaps a religious switch was intended when St. Swithin was made patron of *Ardaloo* where the "*pattern*" of the *Dinan* was anciently held. Shearman (*Loca Patriciana*) surmises that *Ardaloo* surely is *Ard Lugh* i.e. *Lugh's Height*, from the legend, described above, concerning *Conal Cearnach* and *Lughaidh*.

INSPECTION TOUR

Airgidros was a Munster gateway and the *Gower Hill* its bastion and hence this locality gets considerable mention in Irish annals. *Muirceartach of the Heather Cloaks* came through here on his famous winter circuit of Ireland in 941 and the Normans chased the King of Ossory through here in 1171.

Cormacan accompanied *Muirceartach* on his circuit from *Aileach* and gave an on-the-spot commentary. Of the passage from *Gowran* to *Tubrid* he wrote :—

Ro ba sneachta dun ar lar
 I mBealach glorach Ghabhran
 Adhaigh dun 'con Fliodais find
 Fuaireamar biadh agus linn
 Don ruachtar tuirc ar dtoighe
 O rioghraidhe fhel Osraighe

(There was snow on the ground before us in the noisy Pass of Gowran.

A night we spent at the fair Fliodais.

We got food and ale and wild boars were brought to our camp from the hospitable chief of Ossory).

The "hospitable chief" was Muirceartach's father-in-law. The "fair Fliodais" has been identified by the late Henry Morris as the *Nuenna river* (18) which flows through Freshford to join the Nore north of Threecastles.

EXIT MUNSTER

O Heerin (a. 1420) among his 780 verses on the tribes and chiefs of southern Ireland describes the Ossory leaders at the time of the Norman invasion. Donchadh — King of Ossory alias King of Gowran, had his chief fortification at Gowran. The Normans attacked Gowran in the summer of 1169 and forced Donnchadh into the *Slieve Margy* alias *Gower Hill* of *Ui Duach* where Donnchadh was slain.

Of *Ui Duach* *O Heerin* wrote :—
 H-*Ui Duach* *Osraighe* an *fluinn* te
Fiond-chlar *fairsing* na *Feoire*
Ni fadhalta *feadh* an *chlair*
Fear a *baranta* *O Braonain*

The "protecting *O Brenan* of the fair wide plain of the Nore" apparently had his residence at *Threecastles*.

In 1170 *Dermot Mac Murrough* — whose son and heir had been blinded by *Donnchadh* because of *Dermot's* affair with *Donnchadh's* wife — returned via *Gower* and *Ui Duach* to subdue *Donal*, son of *Donnchadh*. *Donal* had fortified his position by "plashing" in the woody pass to *Freshford* — the barony here is still called *Crannagh* i.e. tree-filled—but the Normans routed *Donal* and he fled with his men into *Munster*.

CHIEFS AND KNIGHTS

In 1171 *Strongbow* attended his "court" at *Odagh* and invited *Donal* to arrange a treaty. So we can say that *Strongbow* personally supervised the erection of *Ban O nDuach*. At the court *O'Brien* of *Munster* (son-in-law of *Dermot*) who had been holding *Ui Duach* with *Dermot*, advised treachery against *Donal* but *Maurice de Prendergast*, with knightly chivalry,

18. *Nuenna* is *An Uaine* i.e. *Green*.

Henry Morris was informed by an old inhabitant that *Bearna* here was called *Bearna*—*leeshe* i.e. *Bearna-Fhliodhais*.

drew his sword and conducted Donal back safely to his fastnesses. This incident has been enshrined in Aubrey de Vere's "*Faithful Norman*" :—

“To Ossory’s King they had pledged their word
 He stood in their camp and their word they broke,
 Then Maurice the Norman upraised his sword
 The cross on its hilt he kissed and spoke;
 So long as this sword or this arm hath might
 I swear by the cross which is lord of all
 By the faith and honour of noble and knight
 Who touches yon prince by this hand shall fall.”

CASTELLATED

These events took place at the great Norman mote which still stands at *Threecastles* and which was known as "*The Mote*" up to recent times. There are no traces of a castle on its two acre summit now but of that later. The present Henessy premises probably occupy the original bailey of the castle. There is an old building in Henessy’s farm-yard which was known as "the Chapel" and which locates one of the castles of *Threecastles*. Another, a square keep, still standing was the presbytery of the parish church. A third stood where the rectory is now built. The rectory was built in 1800.

Strongbow had established a Norman foothold at *Threecastles* and the Irish chiefs were bewildered by methodical Norman feudalisation. Wooden castles were built at *Threecastles*, *Comer* (19) and *Clogh* (20) and stone castles were built at these places about the year 1200. The names *Castleedough*, *Castlecomer* and *Clogh* were born, each name referring to a *castle*. Norman title was claimed to the surrounding lands and Donal of Ossory was regarded as a vassal of Strongbow following the treaty of *Ui Duach* (Odagh). The Norman title

19. Comer is Cumar i.e. meeting of waters at Castlecomer. But the name was transferred to the whole Deen valley, c.f. Comaraigh Mountains.

20. Anciently Magh Leithid Plain-Width. Hence Cloch Maigh Leithid—Stone (castle) of Moylade—now abbreviated to Clogh, c.f. Cloch Phuco, Fulk’s Castle, and Cloch-mantach (Clomantagh) and Cloch-rinneach (Clorinka), both meaning "battlemented stone".

to the *Manor of Odagh* was held by direct descendants of Strongbow until 1375.

BREHON AND FEUDAL

In 1219 the *Manor of Odoch* was granted to Joan, great-grand-daughter of Strongbow, while the Manor of le Cumbre ('Comer) was granted to Joan's sister Sibella. Joan got the lowlands but Sibella got Kildare along with the highlands. The Brenan chiefs and their clans retreated into the highlands and maintained comparative independence until the Strafford plantation of *Edough* in 1637. The boundaries of *Edough* were at that date established by inquisition and are still intact under the *Wandesforde* mining rights that extend to the boundaries of the former Castlecomer Estate. These limits are sign-posted today by the "Duach" border lands of *Firoda* i.e. *Fir Ui Duach* (8) *Knockanadogue* i.e. *Cnocan Ui Duach* (9) and *Arduagh* i.e. *Ard Ui Duach* (10).

The limits of lowland *Ui Duach* alias *Odagh*, have become lost in a maze of grants and confiscations. Among the grantees of *Ui Duach* were de Evereux, de Launde, de Troia (Troy), Rothe and Shea. Costard gave the name *Villa Costard* to part of *Jenkinstown* Rochford had *Kilmocar* in 1200; de Vesey had *Magh Leithid* (20) in 1298; Damer gave his name to *Damers-town* in 1247; Cantwell gave his name to *Cantwell's Court*; St. Leger acquired rights to *Leamhchoill* (11) *Ballyouskill*, *Rosconnell*, and *Castlemarket*; the Ballylarkin Shortalls acquired the rights to a dismembered Manor of Odoch in 1500 but forfeited to Cromwellians in 1653.

There were Butler Castles at *Ballyragget* (1490), *Lowhill*, *Durrow*, *Lower Firoda*, *Castlecomer*, *Castlemarket*, *Ardaloo*, *Rathbeagh* and *Dunmore*. There were Purcell Castles at *Esker*, *Kilcollan*, *Lismaine*, *Ballyfoyle*, *Drymerrin* and *Garranagully* (1552). Purcells gave their name to *Purcell's Inch* and to *Pobal an Phuirsealaigh* alias *Ballyfoyle*. The "Fulk" christian name of the de la Freneys is found in *Foulksrath* (1528) and maybe *Cloppook* (20). Archers had a castle at *Corbettstown*. Graces had a castle at *Firoda* (1700). The Shortalls had castles at *Ballylarkin* and *Tubrid* (1596) Martin Dormer's Castle (1701) gave us the name *Ballymartin*.

The native Irish who had once built the cloich-theach or

round tower as defence against the Danes now began to build the Cloch-mantach c.f. Clomantagh, i.e. embrasured stone (house) or cloch-rinneach, c.f. Clorinka, i.e. Merlon stone (house), or simply castle. The Brennan castle at Clorinka was taken by Purcells in 1385. The Brennans also built castles at Coon (21) and *Kiltown* and there were O'Byrne castles at Kilmocar and Byrnesgrove.

RETALIATION

Earlier settlements of the O'Byrnes gave their name to the *Ui Duach* border townlands of Tullobrin (22), Knocknabrana (22) and Ballinabranagh (23). They showed their resentment towards the Anglo-Normans by an attack on Threecastles as described in the *Leabhar Branach* — Book of the O'Byrnes 1570—1615—:—:—

Baile tri gCaislean gan cion
 Mar Chill tSile uaidh airgthior
 Re tslogh nior dhaith a deghuil
 An Raith mhor gur mhilleabhair

It would appear from this verse that in the last quarter of the 16th century Threecastles was plundered because it was as unloved by the native Irish as was Kiltreeley. Also that a demolition was carried out on the "great rath", the demolition of some considerable structure which was most likely the original Norman Castle. Most interesting is the evidence that at this early period *Odagh* alias *Ban O nDuach*, *Banogh* etc. alias *Castle-edough*, *Castrum de Udogh*, etc., was known as *Baile tri gCaislean* i.e. *Threecastles*.

RECONCILIATION

During the rebellion of 1641 native Irish and Anglo-Normans swallowed their differences and we find Brenans and Butlers, Purcells and Bryans leading the eighteen weeks siege of the Castle of Comer where the recently planted English had

21. Coon is Cuan locally called "The Strand" as Cuan means "harbour" or "river winding".

22. Tullobrin — Tulach Ui Broin, Knocknabranagh — Cnoc na (m) Branach. Ballinabranagh — Baile na (m) Branach. All deriving from Bran which gives Byrne.

23. Galmoy — Gabhal Maighe — (River) fork of plain.

taken refuge. The scattered history of Threecastles drifts into the history of Jenkinstown and Castlecomer which can be followed with considerable unity down to the present day.

REMAINS MEDIEVAL

The Presbytery is the only one of Threecastles castles which is evident today. Its ruin is attached to the west wall of the 40 x 22 feet remains of the parish church. The walls of the presbytery are about eight feet thick and about 24 feet of its original 60 or 80 feet height remain.

The entrance door at the parish church is in the middle of the north wall. It is six feet by three feet, is round-headed and of cut stone and was originally approached by a flight of steps. The patron of this church was St. Nicholas (Dec. 6th).

Burials continued in the adjoining graveyard centuries after the church had fallen into disuse. Carrigan dated the earliest grave-stones at about 1600. There are many later stones to families of Butler, Brennan, Hennessy, Kelly, Birch etc.

Churches at Rathbeagh, Druimdeilgneach (Thornback) and Clashacrow had similarly fortified castles. Perhaps these castles, standing at the outmeres of Ui Duach expressed the attitude of the natives of the baronies of Crannagh, Galmoy (24), Fassadinan (25) and Gowran that derive their names from woods, rivers and hills that meet at Odagh.

24. Fassadinan — Fasach Daibhnin — Black River — march-land.

SOURCES

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