

Castles of North Kilkenny

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The ancient Kingdom of Ossory was divided according to Brehon Laws into Magha or plains, defined by natural physical boundaries and which no longer exist in any form. After the Norman Invasion the land was divided into Baronies comprising sufficient land for the upkeep of a baron. Kilkenny was divided into 9 baronies, the land divisions still used today.

North Kilkenny is associated with 3 Magha and 3 Baronies. Threecastles is in the barony of Crannagh and is locally known as Ban Ua nDuach, its Irish place name. In it lie the valleys of the Dinan and Nore and the plain stretching eastwards known as Airgid Ros – the silver wood. There is a strong local tradition that silver was mined here in 183 B.C. but no evidence can be found to support it. However, the focal point in the plain is Rathbeagh, Rath of the Birches. If the wood here was of birch trees the eventual settlers seeing a wood of birches for the first time may have been struck by the silver bank of the trees and have given it the name Airgid Ros.

Airgid Ros was populated by the Ui Bairche, a tribe of the Firbolgs. According to the Four Masters the Munster men invaded Ossory at the beginning of Christianity and plundered from the Ui Bairche bars and ingots of silver, cups and vessels, chessmen and chess boards. These Munstermen, led by Clich Dubh eventually corrupted into Odagh and covered the N.E. corner of the present Co. Kilkenny.

The first mention of Irigid Ros in history is in Irish mythology when it is said that Conal Cearnach and Lughaidh MacConn agreed to fight a duel there in which Lughaidh was slain, buried in the cairn of Airgid Ros and later defiled by the Firbolgs.

The ancient name of Threecastles was Ard Lughaidh or height of Lughaidh. The bridge on the Nore known as Ardaloo Bridge was formerly a ford and the most important gateway into Ossory. In 859 in commemoration of Lughaidh, Carroll, King of Ossory, restored the ancient festival of Lunasa traditionally celebrated on Crom Dubh Sunday, the last in July the eve of Lunasa or August. That festival was held until recent years as the Pattern of the Dinan.

At the time of the Norman Invasion Donn Cadh was King of Ossory and a sworn enemy of Dermot McMurrough. As soon as the Normans had consolidated themselves in Leinster Dermot directed them against Donn Cadh. They attacked his fortification at Gowran and killed or routed his tribesmen to Slieve Margy, Brennan country. The Normans withdrew to winter quarters but returned in 1170 to subdue Donn Cadh's son Donal, who had refused to submit to Dermot. The Normans entered Ossory by Slieve Margy, down through Muckalee and across Airgid Ros. Donal fortified a position in the pass of Acadh Ur, i.e., Freshford, filling the pathways with trees and brushwood. Thick wooded hills to the north and south afforded him protection and may have given the name Crannagh (tree filled) to the barony. Here Donal withstood the Norman attack for three days but was eventually defeated not by valour but by strategy. The Normans withdrew and Donal's men rashly pursued them thinking them retreating. As soon as they reached

open ground the Normans turned around and availing of the open space a great slaughter of the Irish took place in the area now called Clashacrow or the Hollow of Slaughter.

Donal fled into Munster and the Normans withdrew to Ferns. Shortly afterwards Maurice De Prendergast, one of the bravest of McMurrough's allies falling out with the King of Leinster transferred his allegiance to Donal who with his aid invaded and wasted the Kingdom of Leinster. De Prendergast became so popular among the Ossorians that they wished to make him one of their chiefs with the title Maurice of Ossory. He declined the offer however and departed for England only to return with Strongbow in 1170.

In 1171 McMurrough died and Strongbow led an army to lay claim to Ossory as part of his newly acquired Kingdom of Leinster. He fortified the ford at Ardaloo and erected there a motte and baily. This edifice locally and correctly known as 'The Mound' still exists. It was probably built by Strongbow himself and titled the Manor of Odagh and remained in the possession of his direct descendants until the death of David Strabolgi, 13th Earl of Atholl in 1375. When finished a wooden castle was built on its two acre summit and here Strongbow established his court of Odagh.

Donal of Ossory with past experience did not give battle to the Normans but accepted an invitation by Strongbow to make a treaty. Maurice De Prendergast having safely conducted Donal from his fastness discovered that a plot was afoot to murder MacGiolla Padraig. With drawn sword he rushed into the conference chamber and upbraided the assembly there. The incident has been related by Aubrey de Vere:

"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 you prince by this hand shall fall".

After this Donal was confirmed in his Kingship of Ossory but had to recognise Strongbow as his overlord. The Normans having secured a foothold in Ossory the implementation of the feudal system was carried out rapidly. Despite the treaty Strongbow granted lands in Ossory to other Norman knights and the natives were amazed at the speed with which castles were built, first wooden and later stone structures. Donal, viewing this activity with alarm gathered his tribesmen together and departed into Upper Ossory where he drove out the native Delaneys and established his seat at Lisduff. Castles were built at Threeecastles and in numerous other places in Ossory by the Normans. In an attempt to stem the flow of invaders the Brennans built a castle at Cloghrinka but this was taken from them by the Purcells.

When Henry II visited Ireland Mac Giolla Padraig pledged his

allegiance to him and was confirmed in his lands in Upper Ossory. He remained faithful to the Crown and his heirs and descendants remained in Upper Ossory. In 1566 one of them was created Baron of Castletown under the following conditions:

(1) To change the name to Fitzpatrick.

(2) To live in the English manner.

(3) To speak English and bring up his children according to English customs.

In 1691 the Baron of Castletown was outlawed and the title abolished.

Meantime in Odagh the Norman grants caused the Brennan clans to retreat into the highlands maintaining comparative independence until the Stafford plantation in 1637. Following the Cromwellian despoliation many dispossessed Irish went underground and sabotaged the properties of the settlers. These were called Tories. The priest the tory and the wolf were the most hunted creatures in the century following Cromwell. Redmond O'Hanlon in Armagh and the three Brennans in Kilkenny were famous Tories at this time. The Brennan Tories were Tall James Brennan and Little James Brennan of Croghtenclogh and Patrick Brennan of Killeshin. Many of the Tories had to become highwaymen and many sought liberty in the Jacobite movement. Dispossessed Jacobites went underground with the name Rapparees. An offshoot of the north Kilkenny Rapparees was the Kellymount Gang which produced the 18th century highwayman, Freaney the Robber. The activities of these gangs were later enshrined in song and story, e.g. *Life and Adventures of Freaney the Robber* and the ballad 'Brennan on the Moor'.

In 1636 Sir Charles Wandesforde purchased Odagh for £20,000. As he was unable to gain possession peacefully Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Stafford, and Lord Lt. of Ireland seized by force about 100 families from Odagh and held them prisoners until they yielded up their titles and their lands. In 1639 Sir Charles took out new patents. In 1640 he made his will and knowing that the O'Brennans had been unjustly treated left £6,000 to trustees for their benefit. These trusts were evaded under various pretexts although the O'Brennans included this legacy in their wills. During the reign of William in 1695 a petition was entered that the O'Brennans had taken part in the late rebellion and their claim was quashed forever. Since the beginning of the last century the O'Brennans had left their old haunts as no leases would be given to any owner of the name Brennan on the Castlecomer Estate where a Brennan in broadcloth would not be tolerated.

In 1848 and the following years nearly 1,300 inhabitants of Odagh were deported to America. More than half of these victims of the Celtic Exodus never reached their destination. Despite these oppressions the O'Brennans still flourished. Their seat, once in Odagh is now at Ballyragget and in the hills around the Brennans are so numerous that nick names and their mother's maiden names are used to distinguish them.

The other inhabitants of Odagh, chiefly Purcells and Shortalls were also dispossessed of their lands but having nowhere to go as the Brennans were

too strongly entrenched on the hilly ground emigrated and only small pockets of these families remain. The Purcells are remembered by a 1 acre site called Purcells' Garden, the Ui Bairche in Slieve Margy and the Barony in Wexford. The territory of the Kingdom of Ossory still exists as the diocesan See of Ossory which is nearly identical with the old kingdom at the time of the Norman Invasion.

The territory of Odagh has been lost in grants and plantations and now exists as a $1\frac{1}{2}$ acre site about 2 miles past Ballycarron on which stands the church of Odagh built by the Church of Ireland in 1897 for £500.

Threecastles, after which the townland is named, were built here, the first on whose ruins the rectory was built in 1800, the second in Mr. P. Hennessy's farmyard on the site of the old bailey and the last still standing attached to the old church at Ardaloo, both in ruins.

Tubrid or Tubrid na Brilon strategically straddles the ancient and easiest route between Ossory and Munster. Who the Briton was is disputable but it is popularly believed to have been St. Patrick.

Muirceartach MacNeill, known as Muirceartach of the Leathern Cloaks was heir apparent to the High Kingship of Ireland in succession to Donnachad of Meath. In 941 Muirceartach set out on his famous circuit of Ireland to impress the Irish chieftains as well as to wreak vengeance on his enemies. In the depths of winter he clothed his soldiers in leather cloaks and armed them appropriately. The passage of the leathern cloaks through Ossory was marked by a great show of friendship, one forged by the hostility of Cashel and cemented by the marriage of Dubh Dara, daughter of Ceallagh, King of Ossory, to Muirceartach. At Tubrid was an ideal camp site amid food, water and friends. The field known locally as Barna Campa was probably the site of Muirceartach's camp.

About 1900 British regiments camped here on two occasions during manoeuvres and during the Truce the Volunteers paraded here for inspection by Ernie O'Malley who however never arrived.

Tubrid church in ruins dedicated to St. Patrick belonged to St. John's Abbey, Kilkenny, and Tubrid castle was Shortall property. There is a fine spring well a little to the south-west of the ruins named Patrick's Well but holding no veneration for sanctity. Probably the Briton's Well gave its name to the parish and through change of time its name was altered to its present more popular one.

The castle stands a little to the south-east of the church 237' x 17' three storeys high with pointed doorway to the east side and 8' walls. In 1621 Nicholas Shortall held these lands but in 1653 forfeited them to the Earl of Ormonde. Tradition attributes the erection of Tubrid castle to Mairead Ni Ghearoid whose bed is pointed out on top of the castle keep. Many castles in Co. Kilkenny are attributed to Mairead but all were those over which her husband the Earl of Ormonde held sway. It may have been a Butler castle originally and passed to the Shortalls in the early part of the 16th century and restored to them in 1653 by virtue of some ancient claim.

Rathbeagh is one of Ireland's most historic monuments. The rath is that



of Heremon, son of Milesius. In 1500 B.C. according to O'Flaherty or 1700 according to the Four Masters Heremon, one of the sons of Milesius having killed his brother Heber in battle came south and erected a fortress at Ardaloo and made his residence at Rathbeagh which was selected by him to be his last resting place. About 840 B.C. Heremon fought a battle at Coon against Heber's kin and defeated them. Heremon survived Heber by 14 years and was buried in the tumulus here. The rath is situated on the banks of the river Nore at a considerable height over the river bed. It is flat on top and oval in shape and its greatest length north to south is 45 yards and east to west 20 yards. It is surrounded by a vallum or trench 7' high and 12' wide. Sepulchral chambers probably exist within the mound wherein were deposited the remains of Heremon, the ancestor of the Milesian families of Leinster and Connaught.

Tuatha the Legitimate built a residence on the rath about 120 A.D. It is said locally that one of the kings living on the rath coined his own money.

In 769 A.D. the Picts of Scotland made one of their raids into the south and were defeated at the great bright fortress of weapons at Rathbeagh.

The Roman Catholic church of Rathbeagh dedicated to St. Catherine Virgin and Martyr was thrown about 1700 and a Protestant church erected at the same time on its foundation. The latter church has been deserted and roofless for at least 200 years. Tradition has it that though it was built for Protestant worship no service was ever held in it. It is also said that the bell of the old Cathedral Church at Rathbeagh was found in a sandpit on the north side of the present graveyard and that it was presented by a local magnate, Caulfield Best of Clone to the Protestant church of Killeshin where it is still.

Within the church lie fragments of an altar tomb erected to Theobald Purcell and his wife, Catherine. Down the centre is a raised cross and at the top an I.H.S., carvings of the Sun and Moon, remains of two shields, one exhibiting two boars heads. The date is 1613. There are several Purcell tombs around. O'Curry writes there was a well between the church and the Nore called St. Catherines Well. A pattern was held here on June 24th and December 6th (feast of St. Catherine) a holyday in the parish. The well has long since been destroyed.

The ancient castle, a Purcell one, which served as a presbytery to the Roman Catholic church still remains attached to its Protestant successor, both alike in ruins.

CORRIGENDA

EXCAVATIONS AT KELLS PRIORY

— Thomas Fanning, O.K.R. 1973

P.61. fourth line, for "Mone" read Monte

P:63. second line, for "more" read "none"

P.63. twenty third line, for "wallfittings" read "Wall footings"

P.64. third line, for "for" read "the".