

# Ireland versus England

## The First Battle — Clais an Chro

By Padraig Mac Cárthaigh

IN the year 1170 A.D. a fateful battle was fought in County Kilkenny, Diarmaid Mac Murchú, chieftain of Uí Cinnsealaigh — or Wexford — had been worsted in his long conflict with Dóna!l Mac Giolla Pádraig of Osraí — or Kilkenny now. Having no allies in Ireland, Mac Murchú sought the aid of Norman mercenaries in Wales. These soldiers of fortune — Robert Fitzstephen, Fitzhenry, Fitzgerald, de Prendergast, de Monte Marisco, etc. — had been landing their knights or cavalry and their three hundred archers, “hinds, knights and yeomen” on the coast of Wexford and gathering them together — from 1167 to 1169 — in Fearná Mhór.

The Norman army consisted of trained and disciplined units. They were regular mercenary troops whose sole occupation was war and conquest. During the 10th and 11th centuries they established their sway over France and Britain, the Holy Land and Sicily. Now in the 12th century they were welcomed to Ireland by Mac Murchú, who claimed to be king of Leinster. And great was the evil thereof.

The immediate trouble afflicting Mac Murchú was the Danish colony in the town of Wexford. The Normans, led by Robert Fitzstephen and Robert de Barrí, under the protection of the Norman archers, climbed the walls and captured the town. Then the victors retired to Fearná to rest and refresh themselves and prepare for the attack on Mac Murchú's inveterate enemy, Mac Giolla Pádraig of Ossory.

In battle array the Normans were armed with the bow which carried death at a distance, and were flanked on either side by a squadron of horsemen with long lances, shields, helmets and coats of mail. They little feared the native Irish, armed with pikes and darts, or the gallowglasses wielding their broad battle-axes. The Irish troops, though brave and inured to fighting, could not stand against the far-reaching arrows, the long lances, and the military skill of the Normans.

The Norman-Wexford army — 3,000 fighting men, commanded by Maurice de Prendergast — entered Ossory by the pass of Gowran. Mac Giolla Pádraig of Ossory with 5,000 men awaited the enemy. He barricaded the narrow forest-tracks with stockades of intertwined branches. The battle lasted from morning until eventide, until at last the Normans, though with considerable loss, forced their way into the plain, and laid waste the country. Donncha, King of Ossory, fell in the fray.

Then, thinking it safer to return to Fearná, the Normans returned through the wilderness to the Dinín river, and across the Sliabh Mairge hills, through the valleys of the Barrow and Slaney to Fearná.

No sooner had Dermot Mac Murchú retired, however, than he found that Donall, successor of Donncha Mac Giolla Pádraig, had revolted and refused submission to his authority. Accordingly, Mac Murchú organised a fresh expedition into Ossory on a larger scale than before. Donall Caomhánach commanded 5,000 men of Uí Cinnsealaigh, and a contingent of Ostment under compulsion from Wexford town. This great host marched over the mountains, by the cutting through which the Slaney flows, into the barony of Forth in County Carlow. They crossed the Barrow at the usual pass — the old Bridge of Leighlin — and encamped for the night by the river Burren and the old historical Dinn Rígh.

Having moved from Leighlin, Dermot crossed the hills of Sliabh Mairge by Cúilcullen and Muckalee till he came to Magh Airgead Ros and the river Nore. This plain occupies the central portion of County Kilkenny on both sides of the River Nore. Here the waters of the Nore, the Dinín, the Nuenna and the Airgne intermingle and oftentimes inundate the surrounding countryside.

Meanwhile Dónall Mac Giolla Pádraig of Ossory was not idle. He collected all his available forces and Munster allies from Banta na Muimhneach in Magh Airgead Ros, and took up his position in the pass or defile of Acha Úr, or Freshford. No better site for the battle could have been selected by the Ossorians. The river Airgne flows directly from south to north to join the Nuenna and then flow into the Nore, impeding any advance of the enemy from the Nore. The thickly wooded hills to the west and to the south afforded protection to the defenders and enabled them to hold out in desperation for three days. Mac Giolla Pádraig trenched the pass with a hedge of stakes and intertwined branches on the top of his earthen rampart. Mac Giolla Pádraig did not dispute the passage of the Nore, but fortified the passage of Acha Úr against the attackers.

The advance units of the two armies contacted one another on the banks of the Nuenna where it flows into the Nore. A running fight took place for about half a mile all along the Nuenna and through Cúil Íseal. The Ossorians retreated to where the Airgne joins the Nuenna. Here the main forces in the woods, through which the Airgne flows, awaited the onset of the Norman and Wexford forces. This spot is still called **Clais an Chro**, the Hollow of the Slaughter, to tell us of the fierce fight which took place there.

The Normans and their Wexford allies advanced into the wooded and boggy defile. Three days of desperate fighting ensued,



but they failed to carry the stockade and dislodge the Ossorians from their entrenchments. The Wexford troops, who were under the command of Donal Caomhánach, fearing lest they should be defeated, fled through the woods. The little body of Normans were now in a tight place, as their horse could not operate amid the woods and swamps of the pass. Accordingly, Maurice de Prendergast, who was in command, urged his men forward as rapidly as possible, so as to gain the hard open country on the slopes of the hills (Ard an Chró) where the cavalry could act. Meanwhile, the men of Ossory, 2,000 in number, were impetuously pursuing the supposedly retreating invaders. When the hard open ground was reached, the Normans turned and, charging their pursuers, speared them with their long lances and scattered them in utter rout. Mac Murchú's troops, who had fled to the woods earlier in the day, now returned and, joining in the melee, fell upon the wavering and retreating Ossorymen and killed many of those whom the lances of the Normans had speared.

This has been a tedious account of o'd-forgotten, far-off things and a battle long ago — 800 years ago, to be exact. It might never have been written for, as Father Carrigan the historian wrote, the people of Freshford knew nothing about it. As the poet lamented about the farmer who was ignorant of Botany :-

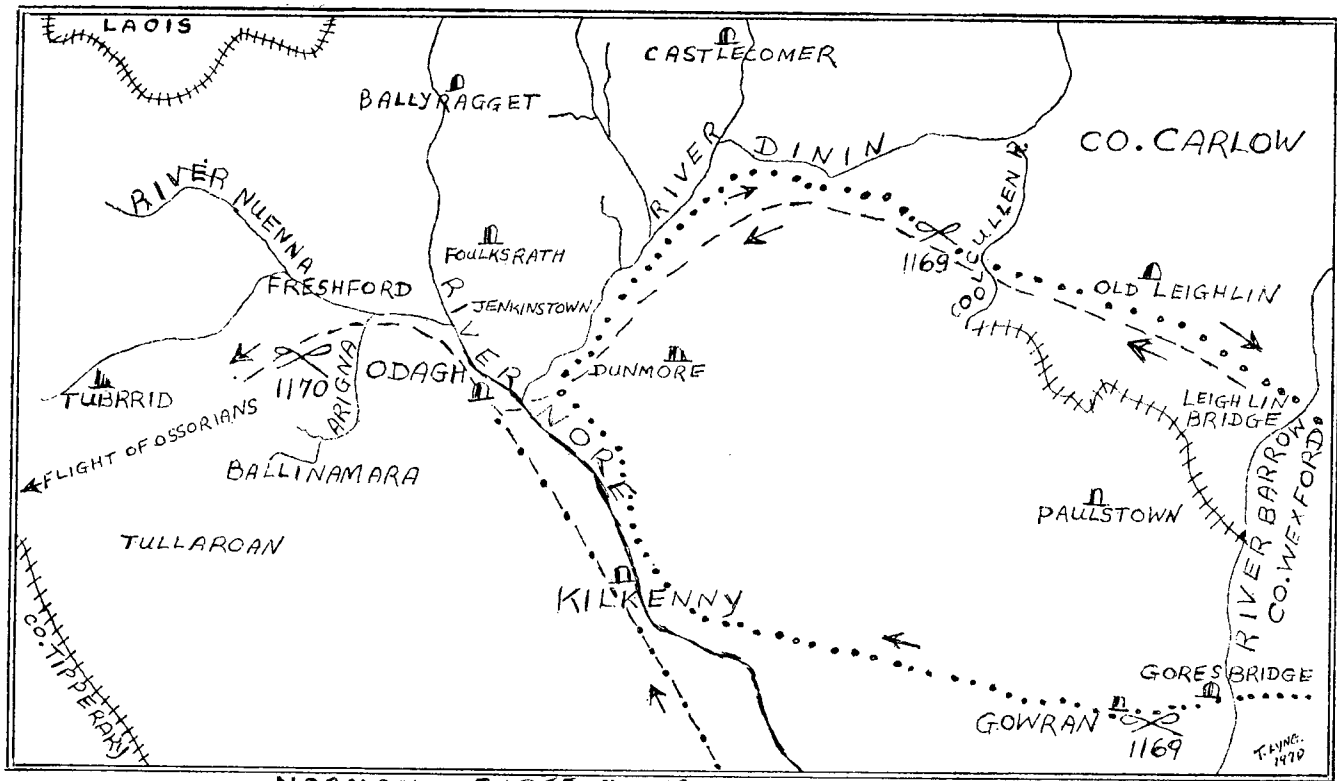
“ A primrose by a river's brim,  
A yellow primrose was to him  
And nothing more.”

So anyone who did not know Irish could not understand the stories that every hedge and rivulet told him. The names Airgne, Clais an Chró, Bearna an Áir, had no significance for him. The history of Clais an Chró was lost when the Irish language went silent on the lips of the people. It did not disappear from rock and field, from road and river. It is those natural features, and their Irish and ancient names that helped me to put together this story of a fateful battle which began the long enmity and wove the web of discord between Ireland and England.

The proper study of mankind is man. The first study of our own history is the study of our own locality. The eyes of the fool are on the ends of the earth; a bird's eye view of history is too dim and indistinct. So let us get back to home-work and field-work.

### MAP OF BATTLEFIELD

The following map will help us to follow the events of the battle. The main river is the Nore. It has three tributaries, the Neunna and Airgne on the right hand and the Dinin on the left. At present, in bad weather, the land around the junctions is under water. In olden times — at the time of the battle of



**NORMAN EXPEDITIONS INTO OSSORY**

SUMMER 1169 .....  
 SPRING 1170 - - - - -

STRONGBOW TO ODAGH COURT 1171 - · - · - ·  
 BATTLES ✂ BOUNDARY #####

Clais an Chró — when there was no drainage, we can imagine the whole district to have been a swamp. The only dry ground was further south. There is a field there called Árd an Chró, the Height or Hill of Slaughter, and nearby another field called Gort na nDeor, the Field of Lamentation. This spot must have been the hard ground where the Norman cavalry won the fight. Much in the same locality is Bearna an Áir, the Gap of the Battle or of the Slaughter. A few fields away from that must have been the camp-field where the Normans lit their fires and bivouacked, for the soil there is still black and soft, because of the ashes and carbon of the camp fires.



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“And I direct that the same shall be delivered within six months after my decease. And I hereby declare that the receipt of the Treasurer for the time of the said Society shall be an effectual discharge to my Executors for the said legacy.”

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