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THE HIDDEN ANNALS



A THOUSAND YEARS OF THE
KINGDOM OF CONNAUGHT
AND THE O'CONOR FAMILY

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THE HIDDEN ANNALS**



BY VINCENT BYRNE M.A. (Dubl.)

**A History of the Kingdom of Connaught
and the O'Conor Family 366 – 1385 AD**

Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

W.B. Yeats

CONNAUGHT

She stands: a thousand-wintered tree
By countless storms imperilled.
Her broad roots coil beneath the sea,
Her branches sweep the world.
Her seed, by heaven's wind conveyed
Across the distant strand,
New forests from her saplings made,
New nations foster'd 'neath their shade,
And linking –
Linking –
Land with land.

And I, on other soil now sown,
Beneath a stranger-star,
Forget not whence that breath was blown
That wafted me afar.
For we are still that ancient seed
On newer soils let fall –
Strong children of the Gaelic breed,
On whom the Mother in her need,
Shall ever –
Ever –
Proudly call.

Take a farmer-culture in the West of Ireland,

West of the Shannon and west to the Atlantic.
Touch it with royalty and nobility and degrade it with war.
Let it learn sickness deformity and famine:
Famine so strong that a life – a child's life –
Would be worth a loaf.
Let the years teach it scholarship and survival,
Cunning and greed
Piety and hope.
Let it be beaten flat by the Invader.
But let it survive against all the odds.
This is Connaught

This book is about the history of the O'Connor family who for over a thousand years styled itself the royalty of Connaught. It is not about the economic, archaeological or sociological background of those times; for that information the reader must go elsewhere.

This book is about the people of Connaught.
It falls into three divisions:

MORNING
AFTERNOON
EVENING

MORNING

CHAPTER 1

THE SEEDS OF TIME

“If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow, and which will not,
Speak then with me, who neither beg nor fear,
Your favours nor your hate.”

Macbeth, Act 1. sc. 3

Sometime in the late 6th or early 7th centuries an anonymous Irish monk took his pen and listed the three great pagan burial-places used by the native royalty from time immemorial. In the first line of these verses he uses the present tense “are” rather than “were”, giving the impression that the “idolaters” are his contemporaries, and not belonging to a long dead past; indeed the term “idolaters”: image-worshippers, is not used in any scornful or triumphalist sense, but merely as a means of identifying those of his countrymen who had not yet received the new faith. These verses are remarkable, for not only do they show the pride of writer in what were seen, even for that time, as ancient remains, but also his admiration for Conchobhor, “that triumphant man”: the earliest ancestor of the O’Conors of Connaught.



Military funeral circa 300 A.D

THE THREE CEMETERIES OF IDOLATERS ARE:
THE CEMETERY OF TAILLTEN,¹ THE SELECT,
THE EVER-CLEAN CEMETERY OF CRUACHAN,²
AND THE CEMETERY OF BRUGH³.

THE HOST OF GREAT MEATH WERE BURIED
IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LORDLY BRUGH;⁴
THE GREAT ULTONIANS USED TO BURY
AT TAILLTEN WITH POMP

THE TRUE ULTONOANS BEFORE CONCHOBHOR
WERE EVER BURIED AT TAILLTEN,
UNTIL THE DEATH OF THAT TRIUMPHANT MAN,
THROUGH WHICH THEY LOST THEIR GLORY

Text and translation by O'Donovan in Petrie's Round. Towers of Ireland, p. 103.



Brugh na Boyne: the palace on the Boyne, 3150 B.C

The name O'Connor is written O'Conchobhair in its Irish form, and has been anglicised at different times to: O'Conquovar, O'Conogher, O'Knogher, O'Connor and O'Connor. The Irish "Conchobhair" means, a hero or champion, hence the family crest of an armed hand and the family motto: "O Dhia gach cu cabrach", i.e. From God comes every helping hero.

Pinkerton, a 19th century historian, says: "We see no reason for denying to Ireland a series of kings older than any in Europe."

This statement becomes all the more impressive now that the ancient Irish chronicles, written in the Irish language from the second century to the landing Henry Plantagenet, have come to light; chronicles that imperceptibly slip from fiction into fact.

These most ancient accounts tell of a time just after the Flood, when Ireland was colonized by one, Pathelon, from Mygdonia in Macedonia. His descendants were subdued by the Fir Bolgs, or Belgae, who in time had to give way to the Tuatha de Danans, called also the Damnoni, and these in their turn were brought under subjection by the three sons of Milesius,⁵ who by the chronicles' reckoning, arrived in Ireland from Spain around 300 B.C. These sons were: Herber, Heremon and Ir, from whom the country takes its name.

“Everyone,” say these chronicles, “who is blue of eye, white of skin, brown of hair, bold, honourable, daring, prosperous; bountiful in the bestowal of property, wealth, and rings, and who is not afraid of battle or combat: they are the descendants of Milesius in Erinn.

“Everyone who is fair-haired, vengeful, large; and every plunderer; every musical person, the professors of musical and entertaining performances; who are adepts in all Druidical and magical arts: they are the descendants of the Tuatha de Danans.

“Everyone who is black-haired, who is a tattler, guileful, tale-telling, noisy, contemptible; every wretched, mean, strolling, unsteady, harsh, and inhospitable person; every slave, every mean thief, the disturbers of every council and every assembly, and the promoters of discord among the people: these are the descendants of the Firbolgs”.⁶

The above descriptions may be of some help to the thoughtful, tactful and diplomatic reader in categorizing his friends, relations and benefactors – if, of course, he is prepared to take the risk.

Milesius’ descendants became the kings or chief rulers of the country, but it was the posterity of the second son, Heremon, that far outstripped all others in dignity and power. “From Heremon to Nial of the Nine Hostages who died in A.D. 407, a period of fifty

generations, everyone in the direct line was either King of Ireland or a king's son, excepting two."⁷

So say the ancient chronicles.

It was from one of these Kings of Ireland, Feredach the Just,⁸ who probably reigned in the latter half of the first century after Christ, that the O'Conor family claims its royal descent. However, it is with his descendant, Eochy Moymedon, that most of the special pedigrees of the O'Conors usually start; probably because he was the last King of Ireland of their line, until the time of Turlough Mor in the eleventh century.

The name O'Conor is written O'Conchobhair in Irish and derives from Concovar, son of Teige, who died in 71 A.D. The name translates as "Champion" or "Hero", and the family's motto: O Dhia gach cu cabrach: From God comes every helping hero, refers to the name of its founder.

CORONATION RITES

It was one of the fundamental rules which governed the Irish succession that no one could be a candidate whose person was subject to any kind of deformity, and no one could be a candidate whose mind was not in every way perfect.

The Book of Ballymote gives a personal description of the High King Cormac, the son of Art at his inauguration at Tara in A.D. 227 as follows:

“Magnificently did Cormac come to this great assembly,
for no man his equal in beauty had preceded him,

excepting Conaire or Angus. His hair was slightly curled, and of a golden colour: a scarlet shield with engraved devices, and golden hooks and clasps of silver he bore: a wide-folding purple cloak on him, with a gem-set gold brooch over his breast: a gold torque round his neck: a white-collared shirt, embroidered with gold, upon him. A girdle with golden buckles, and studded with precious stones, around him: two golden network sandals with golden buckles upon his feet: two spears with golden sockets and many red bronze rivets in his hand; while he stood in the full glow of beauty without defect or blemish. You would think it was a shower of pearls that were set in his mouth: his lips were rubies: his symmetrical body was as white as snow: his cheek was like the mountain-ash berry: his eyes were like the sloe-berry: his brows and eyelashes were like the sheen of a blue-black lance.”

Even allowing for the exaggerated style of this description, it must be obvious that the Irish expected great things from their kings. Certainly, it was necessary in those rough days for the leader, on whom all depended, to be in the peak of physical condition when taking on an occupation which was certainly not for weaklings. Indeed, among the Irish, the blinding of a rival ensured that he could never attain the sovereignty.⁹

The hair of the head and the beard were considered adornments of the features. To cut off the hair of a rival was considered a mark

of the highest contempt, and no one would show his face until time had repaired the injury.

At an earlier election at Tara, Fergus, King of Ulster, spoiled Cormac's chances on that occasion by arranging that his whiskers caught fire during a torch dance which was part of the entertainments provided. Poor Cormac, of course, had to retire from the election, smarting under the pain and disgrace of this outrage and wait a few months for his unfortunate singe to disappear and everything to grow back again. Meanwhile, Fergus had been elected High King, but was not allowed much time to enjoy that dignity he had gained by such a shabby trick. Cormac gathered his forces, and in the ensuing battle in Meath, slew Fergus and his three brothers.

After the battle Cormac claimed the throne of Ireland as his right by conquest as well as by his descent, and was soon after proclaimed King of Ireland with the great pomp described above.



Carnfree near Tulsk, on the plain of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon

THE CORONATION OF THE KINGS OF CONNAUGHT¹⁰

Around the 8th and 9th centuries there were as many as a hundred and fifty petty kingdoms in Ireland. These were called “tuatha”. Most of these “tuatha” paid protection-money to a superior kingdom and also showed submission by the giving of hostages to and the receiving of gifts from its over-king.

In the 5th century Niall of the Nine Hostages and his followers had overthrown many of these ancient divisions of Ireland, and the “Five Fifths” – the kingdoms of: Ulster, Munster, Leinster, Meath and Connaught – now emerged, with the Ui Neill setting up a High-Kingship at Tara. However, it was not until the end of the 9th century that the O’Neills of Tara were able to bring the sub-kings to heel and assert their title as Kings of Ireland.

From the earliest times the Kings of Connaught were inaugurated at Carnfree near Tulsk, Co. Roscommon on the plains of Rathcroghan between Strokestown and Elphin in the old Barony of Ballintober.

“Here,” says Hardiman, a noted historian of the 19th century, “a remarkable upright stone about seven feet over ground called the ‘Lia Dearg’ or the Red Stone, is pointed out as the monument of King Dathi, the last pagan king of Ireland.” Near to this standing stone was an ancient foot-stone, now to be seen in the grounds of Clonalis House: the traditional home of the O’Conor family near Castlerea, Co. Roscommon. It was on this stone that the new King of Connaught stood to receive the homage of his people and to view his kingdom.

When the great day arrived, a public holiday was declared, and a royal fair, accompanied by the usual feasting and games, was held at the site. It was said that the booths and camp fires usually stretched for over two miles around the coronation-mound, so great was the throng of nobles, sub-chiefs, clergy and free-holders gathered there.

In order to qualify for the throne of Connaught, the candidate must be:

- 1 Of the blood of the original conqueror or acquirer of the territory, and free from all personal blemishes, deformities and defects, and be of fit age to lead the clan to the field of battle.
- 2 That the greater part of his sub-chiefs and free-holders should declare in his favour.
- 3 That the inauguration should be celebrated at a remarkable place in the territory, appointed of old for the purpose. In Connaught this was where there was a stone with the impression of two feet believed to be the exact size of the first captain or acquirer of the territory.
- 4 That the hereditary historian or chronicler of the territory should be present to read to the chief about to be installed, the heads of the law relating to the conduct of the chieftain, and that the latter should swear to observe those laws, and to maintain their customs as inviolable.
- 5 That after taking the oath, the chief laid aside his sword and other weapons, upon which the historian of the district, or some other person whose proper office it was, handed him a straight white wand as a sceptre and an emblem of purity and modesty,

to indicate that his people were to be so obedient to him that he required no other weapon to command them.

- 6 That after receiving this straight white wand, one of his sub-chiefs put on his shoe or sandal in token of obedience, and threw the other slipper over his head in token of good luck and prosperity.
- 7 That after these ceremonies were performed, one of his sub-chiefs pronounced his surname without his first name in a loud voice, after which it was pronounced in succession by the clergy (pagan or Christian) according to their rank and dignity and by his sub-chiefs and free-holders, according to their respective ranks.

After this, the King of Connaught stood on the foot-stone, turning thrice anti-clockwise and thrice clock-wise to view his people and his territory in every direction.

This being done, he was the legitimate King of Connaught.

The successors of the Twelve Bishops of Connaught also should be present at the coronation, namely: the successor of St Patrick at Elphin, the successor of St Bridget (regarded as a bishop) at Ballintober,¹¹ the successor of Dachonna of Ardcarn, the successor of Barry of Kilbarry, the successor of St Faithleach of Cloontuskert, the successor of St Brendan of Ogulla, the successor of St Colman of Mayo, the successor of St Giallan of Moygillian, the successor of Bishop Sohell of Lough Salchern, the successor of St Grellan of Creeve, the successor of St Callen of Fenagh and the successor of St Finian of Clooncraft.

The Twelve Sub-chiefs of Connaught also should be present at the coronation, namely:

The O'Flanagan, O'Mulrenin, O'Finaghty and Mageraghty, (these were called the four royal chieftains of the King of Connaught). Next came the chieftains: O'Flynn, O'Hanly, O'Fallon, O'Beirne, O'Concannon, O'Heyne, O'Shaughnessy and O'Teige, who was chief of the household of the King of Connaught.

It was also required that the following chiefs be present, namely: O'Rourke, O'Reilly, O'Hara and O'Gara with their followers and M'Dermot, Chief of Moylurg.

It was the hereditary privilege of O'Mulconry to place the royal sceptre in the hands of O'Conor and no one but he could stand with the king on the royal cairn except O'Mulrenin who guarded its entrance.

During these proceedings O'Connaghten was granted a yearly ounce of gold to keep the royal cairn in repair, O'Flanagan was appointed hereditary High Steward, O'Hanly, Keeper of Hostages; he was also given that part of the fleet from Slieve-in-iarian down to Luimnech (Limerick); the overall command of the fleet belonged to O'Flaherty and O'Malley. O'Kelly was appointed Treasurer of Precious Stones and O'Flanagan, O'Beirne and M'Dockwra, Guardians of the King's Loot. M'Brannan was made Caretaker of the Royal Hounds.

All these hereditary appointments were confirmed at Rathcroghan on the coronation of each new King of Connaught, thus giving these powerful families of the kingdom a vested interest

in the Establishment, and ensuring their continued loyalty to the throne.

THE CURSE OF THE O'CONORS ¹²

The High King Eochy Moymedon A.D. 358-366

This is the story of a brother and a sister: a brother ready to trample rough-shod over law and morality in his lust for the crown of Tara, and a sister ready to sacrifice all for the sake of her son and her thirst for revenge.

Eochy Moymedon came to the throne in A.D. 358, and it is from this date that the pedigrees of the O'Conors begin.

Eochy was a careless pleasure-loving monarch with little thought for the future. He had, it seems, already been proclaimed King of Connaught before taking over as High King of Ireland. He had also acquired two wives, divorcing the one in favour of the other.

Eochy had married a Munster princess, one Mongfinn, during his time as King of Connaught. She had a brother, Crimthan, who was now King of Munster. When Eochy became High King, he divorced Mongfinn and took to wife Corrine, a Saxon princess, much younger and more beautiful than the rejected Mongfinn.

In A.D. 366 Eochy died peacefully at Tara, in the presence of his two queens and surrounded by a large number of children from both marriages.

Now Mongfinn had a son, Brian, whom she reckoned should succeed his father as king on the basis of her seniority. Corrine,

however, had other ambitions; she considered that her son, Nial, had a much better right to the throne as she was now the reigning queen.

The nobles at Tara immediately split into two factions, and civil war seemed inevitable, when out of the blue, Crimthan, Mongfinn's elder brother and King of Munster, arrives on the scene with a large and well-armed body-guard to restore law and order and see justice done all round. After looking 'round Tara, and liking what he saw, Crimthan came to the conclusion that justice would be best served if he took over. This he did in a matter of days, declaring himself King of all Ireland before the cowed courtiers.

Quite understandably, Mongfinn was simmering with fury at Crimthan's base conduct in ousting her son, Brian, from what she considered his lawful inheritance, although she dared not let her true feelings be known for both their sakes, and so she continued to act the part of the loving sister to her usurping brother.

Maybe it was his over indulgence in the plentiful supply of meat and drink during his coronation feast, or some other reason, but Crimthan fell to vomiting in the great hall of the palace, and applied to his sister for one of her famous cures, for Mongfinn's skill as a herbalist was widely acknowledged on all sides. With a tender smile Mongfinn produced from beneath her cloak a phial containing a triple distillation of yew berries, foxgloves, deadly nightshade berries and toadstools and carefully emptied the lot into her brother's goblet, informing him that this would ensure he would never again vomit.

Maybe it was the way she held her breath or maybe it was the barely concealed glitter in his sister's eyes as she bent solicitously over him as he lay on his couch, that alerted the jungle-cunning in Crimthan's brain.

He called for another goblet.

"It would be churlish of me, dear sister, not to share such a sovereign remedy with its maker," said he, tipping half of his goblet into hers.

Smiling reassuringly Mongfinn took the lethal goblet and drained it in a single gulp, watched by Crimthan through narrowed cunning eyes. Then, not to be outdone in the eyes of his court, he followed suit.

Still smiling, Mongfinn drew back and straightened herself erect. Then a spasm of agony stopped all smiles at once as she clutched her stomach and pitched forward, face down onto the stone floor of the banquet-hall. Crimthan, his face twisted in fury, was now on his feet and flung himself with flailing fists upon his sister's body – and then the poison hit, flinging his dying body into its final contortions before the horrified gaze of his attendants.

From his place at the high-table, the Chief Druid rose with dead-white face and glazing eyes. He pointed his staff at Mongfinn's son, Brian, who was now gazing open-mouthed at the grisly scene before him. The screams and clamour of the assembled guests died into silence.

"Ah, now I perceive all things simultaneously – the future merges with the present, and I tell thee this," whispered the priest. "Thy mother has tainted thy blood by her foul fratricide to make

thee King of Ireland. But King of Ireland shalt thou never be, nor any of thy line after thee until Time and blood expiate today's work. Eight days did thine uncle sit upon the throne of Ireland, and eight long centuries shall pass away before any of thy line sits upon that same seat!"

The druid's prophesy proved all too true. The desperate deed of the Irish queen had not the result she anticipated, for now Nial, younger son of the late King Eochy by his second wife, Corrine, was selected in preference to Brian, the eldest son, and no descendant of Mongfinn ever reigned over all Ireland except Turlough O'Conor and his son, Roderick, in the twelfth century.

Brian, son of Eochy, died A.D. 397

Brian may have lost the throne of Ireland, but at least he could console himself on inheriting the throne of Connaught: a throne held by his descendants until long after the English invasion. He now established his house-hold at Rathcroghan, in the town-land of Carnfree.

At this early date, the records the Kingdom of Connaught are much less detailed than those of Tara, for the Kings of Connaught were considered more of a side-show compared to the Irish supreme monarchy. Nevertheless, pedigrees were considered of prime importance by the ancient Irish, and the greatest care was taken to record and hand down to posterity the dates of the O'Conor descent.

Brian met a sad end.

For some time he had been under threat from another half-brother named Fiacha. A battle was fought, Fiacha was defeated, taken prisoner, and sent by Brian to his half-brother Nial, now King of Tara.

However, Fiacha's teenage son, Dathi, was still at large and out for revenge. He collected another army and a battle was fought at a place called Damclone near Tuam, where Brian and his forces were defeated.

The victorious Dathi pursued his fleeing uncle to Tullaghdonnell, where Brian was overtaken and slain by Dathi.



Dathi slays Uncle Brian

His body was buried in the place where he fell, and there it remained for many years until St Aedus, patron of the church of

Roscarn near Galway, removed the royal bones and buried them at Roscam.¹³

This tomb is to be seen to this day at Roscam near to the round tower in the graveyard.

When Nial heard of Brian's death, he set his brother, Fiacha, free, made him King of Connaught, appointing him generalissimo of the armed forces.

One would have thought that after all the excitement of the past few years, that Fiacha would have opted for the quiet life, and taken time to get his breath back. He had other ideas, however, and the new King of Connaught was soon leading his forces on a looting expedition into Munster.

Fiacha never returned alive.

All in all, Fiacha was nothing but a violent rowdy, and everyone must have heaved a sigh of relief on his much looked for demise. His son, Dathi, now became King of Connaught, but soon found himself promoted, for in A.D. 406, his uncle, Nial, died at Tara and his grieving nephew was unanimously chosen to succeed him as King of Ireland, leaving Connaught to another brother, Auley.

THE EMPIRE-BUILDER

Dathi very soon became ambitious for conquest, and sent out messengers to meet him at the Feast of Beltaine, which was held on May-day. The Feast at Tara, later that year, was more magnificent than ever, and the fires of Tailltean or Telltown having been lighted,

the sports and games of that place were carried on with the greatest splendour through the month of August.

When these duties were over, Dathi told the chiefs of his intended expedition, and they all agreed to support him with men and riches. Very soon he had one of the largest armies that ever left Erin, and marched by Dundalk, Carlingford, and Newry to Donaghadee, where he embarked for Scotland.

Arrived at Port Patrick, Dathi sent to the king of the Picts in Scotland, calling on him to submit and pay tribute. That king refused, but agreed to try the question by battle.

This was fought at Magh an Chairthi, or the Plain of the Pillar-stone. The Irish defeated the King of Scotland, who had on his side, besides the Picts, a number of Britons, Scandinavians, and warriors from the Isles of the Hebrides.

The fight was fierce and furious, but the end came when the Scottish king was caught up by Conall Gulban, a druid, and dashed against the pillar-stone.

Dathi, having placed the son of the dead king on the throne of Scotland, marched down the Pennine Way, and from thence into Gaul, receiving, as he progressed, the submission of various kings, and a large number of hostages as sureties for their dependence.

When he reached the foot of the Alps, Dathi called on Beirdra, the chief Druid, and his priests, and asked: "Druids and Sages! What of King Dathi?"

According to the poet, James Clarence Mangan, their reply was:

“Thou shalt work thine own will
Thou shalt slay – thou shalt prey
And be conqueror still.
Thee the earth shall not harm
Thee we charter and charm
Thee the laurel shall crown
Thee the wave shall not drown
Thee the chain shall not bind
Thee the spear shall not find
Thee the shaft shall not pierce
Thee the sword shall not slay
Thou, therefore, be fearless and fierce”

The prophecy of these druids was quite correct; none of these dangers would ever kill the King of Ireland. Dathi, it was said, was subsequently killed by a bolt of lightning at the foot of the Alps and his body returned to Ireland. He is buried at Rathcroughan, Co. Roscommon, where his monument, the Red Stone of Dathi, can be seen to this day.¹⁴

Unfortunately, King Dathi's untimely death robbed the Irish army of its only chance to take on the Roman Empire!



**The High King Dathi killed by
lightening on the Alps**



**King Dathai's Stone,
Rath Croghan, Co. Roscommon**