

A photograph of a stone-walled courtyard. The walls are made of rough-hewn, greyish-brown stones. In the center, there is a dark wooden door set into a stone wall. To the left, a stone wall with a window opening is visible. The ground is covered with green grass and small plants. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

# **Tulsk History Society**

**Newsletter No. 12**

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We hope our first e-newsletter of 2024 finds all our readers well. It's hard to believe we are at the end of the first quarter of the year already. Since Christmas we've been busy completing the survey of Ogulla Cemetery – the details of which will be made available to all in due course on our website. Speaking of which, our survey of Tulsk Cemetery, which was THS's first major project, is now available to view in the new 'Materials for Download' section of **[tulskhs.com](http://tulskhs.com)**. Credit must go to THS members Mike Lennon and Marese Feeney for making this online part of the project possible and it's now a resource that can be easily consulted by anyone. We're just after our annual table quiz, which took place in O'Connor's Bar on Saturday last (16<sup>th</sup> March) and it was great to see so many out on the night. It was, we might add, a success and good sport to boot. Tulsk History Society's AGM will be held at Tulsk Macra Hall on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> of April at 8pm. All are welcome to attend.

This month's edition kicks off with Jody Moylan taking a look at the history of the Tulsk Fife and Drum Band of the late 1800s. Marty Brady tells the interesting story of the Dowell family of Mantua House, some of whom are buried at the Dowell family vault in Tulsk Cemetery. Mike Lennon continues his fine series on the schools of the parish – this time focusing on Castleplunkett NS, while Manus Tiernan brings us an old essay that was written in 1961 about St Patrick's connection to the parish. Also in the current issue is 'Well #5' in our 'Wells of the Parish' series, and we also begin a new series – see if you can spot it! Details on how to become a member is covered at the end. Happy reading!

THS

## The Tusk Fife and Drum Band by Jody Moylan

An active group in the late 1800s and early 1900s in Tusk was 'The Tusk Fife and Drum Band', which was otherwise titled 'The Tusk National Band' and/or simply 'The Tusk Band'. The full title, which was reported in various local and national newspapers, is a description in itself of what the band played – the drum and the fife. The fife was a small, high-pitched aerophone, similar to a tin whistle, though played in traverse (across rather than up-down).

The band was solely affiliated with the local nationalist movement, being attached to the Tusk branch of the Irish National Land League from 1881 and to The Irish National League a year later (the nationalist political party founded by Charles Stewart Parnell). The band was likewise attached to all subsequent forms of local agrarian (land) nationalism up until the approximate start of World War One.

While the fife had been used in the military since the 1500s to accompany battalions –

providing music on the march and in camp – the drum had been used long before that. As the excellent blog of Ballinacree Historical Society (of Oldcastle, Co. Meath) states, the fife and drum bands of the late 1800s were used to give 'expression to the public feeling on the land question.'

And give expression to those feelings the Tusk Fife and Drum band did, on several recorded occasions (and likely many more that went unreported). In November 1881 the Tusk band arrived at Cloonfree Cottage near Strokestown, along with a number of others – from Carnaska, Kilgefin, Strokestown and Creeve. The cause in Cloonfree was to support the jailed John Donnelly, who was in prison in Galway. Though not stated categorically, the charge was undoubtedly agrarian coercion (resisting either his landlord or the police during the land war). Reportedly 'seven thousand men assembled and in a few hours completed the digging of the potatoes grown on the farm.' The scene depicted is one of a hive of activity with the bands playing military music. That evening they all marched through the streets of Strokestown in something of a defiant mass rally. The bands drummed and whistled their 'national airs' while the



*An old newspaper illustration*

digging men shouldered their spades '*a la militaire*', according to the reporter on the scene.

Three years later, in May 1884, the Tulsk Fife and Drum accompanied the Tulsk branch of the Irish National League in a procession of hundreds of people to Derryphatten and neighbouring Oakfield (the latter in Strokestown parish), where work was carried out to complete turf cutting and potato moulding on the farms of 'Flanagan and Donovan' – two men who were holed up in Sligo prison on similar charges to John Donnelly. A year later the Tulsk band 'marched through the principal parts of Tulsk parish playing a variety of patriotic airs' followed by a large crowd who 'cheered loudly for Dr Croke, Mr Parnell and Mr Davitt.' Dr Croke – or Thomas Croke, Archbishop of Cashel & Emly – was a champion of the Irish National Land League in the 1880s (Croke Park was named after him). Michael Davitt, the Mayo native, was the nationalist who famously co-founded the Irish National Land League with the other figure mentioned above - Charles Stewart Parnell.

In 1891 a great outdoor rally held in Roscommon town was headed by Parnell – at the height of his powers – and the Tulsk Fife and Drum band were one of only eight bands in attendance. Skip forward to June 1907 and a 'great demonstration' took place in Four Mile House (as reported by the *County Down Independent*). The only marching bands in attendance were 'from the town of Tulsk and a band from the town of Kilbride.' There was a fervent atmosphere with banners being held aloft and the bands were joined 'in processional order with a whooping and yelling crowd on all sides'. The newspaper report continued with the description that 'a small body of police tried to obstruct their passage but the mob were much too strong ... we are told that the crowd wended their noisy way past the celebrated Doorty farm and thence home again. The police were thrown into a state of excitement but there was no disturbance.'

During a particularly fraught period in early 1908, where local small holders agitated to ensure estate land was divided up amongst them (and not sold or let to large 'grazier' farmers) the band were to be seen out practicing around the locality. The Secretary of the Tulsk branch of the United Irish League (the political party for land agitation representing small farmers) John Flannery wrote in the *Roscommon Messenger* that 'the Tulsk band continues its evening practice marches through the parish, reminding the people and their opponents that there is no cessation to hostilities until the untenanted land is split and divided.' That they were practicing in the evening time in January suggests that the light of lanterns was used to guide them, in a procession that must have been striking. Two months later, in March 1908, the band headed a large contingent from Clashaganny to Roscommon town, where a labour scheme to help the poor was announced at an outdoor meeting held by Roscommon County Council. The band on the day was conducted by John O'Rourke, who was given a vote of thanks at the event for his efforts.

Also thanked during this period was Matthew Flanagan of Tomona House, who contributed to the band's expenses. And while they might have been helped out financially by the odd contribution, the band were also suffering as a result of poverty in the parish. For example, John Flannery (as secretary of the UIL) was instructed in November of the same year (1908) to advertise for a bandmaster 'to train a new band as the old players have almost all left the country.' While emigration was evidently

taking its toll the band does seem to have been rejuvenated to some degree after this, and in May 1910 Tusk news carried in the *Roscommon Messenger* requested all members of the Fife and Drum band to be in attendance for practice at the 'band rooms...tomorrow evening (Sunday) at 4 o'clock for practice.'

In June 1911 the band were joined by two others - from Ballintubber and Athleague - when the county hurling and football finals were played in Tusk. Besides the usual fife and drum, the Athleague band played 'the Irish warpipes' on an occasion that was as much about the culture of the times as it was about the celebration of a special sporting event.

By January 1912 the band had become somewhat inactive and a new committee – of Bernard Burke, Pat Malley and Patrick Dufficy – took on the task of recruiting and training up new members. The trio were responsible for 'taking charge of the band when out for practice and otherwise.' They were glad to learn that same January that 'an expert drummer [had] been trained up in the Clashaganny direction, who was doing infinite credit to his tutelary gods.' However, despite the new committee the band seems to have been coming to its natural end and a year later at a meeting of the United Irish League Tusk branch (February 1913) a request was put out, in no uncertain terms, that 'any boys absenting themselves [from band practice] will be struck off the membership list. They will also forfeit the fifes as all instruments are the property of the UIL and the AOH (Ancient Order of Hibernians).' Reports of the band's activities go quiet from this date until August 1915, when the band members were requested to attend a practice afternoon at Simpson's Cross – at 3pm on August 8<sup>th</sup>. It is uncertain whether the Tusk Fife and Drum Band played on after that, though up to that point they had spent over 30 years in the locality 'giving expression to the public feeling on the land question.' ♦

#### Ladies and Gentlemen #1

**Walter George Raleigh Chicester-Constable** was a native of Wycliff Hall, Darlington England and lived at Runnamoat Roscommon. He owned much of the land in Glenballythomas before it was sold in 1918. In newspaper reports at the time, Chicester-Constable was concerned that the sale of the land would lead to destruction of the ancient monuments in Rathcroghan; a worry that never materialized. Having come from the Chichesters who held an estate in the parish of Cloonygormican, barony of Ballymoe, county Roscommon, which in the 1870s amounted to 2,306 acres, WGR succeeded to the Irish estates of his mother – which included much of the Rathcroghan archaeological complex - and also to the Burton Constable estate, Yorkshire. In 1894 he took the name Constable by royal licence. A military man, he was educated at Stoneyhurst Military College and went on to become an officer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> King's Regiment from 1878 to 1898 and also served with the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Yorkshire Regiment during World War One. He sold by public auction – through William Black Auctioneers Roscommon – the Glenballythomas lands of over 700 statute acres on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1918. He was a rare breed of the landed gentry – a Catholic – though the similarities with the natives probably ended there. He died in 1942 in Yorkshire and was interred in the family vault outside the small village of Halsham.

## **The Pirate, the Prince, the Princess, the Priest and the Priory** by Marty Brady

There are three Mausoleums in Tusk Cemetery that hold respectively the remains of the Taaffes, Graces and Dowell families.

Surprisingly - to some at least - only one of the three families involved are from within Tusk parish; the Taaffes, who were from Foxborough just down the road from Tusk village. The other two, the Dowells and the Graces (who were related) were from Mantua, in the western end of Elphin parish.



*Mantua House in 1896, former home to the Graces and the Dowells before them (Picture from The Landed Estates of County Roscommon/ Pyers O'Conor Nash)*

I have a particular interest in the Dowell family as I am from Mantua myself and while growing up there, I became aware that there was little or no knowledge or even folklore about them, while much was known about the Graces (who succeeded them). This was understandable as the Grace family were the landlords in relatively recent times – until the early twentieth century – while the Dowell name ceased to be used in the late eighteenth century following the marriage of Mary Dowell to Oliver Grace. Oliver Grace of Killabin, Queens County (Laois) married Mary Dowell, daughter of John Dowell of Mantua, on the December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1733. Later the Dowell name faded from the scene when their son Oliver John Dowell (OJD) Grace and his wife put down roots in Mantua in the newly constructed Mantua House.

To illustrate how the Dowells came to Mantua it may be helpful to tell the story of the Pirate, the Princess, the Prince, the Priest and the Priory.

**The Pirate:** The pirate was Dubgal Mac Somurli, who was King of the Hebrides at the time. Dubgal in some documents is recorded as Dubgal MacRoary as he was the son of Ruari (Mac Somurli)

The following from the Annals of Connaught (1258) illustrates Dubgal Mac Somurli's activities off the coast of Connemara:

1258.6

*“A great fleet came from the Hebrides with Mac Somurli. They sailed round the west of Ireland into Connemara and robbed a merchant ship of all her goods; wine, copper, cloth and iron.”*

1258.7

*“The Sheriff of Connacht, Jordan d'Exeter, put out with a fleet full of Galls in pursuit of Mac Somurli and the fleet which had committed that piracy. Mac Somurli had landed on an island and drawn his ships up onto the land, and when they saw the Sheriff's fleet approaching, he and his men put on their armour and fighting accoutrement.”*

1258.8

*“When the Sheriff reached the island he and his men, with those of the Galls who were ready with him, went quickly ashore. But he was met and dealt with by Mac Somurli and his men, being killed at once, together with Piers Accabard, an excellent knight of his company, and other good men. The fleet of the Galls retired after losing the best of their lords, and Mac Somurli went back to his land, joyful and laden with spoil.*

1259.6

*“Aedh O Conchobair went to Derry to marry the daughter of Dubgal Mac Somurli, and eight score warriors came with them.”*

**The Prince:** The Prince was Aedh O Conchobair who came to Derry from Roscommon to marry the daughter of Dubgal Mac Somurli. Aedh was the son of Felim who was the King of Connaught at that time, reigning from 1233 to 1265 until he was succeeded by Aedh. Jody Moylan published an interesting piece on Aedh and the Gallowglasses on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 on the County Roscommon History and Heritage Facebook page.

**The Princess:** The name of the Princess is not recorded except that she is the daughter of Dubgal Mac Somurli and that part of her dowry when she married Aedh was 160 warriors. (1259.6 above). It is as a result of this marriage that the Dowells came to Roscommon.

The warriors who were of the MacDougal clan were commanded by Ailin Mac Somurli, a brother of Dubgal, and they became known as Mac Doughalls in Ireland.

In the following years they became known as MacDowell or McDowell and Dowell. For at least one hundred years previously in the Scottish isles, mercenary soldiers (highly trained and from various distinct families) had been hiring themselves out and had become known as Galloglasses. Other notable Gallowglass surnames are McCabe, MacDonald/McDonnell, MacRory, MacSheehy, MacSweeney, McCoy and others. Sometimes they got paid with land and this (perhaps) is how they acquired Mantua - probably at the expense of the local chiefs, the O Flannagans. The O Flannagans were known as Clann Chathail as they were descended from Cathal son of Muiredach Muillethan, King of Connaught in 696 AD. They were one of the four major subchiefs of the O'Conors for many centuries. The annals say *'O'Connor Rue in the fourteenth century crippled the power and circumscribed the territory of O'Flanagan so that his territory was found to be very insignificant in the reign of Queen Elizabeth'*. It seems that around 1600 the O'Flanagans were on the wane and the MacDougalls had firmly established themselves in Mantua since their arrival in 1259.



*The Dowell mausoleum at Tulsk Cemetery*

**The Priory:** There are some disagreements as to whether it was Phelim O'Conor or a Phelim McDowell that founded Tulsk Priory in 1449

The following is from Mary Gormley's book:

"[The Priory] was founded in 1448 A.D. Some historians say the founder was Phelim McDowell - a powerful chieftain and a descendant of the Gallowglasses from Derry, but no details of him are available". Most lean towards O'Conor as they would be the most distinguished and powerful. But why was McDowell mentioned at all if the family had no input? 'Phelim' is the name of McDowell leaders from different generations though 'Luke' is more often the head in later years. The family became powerful enough to inter-marry with the O'Conors, O'Mulloys, Dillons and O'Reillys through the centuries. A 'Phelim McDowell' was very prominent around the year 1550 and a 'Phelim McDowell' was eulogized in poetry circa. 1600. A Phelim McDowell was also very prominent during the 1641 rebellion.

**The Priest:** The last Phelim McDowell was the martyr priest Fr Felix. Felix/ Philip is an anglicised version of Pheilim. I believe he was probably the son of Luke McDowell and Briget Dillon who were married in approximately 1625.

\*Further notes on Fr Felix are available in Mary Gormley's book while Mike Lennon has a piece on Fr. Felix in the THS Newsletter No. 6 (page 9). ◇



## WELLS OF THE PARISH #5: MANOR



**Co-ordinates: 53.745960, -8.241351**

**Townland: Manor**

**Condition 2024: Structurally sound; spring working; not in use**

KNOWN to locals as 'Dan's well' after the one-time owner of the field - Dan Flaherty - this nicely built construction is about twenty yards inside an old-type field stile by the side of the byroad south-west of Clashaganny crossroads.

The well does not appear in the early Ordnance Survey maps (c.1839) but does in the later 25inch map (1890s – 1915). In that map there are a number of houses in close proximity that do not exist today. The 1901 census documents that the population of Manor in 1901 was 114 with 21 occupied houses. It seems likely that Dan's well was a very busy place with many families drawing water from it. ◇

## Castleplunkett National School (1865-Present)

**Scoil Chairáin Naofa** by Mike Lennon



Hedge schools in thatched mud cabins served the Castleplunkett area for decades before Baslick parish priest, Fr. Tim O'Beirne, applied in 1865 to have the village school he set up a year earlier recognised by the National Board of Education. The building was a disused barn, owned by Fr. O'Beirne, to which windows were added as well as an additional room in 1866. Nineteen-year-old Michael McNally from Ballyleague N.S. was the first teacher to be appointed. He had previously served as a monitor at Clooncagh N.S. He encountered opposition from Michael Shanagher who refused Fr. O'Beirne's request to stand down his nearby hedge school. However, Shanagher gave up when his pupils gradually drifted away to the new national school. When the second room was completed, Catherine Kenny was appointed an assistant teacher and was followed soon after by Ellen Geraghty. Michael McNally also held night classes for young men who worked in the locality for a fee of 3 pence per week. McNally's political activities as a supporter of the Fenian movement brought him to the notice of the police and to avoid being arrested, he was advised to seek a teaching post elsewhere. He transferred to a school near Athlone in 1870 and later emigrated to America.

Thomas Jones, a monitor in Tulsk N.S., replaced McNally as principal but he left in 1873 to join the Civil Service. Thomas O'Donnell had just completed three years as a monitor in Carnalasson school and secured first place in an examination held in Roscommon. The school manager, Fr. Patrick Donagher, reluctantly appointed him as the next principal due to his age being only 18. Unlike his short-term predecessors,



Tom O'Donnell  
1873-1918



James O'Donnell  
1918-1955

Tom O'Donnell remained as principal for 45 years until he retired in 1918. Following his appointment, inspectors noted "a vast improvement has been accomplished not only in the general knowledge displayed by the pupils, but also in their discipline and deportment." Among the assistants who served during the early decades of the school

were Winifred Vesey (1877-1886), who was previously a monitor in Caddlebrook N.S., and Julia Grady (1886-1890). In the mid-1890s, the lack of 'out-offices' was raised by the sanitary authorities in Castlerea following a complaint from a roads foreman that

“some of his men refused to work at that place on account of the state of the roadside occasioned by the children attending Castleplunkett school.” The manager responded there was no suitable plot for toilets and reiterated his call for a new school. The following clergy served as managers from 1873 to 1908: Rev Matthew Naughten (1873-1876), Rev Henry Nangle (1877-1882), Rev Thomas Judge (1883-1887), Rev J. J. Kelly (1887-1888) and Rev John O’Brien (1889-1908).

By 1902 the condition of the original barn-school was no longer fit for purpose and a new school was erected nearby in the townland of Rusheen. The two-roomed stone building was slated and had a fireplace in each room. 48 children were attending when the school opened in January 1903 and local girl, Bridget Carlos (later Mrs Lyons) was assisting Tom O’Donnell. When Tom retired in 1918, there were 95 pupils attending. His son, James Joseph (Joe) O’Donnell became the next principal, having transferred from Kilcroan N.S., Ballymoe and Kate Carlos replaced her sister as the assistant. Under Joe’s stewardship, enrolment increased steadily to 130 by 1922 and Evelyn O’Callaghan from Cloonbonniffe, Castlerea was approved as a second assistant. Kathleen Tiernan from Carniska, Strokestown replaced Evelyn in 1927 and remained until 1930 when she entered the Presentation Order of nuns. Pat O’Gara, who had been a monitor since 1922, took over as the assistant.

The high standard of teaching was rewarded in 1929 when the school won a Carlisle & Blake Premium for academic excellence, a coveted prize only awarded to a small number of schools in the country. Christine Gallagher succeeded Pat O’Gara in 1935 when he moved to Kilcroan N.S. The manager, Fr. Tom Lavin, the staff and parents were agitating over several years for an extra room to relieve the overcrowded conditions in the school. Approval was finally received in 1936 and an additional classroom was built along with new latrines and a fuel shed.

Christine Gallagher (later Mrs Flanagan) transferred to Tulsk N.S. in 1938 in a swap with John P (Jock) Shannon who went on to become principal of Rathnagly N.S. in 1941. William (Bill) McHale filled the assistant position until 1948 when he took up the principal role in Tulsk N.S. He was not replaced and the school reverted to having two teachers, mainly due to the population of the area falling due to emigration. Joe O’Donnell retired in 1955 after 37 years as principal, thus ending the 82-year O’Donnell father-son teaching span in Castleplunkett. Joe left a distinguished legacy of local history writings and a love of their native area with his students.

The next principal, Lawrence Mannion from Glenvale, was destined to serve 39 years in Castleplunkett school and to witness many emerging changes in Irish life and education – electric light in the classrooms (1957), bus transport to school (1967), flush toilets (1967) and the banning of corporal punishment (1982). As pupil numbers began to increase again and had reached 100 by early 1959, Lawrence and Katie Carlos were in charge of 50 children each. Mary Gormley (née Geraghty) was approved as a third teacher in September 1959 but left for Tulsk N.S. two months later and Christine Gallagher Flanagan returned for her second stint in Castleplunkett. Katie Carlos

retired in 1962 after 46 years in the schoolroom. Mary Flanagan from Knockalaghta replaced Katie and went on to become Mrs Lawrence Mannion after moving to Castlerea Convent Secondary School in 1968. Freda Keane (née Morahan) transferred from Caddlebrook N.S. to replace Mary Flanagan. The rotation of assistant teachers continued in 1974 with the retirement of Christina Flanagan and the arrival of Mary O'Connell, who remained until 1979 when she moved to Kilmurry N.S. Mary Kelly (née



Lawrence Mannion 1955-1994

Mangan) succeeded as the assistant. The three-teacher structure remained stable until 1992 when Freda Keane retired and Kathy Dunne (née Keane) replaced her. 1994 saw the retirement of Lawrence Mannion and his assistant, Mary Kelly taking over as principal followed by the appointment of Fidelma Kennedy (later Mrs Croghan).

The mid-1990s heralded further changes for the better. A new classroom was added and major refurbishments, including indoor toilets, were carried out in 1997 and 1998. During the works, the school moved to Kilmurry Community Centre. A half-acre sports field was purchased behind the school. Computers were introduced into the curriculum in 1998.

Additional teaching resources were provided for children with learning difficulties when Noreen Shelley joined in 2001. The centenary of Castleplunkett's second school building was commemorated in June 2003 with a weekend of celebrations, the publication of a souvenir magazine and a visit from President Mary McAleese.

The period over the past twenty years has been one of growth, achievement and stability. While the number of teachers has increased, rotation has been minimal. Aoife Feely joined as an assistant teacher in 2009 and continues in that role. Fidelma Croghan, with thirty years service, provides special education teaching. Kathy Dunne, who retired in 2017, had twenty-years' service. She passed away in July 2022. Noreen Shelley retired in 2016 after fifteen years in the school. Following thirty-eight years as assistant teacher and principal, Mary Kelly took her well-earned retirement in June 2017. Under Mary's leadership, her pupils excelled in sport, particularly in Rounders, achieved successive Green Flags and participated in community fund-



Mary Kelly 1979-2017

raising and other events. Deirdre Hannon joined as principal after Mary's retirement and remained until October 2022 when she was replaced by the current principal, Kathrina Grogan. Other appointments to the school were Mabel Hynes as secretary in 2017 and teachers, Lorraine Toman in 2018 and Margaret Fannon in 2020. As Castleplunkett school approaches its 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year, it can record a proud history of serving that part of Tusk parish which was formerly known as Baslick, especially following the closure of Caddlebrook (1967) and Kilmurry (2019) schools.

Footnote – I acknowledge the centenary magazine *Castleplunkett School 1903-2003 – A Century of Learning* as the source for most of the material in this article. Also the assistance of the principal, Kathrina Grogan, for more recent information. The final chapter in this series on Tusk parish schools will feature Rathnagly National School in the next edition of the E-Newsletter. ♦

## **Retracing the steps of Saint Patrick in Maigh Ai**

**Compiled by Manus Tiernan**

### **Introduction:**

The following article -**part-one** in a two-part series - was written in 1961 by the late James J. O'Donnell of Castleplunkett. The author was a retired principal and member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and composed the essay at the request of the late Very Rev Cannon Joseph Kilmartin P.P., Ogulla and Baslick (now known as the Parish of Tusk) to commemorate the 1,500th anniversary of the death of St. Patrick. While some of the material here written is open to question by the research and literature since 1961, the article is reproduced in its full original form.

### **The Plain of Aoi.**

In order to secure a complete picture of St. Patrick's missionary work in Ireland, it has been suggested that each parish would contribute any information available as regards activities of the saint in such parish. The following is an attempt to recall the movements and ministry of St. Patrick in the ancient territory of Maigh Ai. This territory approximately occupied the area bounded to the north by a line from Castlerea to Elphin, on the east from Elphin to a point in the parish of Kilbride, on the south along the upland ridges, north of Roscommon Town to the valley of the Suck, and from thence along the line of the Suck to Castlerea. The name Maigh Ai means the plains of Aoi! Aoi being some long-forgotten ruler or hero. That Maigh Ai was an area of very early settlement is proved by the many stone objects of Neolithic Age, found in various places within its boundaries. Weapons and ornaments of the Bronze Age discovered here also indicate the occupation of the district by a race, the knowledge of which is obscured in the mists of antiquity. It is only with the coming of the Celts that we begin to get a vague idea of the lives and activities of the early inhabitants of the land which is now our heritage.

### **Court at Rathcroghan:**

In the first century A.D. we find Celtic rule firmly established under Eochai Feile, having his court at Rathcroghan. It is not difficult to understand why this site was selected for a royal residence. The airy upland commands an extensive view, has land suitable for livestock and tillage and the frequent rainfall guarantees a plentiful supply of water. Rathcroghan was originally a centre for druidical worship and had got the name of Druim na nDru (meaning the Round High ground of the Druids). Mount Druid, near Bellanagare is probably an echo of the name

Druim na nDru. Eochai recognised these advantages, and also that the position was capable of defense from attack from every direction, as he took over the location from the druids, and used the slave tribes under his control to pile the mound which exists to the present day. He got a palace of wood built on the summit of the mound and the beauty and elegance of this palace is accorded the highest praise in the old records. He changed the name from Druim Na nDru to Rathcroghan in honour of his queen Croghan.

### **Queen of Connacht:**

Their daughter, Maeve, succeeded her father as Queen of Connacht and her fame and attainments are related in the Thain Bo Cooley, the oldest and most interesting saga of Western Europe. The protracted wars of the Thain between Connacht and Ulster ended giving supremacy to Connacht and so Connacht kings ruled Ireland as High Kings down to the battle of Ocha in 483. So, it may be taken as a fact that Maigh Ai was one of the most famous places in Ireland when St. Patrick started his missionary work here in 432. The coming of St. Patrick was not unexpected. During the reign of Con of the Hundred Battles, in the second century, a druid made a prophesy which was recorded and handed down orally as follows:- 'Five years this King (Leary) shall have ruled, when a stranger shall come, that is Patrick, a bearer of great dignity, whom God will honour and who will light a great torch that will illuminate Eire even to the sea'. The druids were well aware of this prophesy and when the succession of Kings from Con to Leary occurred, they awaited in fear and jealousy the coming of the 'powerful stranger from over the eastern sea'. They used all their influence and tyranny to prevent the Irish from accepting St. Patrick's teaching and urged his destruction. Their efforts were in vain, for although Leary himself did not become a Christian he gave Patrick freedom to travel and teach throughout his kingdom.

### **Crossed Boyle River:**

About the Spring of 434 Patrick and his company crossed the Shannon near its source and the Boyle River near where the town now stands. He moved slowly southwards across ancient Magh Luirg, now the plains of Boyle, until he reached Elphin. It would appear the saint spent some weeks in Elphin and its vicinity. The town did not then exist but there was a small settlement there on the lands known as Emlagh Ono. The Ono was a druid and a chieftain. Patrick bravely asked him for a site for a church. Ono feared to completely refuse, but he demanded the price of the site in gold, under the impression that Patrick had no such wealth. The saint ordered one of his people to go a short distance to where swine were

rooting and to bring him whatever he found there. The disciple soon returned with a large nugget of gold, more than sufficient to meet Ono's demand. Patrick then built a church and he placed Naomh Asis, or St. Ascus, in charge, consecrating him the first Bishop of Elphin. An old manuscript, preserved in the library of Belfast, states that the saint met Ossian, son of Finn Mac Cool at Elphin. Ossian had then returned from his three hundred years' visit to Theer na nOge, and was

an old and feeble man. Nevertheless, he is represented as a labourer carrying stones when the saint and himself met. The old poetic tales give accounts of several conversations between the saint and the aged hero. Ossian is continually complaining of the cold, dull life of abstinence insisted upon by St. Patrick, as compared with the stirring lives of the Fianna, who spent their time fighting, hunting, feasting and drinking wine and mead. Patrick urges Ossian to forget these wild activities and to think of his salvation. There is a poem in Irish included in the manuscript, which indicates that Ossian became a Christian, but it is not too complimentary towards hospitable Elphin. Here is the first verse as translated by Dr. Douglas Hyde:



*St. Patrick statue, Ogulla*

“Long was last night in cold Elphin,  
More long is tonight on its weary way;  
Though yesterday seemed to me long and ill,  
Yet longer still is this dreary day.”

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More long is tonight on its weary way;

Though yesterday seemed to me long and ill,

Yet longer still is this dreary day.”

St. Patrick did not come to Ireland as a solitary pioneer of a new religion. He was accompanied by about forty persons in Holy Orders, as well as by a number of attendants. It is stated in the Book of Armagh that he had also an armed guard of about twenty warriors.

### **Near Ogulla Well.**

On leaving Elphin the saint and his company proceeded towards the Court of Rathcroghan, following much the same route as the present main road from Elphin to Tulsk. It appears that he encamped for the night beside the Fountain of Cleabach, now the well of Ogulla. It is likely that this area was then wooded and

there was a bathing pool there constructed from the stream issuing from the fountain. This isolated spot was used by the nobility of the palace of Rathcroghan to bathe and refresh themselves in the genial summer mornings. Amongst those using the pool were two daughters of the Ard Ri, Leary, who ruled from Tara. These two princesses, Ethna and Fidelma, were attending the great school of



*Ogulla Shrine pictured in 2023*

Cashel Manna, attached to the court of Rathcroghan. Brian, son of Eochy Maymedon, ruled then at Rathcroghan, his druids Caplait and Mael, were renowned for their learning and the children of kings and chieftains came to Cashel Manna to receive their final education. A very strong tradition states that it was here at the Fountain of Cleabach St. Patrick met the two maidens. They found the saint and his people beside the fountain when they came as usual for their morning bathe. The monks were dressed in white and were singing matins at sunrise. When the maidens arrived they were astonished to see the peculiar dress of the strangers and hear their solemn song. They recognised that the visitors were peaceful, and at first they thought they were fairy people. The girls enquired as their nature and origin and St. Patrick began to explain his faith and mission.

### **Belief in Tradition.**

Some authorities cast doubts on this event and have expressed the opinion that the matter is only a story for children. However, Professor Moonan, who held the chair of Celtic Literature and History at U.C.D. in the early years of the present century, definitely expressed his belief in the tradition. The Most Rev. Dr. Healy Archbishop of Tuam has also accepted the information as truth. In his writings



on the life and missionary work of St. Patrick the bishop gives a vivid description of the meeting of the saint and the princesses at the Fountain of Cleabach and no doubt but this fountain is now the well of Ogulla. Another eminent authority Cannon Mannion formerly P.P. of Elphin had great faith in the conversion and translation into heaven of Ethna and Fidelma.

### **Patron Saints?**

He has stated that these virgins were for a long period regarded as patron saints of young people preparing to receive their Holy Communion. The entry into the Book of Armagh referring to the burial of the princesses is as follows:

'When the time for wailing for the maidens was over, they buried them by the fountain of Cleabach making for them a round grave according to the ancient custom of the Scots (The people of Ireland were known as Scots in St. Patrick's time). They also built a church of earth in the same place and it was called Sean-Donach Maigh Ai and was given to Patrick for all Time'. According to John O'Donovan, the antiquarian who visited and wrote about ancient places in Co. Roscommon during the 1830's, the name Ogulla is derived from Saint Oigh-Gulla who ministered there in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Oigh-Gulla is said to mean servant of the virgin or virgins.

### **Contest with Druids.**

It is not known how long St. Patrick spent in Rathcroghan and its surroundings but from the results he achieved there, it must have been a considerable time. We are informed that a contest occurred between himself and the druids in the presence of the king and his court. The very Rev. E.A. Dalton P.P. of Ballinrobe mentions these contests in his history of Ireland and Owen O'Naughton, Gaelic scholar and author, gives a detailed account of them in his 'Stair Cheachta' or historical essays in the Irish language. The druids challenged Patrick to what was known as the ordeal of fire. A hut was built of wood and was partly filled with dry faggots. Then one of the young druids and Benineen or Benignus a disciple of St. Patrick were both caused to enter the house. The young pagan was wearing the cloak of Benignus and Benignus was wearing the cloak of the pagan. The hut was then set on fire and it burned fiercely. When the fire burned out Benignus was discovered unhurt, standing among the ashes and his cloak also remained unburned, but there was no trace of the young druid or of his cloak. Again by their magical powers the Druids caused a great darkness over the land, and on the mid-day of a summer's day brought down a heavy fall of snow. Patrick addressed them and said, "Evil is the deed which you have wrought in bringing

darkness on the land and rain on the growing crops. Now undo your evil and cause the darkness and snow to disappear". The Druids invoked their Gods in vain and were not able to cure the harm done. Then Patrick besought God and a great flash of lightening and a mighty roll of thunder came in answer to his prayer and when this passed away the sun was again warmly shining out of a serene blue sky.♦

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## *TULSK HISTORY SOCIETY*

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### *Membership*

*We hope you have enjoyed the March 2024 edition of our newsletter. New members are most welcome to join the Society. If you wish to do so, please email us on [historytulsk@gmail.com](mailto:historytulsk@gmail.com). Annual fees are €30 for adults and €10 for students. For those wishing to read our latest Tusk Morning Howl; you can do so by visiting our website at **[tulskhs.com](http://tulskhs.com)**. Until the next issue; enjoy the spring season as we all look forward to a nice stretch in the evenings!*

