

Moytura - Magh Tuireadh

Lough Corrib, its shores and islands : with notices of Lough Mask

W. R. Wilde

1872

The battle and battle-field of Moytura.

The primitive Irishman. Fomorians. Partholan. Nemeth. The Firbolgs. Tuatha de Danann. The plain of Moytura. Knockma. Ceasair. Kings Eochy and Nuadh. The battle-field. The warriors, druids, and physicians. Existing monuments ; cairns, caves, cahers, stone circles, and pillars. The four days fight. The meane uisge. Sepulchral urn. Standing stones at Inishowen. The Dagda and the Wathach. Nymphsfield monuments. Caher mac Turc. Belor of the magic eye. The Neale monuments. The hill of Carn. Caher Robert. History of the Moytura manuscript.

BEFORE entering upon the topography of the locality, or describing the battle-field of Moytura, a short epitome of the early history and colonization of Ireland may not be out of place. The computed period of man's residence on our globe has undergone much modification of late years ; but, with respect to Irish chronology, at least we believe it will be found to approach the truth as near as that of most other countries ; and the more we investigate it, and endeavour to synchronize it with that of other lands, the less reason we shall have to find fault with the accounts of our native annalists.

The author has elsewhere stated his belief that man first set foot on Erin in a very rude state, as a nomad hunter and fisher, depending for his food on the chase, or feeding on the uncultivated fruits of the earth, or the produce of the waters ; clad in skins, and having no knowledge of metal, but forming his simple weapons, tools, and ornaments out of flint, stone, and shell, &c. [1] These early or aboriginal people were termed, in later times, Fomorians. A colony under three leaders Bith, Ladra, and Fintan and several females (of whom Ceasair, or Cesarea, was the chief), who were supposed to have come across the Spanish Main, arrived on the south coast, and have left their names in different localities in ancient Erin, and among the rest in Knockma, the great hill of the plain, which forms so conspicuous an object in the district ; and in the great monumental cairn surmounting which, called Carn-Keasrach, it is said, in The "Ogygia," that Cesarea was interred.

Another large colony, believed to have been of immediate Oriental origin, under a leader named Parthalon, followed, and, also landing on the south coast, defeated the native Fomorians, but were themselves cut off by a plague, or *Thaum*, and were interred at Tallaght (*Tamh-Leacht*, or the "plague stone"), near Dublin, where their urns have been frequently exhumed ; but Parthalon himself, it is thought, was buried in the cromleach at Ben Edair, now Howth. [2] The leaders of that colony also left their names to various places in Erin ; and by these people it is said that several of the plains were cleared of wood, and cultivated. Our histories state, that in these early times many lakes were formed, and several rivers broke out relations that some years ago would have been regarded as fabulous by many, and miraculous by some ; but now that cosmical phenomena are better understood, such accounts will rather afford subjects for calm scientific investigation than for ridicule. After the days of Parthalon another immigration into Erin occurred, under the leadership of Nemedh (from whom the original name of this very plain, to the east of Cong, was derived), with his sons Starn ; Hiarbanel the prophet from whom the Dananns descended ; Fergus Redside, the father of Britannus, who gave his name to "the great island" adjoining ; and Ainnin, from whom Logh

Ainnin, now Lough Ennell, in Westmeath, is called. They also were clearers of woods, and promoters of civilization ; and their chief settlement was in Dalaradia, in the northern portion of the island, where they contended for the mastery with the old Fomorians, and destroyed their great tower of Conang, at Tor-innis, now Tory Island. As in many modern instances, the plague combined with the sword to thin their army ; and, after an occupation of a portion of the island, Nemedh himself, and three thousand of his followers, died of a *Thaum* at Ard-Neimedh, now Barrymore Island, on the Cork coast ; and then, More the son of Dala, rallying the Fomorians, attacked the remaining Nemedhs, and caused them to emigrate to Britain.

We now approach more probable, if not more certain history. A Belgic colony, called Firbolgs, under five chieftains Slainghe, Radruic, Seangan, Gen =an, and Gan, passing over from Britain, arrived in great numbers, conquered the native Irish of the day, established a kingly form of government, and divided the country into a pentarchy. They also left their names in several places, and erected those stupendous barbaric monuments which may be seen in the Aran Isles to this day.

During all this long period the Fomorians, although conquered, were neither subdued nor extirpated ; they frequently espoused different sides with the several invaders (just as the native Irish did after 1172), and by intermarriage became allied to them. Eventually their political power was crushed, and their chiefs retired to Tory Island, on the Donegal coast, where they earned the name of “ pirates.” They come on the scene at a later period.

The fifth colony, sprung, it is said, from the race of Nemedh, who had emigrated northward, possibly driving the Lapps of Middle Europe before them, prior even to the date of “ the March of Odin,” and perhaps coeval with the time of the oyster-eaters of Jutland, returned to Ireland as Tuatha de Danann, under the leadership of their king, Nuad, and, advancing into the interior as far as the south margin of Leitrim, demanded a portion of the island from the Belgæ, with whom they had, it is said, a common language. Prior to that date, whatever it may have been, the entries in our annals, transmitted by the Bards, and probably recited at the feasts of chieftains, or at national assemblies—as very likely the poems of Homer were sung, before being committed to writing—are meagre, and consist chiefly of records of pestilences and cosmical phenomena, which latter, however, bear the test of scientific investigation.

Henceforward, Irish history becomes more detailed, if not more certain. Thus we read of colony after colony coming down from the cold regions of the north, passing on from the warm sunny plains of the south, and crowding in even from the distant east ; seeking, as the destiny and the impulse of man ever is the land of the setting sun the most distant point of habitable earth to which he can reach, or whereon he can by any possibility exist ; but above all because, from its geographical position, its climate, and its soil, Green Erin afforded these pastoral people then, as it does now, a greater amount of food for herbivorous animals than any equal extent of land in North-western Europe.

The Firbolgs were a small, swarthy, dark race, as were probably their Fomorian precursors. The Teutons or Scandinavian Dananns, on the other hand, were a large, fair, light or sandy-haired people, of superior knowledge and intelligence, which obtained for them the attributes of magical skill and necromancy ; they were also musical and poetic. Both races were Druidic in religion ; and, so far as can be gleaned from remote history, both possessed a knowledge of metal, and were armed accordingly.

The Belgæ having refused to divide the country with the invaders, the Dananns proceeded westward, and occupied the great plain of Nemedh, or Magh-Ith, which stretches for about 12

miles from the hill of Knockma, in the county of Galway, through the fertile barony of Kilmain, in Mayo, to *Slieve Belgadain*, now called Benlevi, a short distance from the village of Cong, in the barony of Ross, and county of Galway, and forms the eastern barrier to the western highlands. Both eminences, as already stated, may be discovered at a great distance all round. Lough Corrib forms the southern, and the shores of Lough Mask the immediate western, margin of this plain, which, extending for four or five miles in breadth, is bounded on the north-west by the River Robe. How long the Scandinavians occupied that situation, or whether they or the Belgic people formed those numerous forts, raths, cairns, and cahers, that cluster on its western extremity in groups resembling cities, or, whether such were constructed prior to the battle, must remain matters of speculation. Certain it is, that in remote ages an immense population must have occupied that plain ; for, notwithstanding the vast lapse of time, the progress of cultivation, and the ruthless hand of the despoiler, almost every field bears evidence of its existence. Eochy, son of Erc, King of Erin, advanced to the hill of Knockma with all his forces from Tara, in Meath, then the seat of government, to attack the Tuatha de Dananns, whose leader, Nuad, took up his position on Benlevi, with his warriors, sages, Druids, bards, poets, and physicians, &c., whose names have been all recounted, and their prowess sung in story, so that throughout the whole thread of Irish history they remain recorded. By this means the wily Dananns had the fastnesses of Joyce Country and Connamara to fall back on in case of defeat, as it is said they destroyed their fleet on landing.

Knock-Magha, or Knockma, the great “ hill of the plain,” so conspicuous in the landscape, is about five miles to the west of Tuam, in the barony of Clare and county of Galway ; its northern slope is occupied by the woods and cultivated grounds of Castlehacket, the seat of Denis Kirwan, Esq. ; and on its summit stands the great cairn within which tradition and ancient history say Ceasair, one of the earliest colonists of Ireland, was interred. [3] Perhaps we do not err in assigning to this ancient burial place a date anterior to that of any other identified historical locality in Ireland ; and hence tradition, as well as popular superstition, has thrown over it the investiture of fairy legend beyond all other places in the country ; for here Finvarra, the Oberon of Irish sylvan mythology, holds his court. From this point may be obtained one of the grandest panoramic views in Ireland ; the great plain stretching beneath and round Knockroe ; the beautiful abbey of Knockmoy ; the towers and city of the Ford of the Kings ; the Tuam of St. Jarlath ; the Round Tower of St. Bennan ; the ruined keeps of the De Burgos ; the ships riding in the Bay of Galway ; the Slievebloom and Clare mountains ; the blue island-studded waters of Lough Corrib ; and, in the far western back ground, the Connamara Alps, with their clear-cut edges, and their sides momentarily varying in tints from the marvellous atmospheric effects of that region stretching round by the Partry range to the lofty peak of Croaghpatrick ; and in the extreme north-western distance the bulky form of Nefin, and even some of the Achill mountains skirting Clew Bay.

King Eochy, with his Firbolg host, descended into the plain of Moytura, and, passing westwards, was met by the heralds and ambassadors of Nuad, on that portion of it subsequently called Conmaicne Cuile Toladh, extending from the present village of Cross to the neck of land that divides Loughs Mask and Corrib. They then, as was not uncommon with nations in kindred states of civilization, agreed upon a trial of skill and manly prowess ; and twenty-seven youths from each army engaged in a game of hurling, in a valley denominated in the tale “ The Plain of the Hurlers.” Now, presuming that we are correct in our interpretation of the MS. account of the engagement and the topography, this extends in an eastern direction for three quarters of a mile from the bridge of Garracloon to the rise of Cath-na-Bunnin, south-east of Nymphsfield, and is bordered on the north by Caherduff, and on the south by the rise of Knock, on both of which we find several monuments of the battle that subsequently ensued. In fact, it is the only hurling ground in the district ; it was used as such within the memory of the present generation ; and it is said the fairies still have their games

of “common” there on bright moonlight nights. The northern boundary of this smooth valley is the rocky space, covered with dwarf hazel, which gives the name of *Ceaslean-na-Cuillagh*, “The castle in the wood,”; and to the west of which is the cave of *Caherdubh*. This castle—so often seen, it is said, “afire” on summer nights, when the fairies, after their game of hurling, hold their banquets there—is, however, a mortared structure of great strength, and probably about five centuries old.

This warlike pastime ended in the defeat and death of the thrice nine youths of the Dananns, over whom was erected the great cairn or stone monument, and which would appear to be that called in the MS. *Carn-an-chluithe*, or the “monument of the game;” and the valley of the hurlers, where they were interred, was then denominated *Glen-mo-Aillem*. There it stands to this day, about 50 feet high, and 400 in circumference an historic memorial as valid as that which commemorates the spot on the shore of Attica, where the Athenians fell beneath the long spears of the Persians on the field of Marathon.

Next day, supposed to be the 11th of June, in the year of the world 3303, the battle commenced; it lasted four days, and it is said 100,000 men were engaged in it. Each army sank a royal rath or fortress; that of the Belgæ called *Rath Crophorta*, and that of the Dananns, *Rath Fearainn*; both are probably still remaining, but not capable of identification among the many monuments of which vestiges still exist in this locality. Both parties were armed with swords, spears, darts, and shields, but no mention is made of either slings or arrows; so it must have been a hand-to-hand fight. They did not, however, forget the wounded; for each sank a “sanative pool” or medicated bath in the rear of their lines, in which the wounded bathed. That of the Dananns was presided over by Diancheacht, the Machaon of the Irish Iliad; and the circumstance is commemorated in the name of a district bordering the Shannon, called Lus-magh, “the plain of the herbs,” from the fact that on it were collected the plants that formed the *materia medica*, with which the milk of the bath was endowed with its healing virtues. Forward marched the Firbolgean host, headed by the Fathach, or Druid poet a character still remembered traditionally by the people as the *Faughac Ruadh*, or red giant, who raised a pillar-stone against which he rested, and sang the exploits of his warriors. The stone has disappeared, but the eminence on which he stood is still pointed out within the demesne of Moytura, on *Knock-ard-na-gook*, or “the knoll on the height of the cuckoo,” because, it is said that that visitor is usually first heard there in spring. In the history of the battle this pillar-stone is called *Cairthi Fathaigh*, and is said to have been the first of the kind erected on this plain. On the other hand, we can well imagine the Dananns marching to battle, incited by the Miriam-like chaunt of Edain, or Edena, the poet-prophetess, whose name often occurs in the history of the engagement. The Dagda More, afterwards a king, and whose monument undoubtedly stands on the banks of the Boyne, near Newgrange, performed deeds of surpassing valour, until withstood by the hero Kerb, the son of Buan of the Firbolgs. Adleo, the son of Allai, another of the Dananians, was slain by Nearchu, grandson of Semeon, and a pillar-stone, called *Cairthi Adleo*, was erected where he fell—probably the *Clogh-Fadha-Cunga*, or “long stone of Cong,” which not long since stood on the old road to the east of that village, and a portion of which, 6 feet long, is still in an adjoining wall. The only other pillar-stones in the district are, one on the east shore of Holly Island, in Lough Corrib, and the *Clogh-Fadha Neal*, or “long stone of The Neale,” at the junction of the roads passing northwards from Cross and Cong, where it is said by tradition the king stood at one period of the battle.

The Belgians, although not absolutely victorious, had rather the best of the first day’s fighting, having driven their enemies back to their encampment, which probably extended from the site of this pillar of Adloe to the western end of the Plain of the Hurlers, along by Nymphsfield to the cross roads leading to Lough Mask, and from thence through Creevagh,

in which still stand the remains of cairns. Each Firbolg having carried with him a stone and the head of a Danann to their king, he erected “ a great earn ” to commemorate the event. Taking into consideration the line of the two armies, this must be the cairn of Ballymagibbon, which stands near the road passing from Cong to Cross. It is 129 yards in circumference, and about 60 feet high ; and its original base may still be traced by a number of upright stones. Within it there is a large cave, but it is not at present accessible.

The next morning, before the second day’s fight was commenced, the following incident occurred : King Eochy, unattended, went down into a certain well to perform his ablutions, and while there observed three of the enemy “ overhead,” about to seek his life. A colloquy ensued, but the Dananns would give no quarter. He was saved, however, by one of his own band, who slew the three, but died immediately from his wounds on an adjoining hillock. The Firbolgs, coming up to look after their king, there and then interred the hero who so bravely defended him ; and, each taking a stone in his hand, erected over him a monumental cairn. The well is not named in the ancient account of the battle ; but the little hill on which the conflict took place is called *Tulach-an-triur*, “ The Hill of the Three,” and the monument erected thereon *Carn-in-enfhir*, “ The Carn of the One Man.” Such is the simple narrative of the transaction sent down to us through bards and wandering poets and chieftains’ laureates, who perhaps, as already remarked, recited it at feasts and in public assemblies—as the tales of Troy were sung possibly before Homer was born—until the days of letters, when the tradition was transmitted to writing, and the annalist sped it on to the present time. Is it true ? Can it be that a trifling incident of this nature, occurring so far back in the night of history, can possibly bear the test of present topographical investigation, while many of our classic histories have been questioned, and, in some instances their statements disproved ? Yes ; there they both remain to the present day the deep well, now called *Mean* or *Meeneen uisge*, in a chasm of the limestone rock through which the floods of Lough Mask percolate into Lough Corrib the only drop of water that is to be found in the neighbourhood and so deep under the surface, that the king must have looked upwards to see his enemies overhead. Immediately adjoining it, on the south-east, stands the hillock referred to in the manuscript, and now crowned with a circle of standing stones, 176 feet in circumference, in the centre of which are the remains of the cairn and the monument is still called *Carn Meeneen uisge*.

This well of the *Mean-Uisge*, the precise derivation of which is not known, but which signifies either “ the small watery plain,” or “ the celebrated water,” answers well the description afforded by the narrative ; for it is reached by a flight of steps like those in the Pigeon Hole and other similar natural caves near Cong. At certain seasons, when the upper floods accumulate, the water rises almost instantaneously in a jet through this aperture, and forms a turlough to the south of it.

After a careful examination of the locality, with a transcript of the ancient manuscript in his hand, the author, feeling convinced of the identity of the stone heap standing within the circle figured above, and by the kind permission of its proprietor, Charles Blake, Esq., made an excavation in the centre, telling the workmen beforehand that they would assuredly find a chamber in it ; and if it had not been already rifled, the remains of the hero who so bravely defended the Firbolg king. As much of the top of the heap had been removed for building purposes some years ago, we soon came upon a large smooth, horizontally placed, gritstone flag, on raising which another, somewhat larger in size, was discovered. The latter remains *in situ*, and covers a small square chamber, 28 inches high, and 37 wide, the walls of which are formed of small stones. On removing some of these on the western side, we found imbedded in the soft black powdery earth that had fallen in through the apertures, and probably mixed with charcoal, the urn contained the incinerated remains of human bones. It is now in the Museum of the Academy.

This very beautiful object is about 5½ inches high, and 6 inches wide in the mouth, tapering gracefully to the bottom, which is only 2 inches broad. It is also highly decorated all round the lip, and has six fillets beneath the outer edge of the rim ; and, what is unique in vessels of this description, four slightly elevated knobs, like handles. The lower plain surface beneath the fillets and handles is covered with herring-bone ornamentation. The surface of the vessel is of a reddish-brown colour, and the interior of its substance black, showing that it was submitted to the process of baking or roasting, either in its original formation, or at the time of the pyre, or when the hot embers of the human remains were placed within it.

Here, no doubt, the body of the loyal Firbolg youth was burned, and his ashes collected and preserved in this urn. Perhaps a more convincing proof of the authenticity of Irish or any other ancient history has never been afforded. [4]

Immediately over and to the north and west of the site of the foregoing incident the ground rises into the slope of Toneleane, the “ trowel-like elevation ;” that of Callagh Dubh, the “ black woman,” probably in reference to the Danann poetess, the daughter of Dianceacht, and from which name in all probability the present townland of Nymphsfield takes its name ; and the little hollow called Cath-na-Bunnen—upon all of which the chief battle monuments of the Dananns still remain.

O’Donovan, when examining the barony of Kilmain, in 1839, did not visit any of the monuments, which exist in the hollow south-east of Toneleane ; but the translation which he has left of the *Cath Magh Tuireadh* has directed the author to the discovery of this and several other structures still existing. He has also had the advantage of collating, with Mr. O’Looney, O’Donovan’s translation with O’Curry’s transcript of the manuscript now in the Catholic University.

This second day’s contest commenced under a new set of commanders, among whom “ Aengabha of Norway,” Ogma, Midir, Bodhbh-Dearg, and Dianceacht the Physician, were conspicuous as Danann leaders ; and Mella, Esc, Ferb, and Faebhar, the four sons of Slainge Finn, son of King Eochy, led the Firbolgs. The battle raged with great fury, and, according to the spirited description in the narrative, a Danann chief named Nemhid, son of Badhri, was slain by Slainge, and “ his grave was dug, and his pillar-stone was raised ; which is from that day to this called *Lia-Nemhidh*.” If this still exists, it is not at present susceptible of identification.

It would now appear that the battle surged northwards ; the lines extending towards the western shores of Lough Mask, where Slainge Finn, the king’s son, pursuing the two sons of Caelchu and their followers, who had fled from the left wing of the Danann army to the margin of the lake, killed them there, and “ seventeen flagstones were stuck in the ground in commemoration of their death.”

Here is another most remarkable confirmation of the tale ; for by the margin of the lake in the island (or peninsula as it is at present in summer time) of Inish-Eogan, now Inishowen, there stands this remarkable monument to this hour, within an elevated and entrenched fort, with thirteen of these flat “ flagstones” still occupying the edge of the rath, some of them over 6 feet high, by 9 inches wide, and about 4 or 5 inches thick. The site commands a glorious prospect of the lake and the Partry range, as well as Nephin and Ballycroy, mountains, and, the deep valley through which the waters of Lough na Foohy communicate with Lough Mask. The fort is oval, and measures 22 paces across ; some of the stones are perforated ; upon the west or water side the ditch is remarkably steep, but now much overgrown with bushes. There was great slaughter on both sides during this day’s fighting, and the

Norwegian general was nearly overpowered in a personal conflict by the Red son of Mogharn, one of the Belgæ ; but at nightfall the Firbolgs gave way. They carried home, however, into the presence of their king, the heads of the slain Dananns.

The Firbolgs, says the narrator, “ rose out early the next morning, and made a beautiful *scell* [sceall, or testudo] of their shields over their heads, and placed their battle spears like trees of equal thickness, and thus marched forward in Turthas [columns or battalions] of battle. The Tuatha de Danann, seeing the Firbolgs marching in this wise from the eastern head of the plain [probably from the places now known by the townland names of Gurtachurra, Ballymagibbon, and Knock], observed :—‘ How pompously these Tuirthis of battle march towards us across the plain !’ and hence the plain was called *Magh Tuireadh*, or plain of the Tuireadhs.” From this circumstance arose the name so often referred to in ancient Irish history.

On this third day of the battle, the Dananns were commanded by the Dagda ; for, said he, “ I am your Daigh-dia” (god of hope, or confidence, deliverer) ; and Sreng, the son of Sengan, led the Belgæ. Several personal conflicts between the most renowned warriors are said to have taken place, the details of which, descriptive of the arms and mode of fighting, are related in Homeric language in which it is said the helmets were crushed, the metal-bound shields were battered, the long-handled spears were shivered, and the “ green-edged [bronze] swords were dyed with blood.” The Dagda slew Kerb, one of the most famous Firbolg heroes, and the Belgæ were driven back to their camp ; but they were still able to carry each a stone and the head of a foe, and also that of Kerb, which they buried within their lines, and placed over it a cairn called *Carn-cin-Kerb*, or the “ monument of the head of Kerb.” This name is not now known ; but, considering the line of the two armies, we are inclined to think it may be the small stone heap a little to the west of the great monument at Ballymagibbon, erected after the first day’s battle.

The line of the Belgian or Firbolg camp, or more probably settlement, can still be traced with wonderful accuracy, stretching in a curvature along the lake side to the east of Cong, where, commencing with the caher, or fort, which lately existed at *Lisloughry*, “ the lake fort,” it extends by the fort and cave of *Lackafinna*, “ the white flagstone,” over the high ground where stands *Lisduff*, “ the black fort,” to Caher Gerrode, that commands the whole scene ; [5] and thence by Cuckoo Hill where the pillar-stone of the Faugha stood, and immediately beneath which, to the east, is *Caher-Speenau*, “ the thorny fort.” The wall of this fort, although not built of large stones, is 10 feet thick, and 6 feet high ; its circumference is 393 feet. An outer wall encircled this fort originally ; but at present only a few-yards of it remain. The inter-space between these walls is 48 feet. Tradition says there is a cave in the interior of this fort. When the outer walls were being removed some years ago, several antiquities were discovered, especially querns and iron hatchets. [6]

More to the south-east, on the hill of Tongegee, and which commands a grand panoramic view of the lake and mountains, are the remains of *Caher-na-gree*, “ the pleasant fort,” which, with the cluster of minor erections, both military and monumental, around it, must have been a city in itself. Still more to the east are the *Lisheen*, or “ little earthen fort,” and the great enclosure and caves of *Caher-Phaetre*, “ pewter fort,” immediately below the cairn of Ballymagibbon. Still more to the east, there are the forts on Corgorave hill, and others along the road to Cross, and so on to the immense heap of *Caher-Mayo*, or the great “ stone fort of Mayo,” which tradition says was intended to have been the capital ; and to the north of which, at Attyricard, there are several similar structures. Then turning northwards, by Kildun and Caherduff, to the village of The Neale, we meet with undoubted evidences of the exist-

ence of a numerous population ; for it must have been the work of thousands to have brought together those huge masses of stone, and sunk those caves.

Within the Tuatha de Danann lines we have several large cahers, caves, and forts, extending along the eastern and northern slopes of Benlevi, to the tower of Ardnageeha, wherever the ground permitted of their erection. But, presuming that we are correct in the topography of the battlefield, the front of the invaders extended from the site of the Long Stone at Cong across to Nymphsfield, where we find a cluster of most remarkable monuments, to be described presently.

The battle was fought in the space between these two lines, and passing off to the north, turned at The Neale again towards the west, and concluded at the shores of Lough Mask.

On this third day of the engagement the Firbolgs were reinforced by the aged Fintan, and an additional Leinster army. Both the kings commanded in person. Nuad, in a fierce encounter with Sreng, one of the Belgian heroes, lost his arm, but was rescued by Aengabha, his Norwegian ally, whose exploits are most graphically described in the manuscript. Dianceacht, his surgeon, dressed the wound, and Credne Cerd, the artificer, afterwards made for him a silver hand ; so that from henceforth he was known as *Nuadhat-Airgead-Lamh*, or “ Nuad of the silver hand ;” and the circumstance has passed down through the whole stream of Irish history. A monument was erected over the king’s hand where the blood dropt from it upon *Cro-Ghaile*, “ the enclosure of the foreigners,” and which monument may, for aught we know, still exist. [7] It is also stated that the Dananns reared up *Cairtheda*, or pillar-stones, to protect their men, and also to prevent their retreat.

Before proceeding with the narrative, we must here conduct our readers to the existing Danann monuments that accumulate in the fields opposite the glebe of Nymphsfield, to a portion of which the locality tradition has assigned the name of *Cath-na-Bunnen*, “ the battle of the butts ;” because it is said that here, when the combatants were nearly exhausted, and had blunted, broken, or lost their swords and spears, they fought with the butts, or handles, as the Faugaballaghs did in the Peninsula. But perhaps this term may be only a corruption or mispronunciation of *Cath-na-Danann*, “ the battle of the Dananns.” There are here five very remarkable stone circles still remaining within the compass of a quarter of a square mile, and there are traces of others.

Are the other circles adjoining military, religious, commemorative, or monumental? The experience and general belief of antiquarians is, that all these large circles are Druidical, and either monumental or religious. Sometimes they undoubtedly mark the confines of a cairn or tumulus, which latter having been removed centuries ago, the circle has remained as would be the case, had we continued our excavations, and cleared away the interior of the circle of the “ One Man’s Cairn.” Some stone circles of only a few feet or yards in diameter are, no doubt, the remains of the upright supports of dome-roofed sepulchres ; but the experienced eye is sure to detect such use, and it would not have been possible to roof over the spaces that are included within the Moytura circles. Of their Druidical or religious purposes we know nothing, nor are we ever likely to know more. Some of them may mark the outer walls of cahers, where all the other stones, possibly of smaller size, have been removed in the course of centuries ; or they may have been originally (in lieu of timber) raised up as defensive stockades where, taking the warfare of the time into account, their interiors would be places of considerable security. Our ancient histories make no mention of these stone circles ; legend, tradition, and even popular superstition, are remarkably silent with respect to them ; and we therefore hail with thankfulness any inkling which this as yet unpublished tale of the Moytura Battle can afford us as to their use. As already stated the Tuatha de Dananns, it is

said, “ fixed pillar-stones in the ground to prevent their people fleeing, until these stones should take to flight,” and at the same time protect them from the enemy ; and certainly a circle of this description, formed of smooth sloping flags, with the interstices filled up so as to form a wall 7 or 8 feet high, within which 200 men could easily stand, would answer all the purposes of an entrenched camp.

Now, among the most renowned personages of that age whose names and exploits have descended to our own time was Belor, the great Fomorian giant, who is said to have had a third eye in the centre of his forehead, with the basilisk power of which, when uncovered, he could, even at a great distance, kill or petrify his enemies. [8] There is a vivid tradition among the people that such a personage was at the Cath-Magh-Tuireadh-Cunga, and that the persons who erected these forts and circles, dreading his power over their soldiers, painted the figures of warriors on the outer surfaces of these flat stones ; so that, as an old man once told me on the spot, “ when the Fomorian necromancer, standing on the fort of Lackafinna about half a mile off, or at Ardnagook, and turning his magical eye on them, perceived that he had not tumbled any of them—for he used to *melt* people with his eyes, he went away in disgust.” The name of this hero is not known traditionally in this neighbourhood, and there is no mention made of him in the manuscript account of the first battle of Moytura ; but we know, that “ Belor of the mighty blows” was killed at the second or northern battle of Moytura, subsequently fought in the county Sligo. It is with the Faugha Ruadh, or great red giant, already referred to, that local tradition associates this circumstance.

At the south-west corner of the same field, opposite the glebe of the Rev. E. L. Moore, the present rector of this parish, there is another circle. It consists of a series of standing stones, and is 152 feet in diameter. Within and around this and the adjoining fields, to the south and east, several perfect circles still exist, and the sites of others can still be traced within the confines of Cath-na-Bunnen ; so that here was evidently the stronghold of one of the contending armies.

Where the glebe now stands there existed, about forty years ago, the great Danann stronghold called *Caher-Mac-Turc*, “ the caher of the son of the wild boar,” and by some called *Caher-more* and *Caher-Biel*, the stones of which were used in erecting the parsonage ; and the slope in front of the latter yet marks a portion of its site. Half a century ago, before the same knowledge existed, or the same interest was felt in the preservation of national or historic monuments as at present, but little attention was paid to the preservation of such structures. Thanks to George Crampton, Esq., son of the late Rector of Cong, we have been furnished with a map and description of this great caher, which was perhaps one of the largest in Ireland, and resembled Dun-Aengus or Dun-Conor, and others in Aran. It was circular, and enclosed a space of about half an acre. The inner wall was about 7 or 8 feet high, and 10 or 12 thick, and sloped from without inwards, with an opening or doorway 12 feet wide. In the central space was a small circular building, which in modern times was called by the people “ the gaol,” the wall of which was 3 feet thick. In removing the caher, several ancient iron weapons, and the stones of some querns or hand-mills, were discovered.

After the Danann king was wounded, Breas, his grandson, charged the Firbolgs with great fury, but was cut down by the hand of Eochy. That, however, Breas, the son of Ealathan, was not killed, is manifest from the context of the MS., as well as the general tenor of history, for he subsequently reigned during the period that Nuad was disabled from his wound. Then the Dagda, Ogma, Allad, and Delway (evidently Scandinavian names), rushed on King Eochy, but were repulsed for a while by his four grandsons, the sons of Slainge, all of whom, however, fell in the engagement ; and “ the place where they were interred is called *Leaca-Mhac-Slainge*, ‘ the flags of the sons of Slainge.’ ”

On the other side, the four sons of Gann charged down the Danann lines, but they also were killed by Gobnen, the smith ; Lucry, the carpenter ; Dianceacht, the surgeon, and Aengabha ; and their monument was called *Dumha-Mac-Gainn*, “ the mound of the sons of Gann.” Then the three sons of Orddan, the Firbolg Druid, next essayed to break the Danann columns, but were slain by the sons of Cainte ; and “ the place where they were buried is called *Dumha-na-n-Druadh*” or “ the Druid’s mound.” Afterwards, the cohorts of the invaders, along with Inchar and Incharba, advanced, and charged the Belgæ, but were withstood by Carbre, the son of Den and the sons of Buan, whom however they slew ; and, says the MS., “ the leachts at which they were interred are called *Leaca-Mac-Buain*, and the grave of Cairbre lies outside their leachts or monuments.” Could we but identify them, there are all round this spot sufficient monuments to choose from for these erections, notwithstanding centuries of cultivation, and, alas ! years of ruthless destruction.

The Belgian columns were evidently driven back, and the battle passed, as on the occasion of the second day’s fighting, to the north-east. The sons of the two kings, Looe the strong, son of Nuad, and Slainge the fair, son of Eochy, after a fierce encounter slew each other. The grave where the Danann hero was buried is called *Lia-Looee*, and is in all likelihood the “ long stone of The Neale”. It is a very notable object at the fork of the road, to the south of the village, and is now 4½ feet over ground. There are many traditions about Looelamhfada, the long-handed son of King Nuad, still in the mouths of the people in this district.

Following the track of the Dunanns during this third day’s engagement, we approach the Parish of KILMOLARA, commonly called The Neale, but the parish church of which happens to be situated in the parish of Cong. Adjoining the village is The Neale House, the residence of Lord Baron Kilmaine, and within the demesne there are several monuments of much interest, although not noticed by writers. A large stone heap, now faced with steps, and crowned by a weathercock, contains, we believe, in its interior the nucleus of a cairn, and may probably be that erected over Slainge himself. In the grounds adjoining a comparatively modern structure has been erected over some sculptured figures of considerable antiquity, although not referrible to the days of Moytura. They are placed in front of an ancient cave, and are popularly known as “ The Gods of The Neale.” That, however, which is of undoubted antiquity, and well worthy the serious attention of philologists and antiquaries, is a flat mass of gritstone placed in the orchard wall, and now nearly obscured with ivy, and of which, with the permission of the noble proprietor, we have been permitted to publish an account. It measures nearly 15 inches each way, and bears the inscription, in sunken letters. These characters are perhaps the oldest letters that have yet been discovered in Ireland, and are evidently of greater antiquity than those upon the Inchangeoill monument. Mr. J. O’B. Crowe reads this denotative inscription thus : Lon Fecnan, *Ecclesia Fecnan*, the *lon*, *laun*, place, or church, of Fecna (genitive Fecnan), perhaps the Fecnan of Adumnan or some Fechna of Mayo of the Saxons. —See Colgan’s “ Trias Thaum.” page 378. Other philologists to whom it was submitted have not as yet thrown more light upon its interpretation. Of the antiquity of this inscribed monument there can be no doubt. It is said to have been brought here from the old church of Brefy, below Castlebar. [9]

The fourth day’s battle drew to a close ; the flower of the Firbolg army was cut off ; and its king, greatly fatigued, and far removed from the well of the Mean-uisge, and there being then—as there is literally now—no water in the place, was sorely oppressed with thirst ; so he committed the command to Sreng, and fled with a chosen band across the plain, from near The Neale in a north-western direction towards Lough Mask. The MS., which rather inclines to the native or Firbolg side of the question, relates that the Dananian Druids, hearing of the extremity in which Eochy was placed, magically concealed all the wells, rivers, and fountains probably a mist surrounded them.

The king and his attendants were pursued by the three sons of Nemed Mac-Badhraí, and 150 followers ; and after a fierce conflict on the lake shore, which is described with great spirit, and in which the king slew his three youthful assailants, he himself expired. “ Thus fell,” says the MS., “ the mighty Eochy ! A lofty cairn was raised over his body, which is to this day to be seen at Traigh Eothuile, and called *Carn Eathach* from his name ; and at the western extremity of that strand still exist the monuments of his slayers, called *Leaca Mac-Nemidh*, ‘ the flags of the sons of Nemidh. ’ ”

On the great grassy hill of Killower, or Carn, from which the townland takes its name—overlooking Lough Mask, from which it is about a mile distant, and commanding a view of the entire country, stands to this hour the most extensive and remarkable cairn in the West of Ireland and which, we entertain but little doubt, was erected to commemorate the fate of Eochy Mac Erc, the last of the Firbolg King’s of Erin.

Crowning the summit of the eminence is a ditch and rampart, the top of which is 2500 paces in circumference, and on it are still some standing stones, especially near the entrance on the W. N.W. side. A space twenty yards wide intervenes between the top of this rampart and the outer margin of the cairn. The tumulus undoubtedly contains central chambers, and a remarkable and partially open passage encircles its base. The view from the top is very grand; on the extreme west we have Benlevi and the Partry range of mountains rising from the lake, with the Reek of St. Patrick peeping over them ; more to the north is Nephin, the hill of Cultamaugh, Balla, and the country about Claremorris, and so all round the distant eastern end of the plain to Knockma, whence the eye again turns westwards to the shores of Lough Corrib.

Between this point and The Neale, on the east, and stretching round to Nymphsfield, on the south, the ground over which King Eochy fled exhibits no trace of water, and scarcely any vestige of early occupation. As yet the flagstones of the sons of Nemid have not been identified, although a ruined cromlech, somewhat to the south-west of our position, on the sloping ground above Caher Robert, evidently mark the site of an ancient monument. Above these are the remains of two caves ; and about half a mile to the south-east of the “ Carn ” stands the remarkable square dry-stone enclosure, forty-four paces in width, and containing a well-built cave in the centre, which is called *Caher Ribert*, or “ Robert’s Fort.” Its walls are 6 feet high, and 2½ thick ; and the western square-topped doorway, with its massive lintel and sloping sides, would appear to be the type of the early Christian edifices to which reference has been so frequently made. It is 4 feet 10 inches high, 3 feet 2 inches wide at the bottom, and 2 feet 10 inches at top. This form of caher, although represented in Aran, is rather scarce, and is evidently of later date than the circular ones. A square fort or enclosure may still be traced among the rocks, about half a mile to the north of Aughalard Castle. [10] Immediately at the western foot of this hill is the great natural and artificial cave ; and nearly in the same line we see several other raths and cahers—Lough Mask Castle, Ballinchalla church, the ruins of Inishmain Abbey, and the fort and standing stones over the water’s edge at Inishowen ; while more to the north rises the last great battle monument, called Caher Bowen, and also the well of Derrnod and Graine : and the forts in the demesne of Cushlough.

Our account of the battle and battle-field of Moytura here closes ; both parties withdrew after the fourth day’s fighting the dispirited Firbolgs to their camp along Corrib shore, and the Dananians to their mountain fortress. Both parties interred their dead ; and it is said the former “ raised *Dumhas* [or tumuli] over their nobles ; raised *Leaca* [or flagstones] over their heroes ; *Ferthas* [graves] over the soldiers ; and *Knocs* [or hillocks] over the champions.” Sreng and the other remaining descendants of Gann held a war council ; and, having but 3000 men remaining, they discussed the question of leaving the country in the possession of the

invaders, dividing the kingdom, or risking another battle ; and, as they were inferior in numbers, they demanded single combat, and challenged the Dananns to fight man to man. This was refused ; but a peace was ratified, by which Sreng and the Firbolgs, or Belgæ, retained the province of Connaught, to which those of that nation then resorted from all quarters, and where there is no doubt some remnant of that race still remains. A portion of the Belgæ, possibly the warriors and soldiers, fled across Lough Corrib to the Islands of Aran ; where, perhaps dreading another invasion, they raised those stupendous barbaric monuments that still exist there, the wonder and admiration of antiquaries and historians, as they are undoubtedly the most extensive, as well as the oldest, structures of their kind in Europe. [11]

The Tuatha de Dananns elected Breas, son of Elaethan, to reign during the period of Nuada's convalescence, which it is said occupied seven years. Under A. M. 3310 we read—“ This was the seventh year of Breas over Ireland, when he resigned the kingdom to Nuadhat, after the cure of his hand by Diancecht, assisted by Creidne the artificer, for they put a silver hand upon him ;” and in 3330, “ at the end of the twentieth year of the reign of Nuadhat of the Silver Hand, he fell in the battle of Magh-Tuireadh na bh-Fomorach, by Balor of the mighty blows, one of the Fomorians.” From this we learn that, according to the computed chronology, twenty-seven years elapsed between the first or southern and the second or northern battle of Moytura, which was fought in the parish of Kilmactranny, barony of Tirerrill and county of Sligo. By many writers, ancient and modern, these two battles and battle-fields have been mixed up ; but we trust the foregoing narrative and topographical description will prevent further mistakes of this nature.

The bare historic fact, with but few details of the great battle of Moytura, has been mentioned in all our annals, and is told in most of our ancient Irish MSS. of authority ; from which, however, it was here unnecessary to quote, as they do not enter into details, and no effort has heretofore been made to identify the locality. The unpublished manuscript from which the foregoing account has been extracted is preserved in the Library of Trinity College, H, 2. 17, commencing at page 291 ; it was transcribed at Moy-Enne, near Ballyshannon, by Cormac O'Cuirnin, probably in the fifteenth century ; but the tale itself is referred to by Cormac Mac Cullinan, King and Bishop of Cashel, the most learned man of his age, when he wrote his celebrated Glossary, in the ninth century. The translation which the author had access to was that made for the Ordnance Survey by the late Dr. John O'Donovan, and which is preserved in one of the manuscript books of the Ordnance Survey for the county of Mayo, to which we have so frequently referred. [12] It would have exceeded the limits of this book to have described the battle more at length ; but an alphabetical list of the names of those who fought upon both sides, and the significant meanings of which so much resemble those of North American Indians, would, we think, be of some interest to the philologists of the present day.

[1] See the Author's Catalogue of the Antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, part i.

[2] See Mr. Ferguson's poem on Howth See also the Author's Table of Pestilences in the “ Irish Census Report for 1851,” vol. v., page 45.

[3] During the last fifty years an eccentric person residing in the locality made a castellated stone structure to the west of this great cairn ; but it in nowise either interferes with or invalidates the old sepulchral monument referred to in the text ; and it is not clear that, despite its Brummagem architecture, there is not beneath it a second tumulus, consecrated to the remains of some early Irish notability.

[4] See the author's communications upon the battle-field of Moytura, laid before the Royal Irish Academy in 1866, and printed in the Proceedings, vol. x., pp. 22-24.

[5] Caher Gerrode, or Garret's Caher, which stands on the hill to the north-west of Moytura

House, is manifestly a modern name. The author has lately erected a tower within it ; but the antiquity of the outer wall is undoubted.

[6] A *tuath*, or narrow iron hatchet, found here is now in the valuable collection of the late Dr. Petrie.

[7] Many years ago the late Rev. Dr. Walsh, father of the present Master of the Rolls, presented to the Academy an urn containing the bones of a human thumb which had been found in a kistvane, or stone chamber, at Kilbride, in the County Wicklow.— See Proceedings, vol. i., p. 296. And in the church at Waterloo we can still see the monument commemorative of the Marquis of Anglesea's leg.

In his note to the foregoing circumstances, as related in the Annals of the Four Masters, under A.M. 3303, O'Donovan writes as follows :—" It is stated in the Leabhar-Gabhala of the O'Clerys, that Diancecht and Credne formed the hand with motion in every finger and joint, and that Miach, the son of Diancecht, to excel his father, took off this hand, and infused feeling and motion into every joint and vein of it, as if it were a natural hand.—See O'Flaherty's Ogygia, Part iii., c. 10. In Cormac's Glossary, the name of Diacecht is explained, ' Deus Salatis' i. Dia na h-ice—' The God of Curing.'

[8] Could it be possible that at that period Belor had an optical instrument by which he might see at a distance ?

[9] On a stone built into the wall, beneath this monument, can be read the following inscription : " The above stone was found at Brefy, in the Co. of Mayo, A.D. 1732, in a coffin, inscribed in Irish characters, the coffin of Genan, which contained a skeleton, 12½ feet long. Genan was King of Ireland, A. M. 3352, P. D. 7024, A. C. 1681 ; and this monument is erected to show the antiquity of the Irish character and the size of mankind in those early ages. A. D. 1756." The foregoing speaks for itself.

[10] In order to visit this portion of our route, the tourist, passing along the road from Cong by the Glebe and the cross roads to The Neale, reaches a site once known as Cross-Davy, where an ancient sculptured cross formerly stood, until removed about fifty years ago by religious fanaticism, backed by legal injustice. Then, taking the northern road through Creevagh Caher-Robert, Eochy's Carn can be visited. The lower road from Lough Mask Castle into Cong will take the tourist to Aughalard, and on by the Pigeon Hole, to his hotel ; or carry him by the lake margin to Maam.

[11] See Mr. Haverty's graphic account of the visit of the Ethnological section of the British Association to the Islands of Aran in 1857, which the author had the honour of conducting.

[12] There are also other copies of the *Cath-Magh-Tuireadh* nearly paraphrastic of the foregoing, and also giving descriptions of the engagement at Ballisadare, or Kilmactranny, preserved in the British Museum ; and a copy of which, made by a son of the late Eugene O'Curry, is now in the Library of the Catholic University. See O'Curry's Lectures upon " The Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History," pp. 241, 250, &c. The British Museum manuscript was transcribed by Gilla-Riabhadh-O'Cleary about the year 1460.

Lough Corrib, its shores and islands : with notices of Lough Mask (1872)

Author : Wilde, W. R. (William Robert), 1815-1876

Publisher: Dublin : McGlashan & Gill

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : cdl ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/loughcorribitssh00wildiala>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

September 26 2011