

Battles and barbarism

On the northwest corner of County Down, Northern Ireland lies a beautiful old village with a street of stone-façade homes, shops and a market house. Narrow carriage archways and cobbled courtyards hint at days long gone; an extensive well-maintained demesne covers what once was a grand mansion or Castle. Over time this village was known on maps and documents by many names, most of which sound similar to how we pronounce Moira today. They include Maighe Rath (AD 634), Muigh Rath (AD 942), Maige Roth (1160), Magh Rath (1350), Mag Rath (1392), Myra (1583), Moyragh (1609), Moyrath (1692), Moyra (1712) and Moyrah (1719). It would seem that the name we use today was first in use about the mid-eighteenth century.

Traditionally the name Moira was thought to have been anglicised from Magh Rath to mean “Plain of the fort.”¹ The large number of forts or raths in the area helped create that assumption. However for the second element in the ancient names to mean fort, the word “rátha” rather than “rath” would be required. There are good arguments for the name to mean “plain of prosperity” or “plain of rivers or fords” but perhaps the most natural translation, since the village was a meeting-point of routes north, south, east and west, was “plain of

¹ From Archdeacon Atkinson’s *Dromore: An Ulster Diocese*.

wheels.”² It is a frivolous thought, I know, but if the old name was being translated today, wouldn’t “plain of wheels” be appropriate, given that Moira motorway roundabout branches in five directions like spokes on a wheel?

It is clear from the historical names that Moira is an old community. A local newspaper suggests Moira was flourishing when Lurgan had only a few houses and Belfast was little more than a ford on the River Lagan,³ though to describe it as flourishing may be just a little fanciful. Certainly a community of sorts has existed for many centuries. Some evidence lies hidden from the view of all but the most knowledgeable, while other evidence is walked upon daily with little understanding of its significance.

Over the years, growth in population and the ensuing development of the land has left little to remind us of early life in area, except for the few earthen raths still visible in and around Moira.

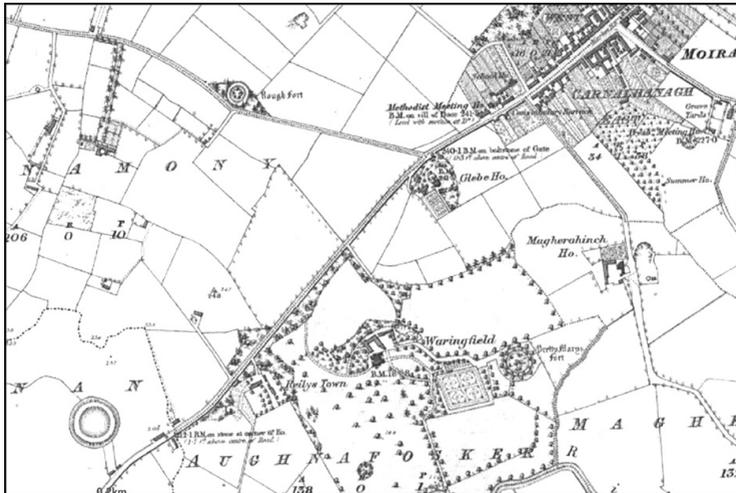
The most familiar and accessible rath is the Rough Fort on the Old Kilmore Road. The overgrown and rather inaccessible rath in the townland of Aughnafosker, just below Glebe Gardens, is called Pretty Mary’s Fort. How it came to be so named is a mystery. Because it has more

² See <http://www.placenamesni.org/resultdetails.php?entry=11007> accessed 7th April 2017 for more detailed information.

³ Lurgan Mail article 10/11/95.

than the normal number of defensive earthwork rings, it is said to be a good example of a multi-vallate ring-fort.

Many other forts throughout the district have long since been levelled. Back in 1872, Maralin parish schoolmaster Robert McVeagh took Dr John O'Donovan to the townland of Ballymackeonan where he pointed out the site of a former fort. "This," said McVeagh, "was one of the finest forts in this parish, but it was levelled some years before I was born to give room to cultivation, for people cannot afford here to pay rent for waste ground and in my own memory twenty-four forts have been levelled within the parish."⁴



Ordnance Survey map © Crown Copyright 1860

⁴ Dr O'Donovan's letters preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Another fort suffered a different fate. It was an unusually large one and early maps show it so close to the quarry on the Lurgan Road that the western half was gone. Site surveys in 1978 showed no trace and the conclusion was that it had been swallowed up by the quarrying.

In addition to the raths of Moira, there are two other evidences of even earlier life. One has now all but disappeared while the other is very visible but seldom recognised for what it is.

The former is a crannog. They were very early dwellings, sometimes built on stilts, in a lake or bog. Our local crannog was in the townland of Drumbane, on land now bordered on three sides by the motorway, the railway and the Drumbane Road. That area, crossed by road and rail, was once so liable to flooding that it was effectively a lake. An old land survey map of 1780 shows it as a mill dam and turf bog.⁵ Virtually all trace of the crannog has disappeared, though the lie of the land still indicates the edge of the former lake.

The henge is a different matter and is visible on land behind the Presbyterian churches and is surrounded by the housing development at Claremont. Henges are from the Neolithic period and Early Bronze Age and were large ceremonial circular earthworks. They are thought to have been meeting places where a tribe congregated at certain

⁵ 'Map of Earl Moira's demean^(sic) Moira, Co. Down 1780' by Daniel Mullan. Image T3560/1 PRONI.

times of year for rituals or other gatherings. Interestingly, Edmund Getty described Moira as “one of the classic spots of pagan Irish history.”⁶

This circular mound in Moira is reasonably large, being thirty-six metres (almost one hundred and twenty feet) in diameter. Some limited archaeological excavations of the outer ditch in 1977 identified two distinct historical periods. The upper layer showed late medieval activity but by digging deeper, the archaeologists found pottery dating from around AD 500-1100 and showing that there may once have been an underground chamber which was now collapsed. However, the structure of the mound surrounded by a ditch almost certainly dates it to around five thousand years ago.⁷

Forts and crannogs were means of security in a rural and often barbarous society. The area, being close to Lough Neagh and the River Lagan, was always likely to be visited by those who wanted to dominate or destroy. Over the centuries the Moira area has been the scene of many battles and has endured much adversity before becoming a desirable place to live.

The Romans visited Ireland but did not invade. They believed this island to be a barbaric place. It was “the land

⁶ Notices of the round towers of Ulster by E Getty. Page 28

⁷ Ulster Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 42 1979 Excavation of an earthwork near Moira, County Down by N.F. Brannon and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency Rescheduling of a Henge in the townland of Carnalbanagh East, County Down (DOW 013:013).

where the limits of the known world should be placed” and where the “natives are wholly savage and lead a wretched existence because of the cold.”⁸ We know the Romans mapped the British Isles. They knew this island called Hibernia, the land of winter, and were familiar with our coastal areas. One of their maps clearly shows Belfast Lough with a river flowing into it. Roman coins and material goods have been found in Ireland providing evidence of scouts and traders exploring up our rivers in search of butter, cattle and Irish wolfhounds. It is possible one of those Roman scouts may have sailed up Belfast Lough and explored the Lagan as far as Maighe Rath. I suggest this because a Roman coin from the time of Vespian (AD 70-79) was unearthed here shortly before World War I and is now in the Ulster Museum in Belfast.⁹

As we move forward around five hundred years, we discover more barbarous activity. Hordes came to fight in AD 637 and battled for six days. Thousands of them never went home. This Battle of Moira is the earliest historical record of life in Moira.

Congal Cláen, King of Ulster had killed the High King of Ireland in AD 628 but was defeated the following year at the Battle of Dun Ceithirnn in Derry. Congal fled to Scotland and Domhnall of the Clan Connall became the

⁸ Strabo – Greek geographer and historian quoted in BBC Northern Ireland - Blueprint series.

⁹ Craigavon Historical Society - Review Vol. 2 No.1 and BBC Northern Ireland - Blueprint series and confirmed to the author by the Museum in 2017.

new High King. In Scotland, Congal sought help from King Domnall Brecc of the Dal Riada, a Scottish kingdom that included northern Irish territories. He returned to Ireland with an army of Britons, Scots and Saxons, including a Scottish King and a number of princes.

Perhaps he arrived through Dunseverick (though one writer believes they landed in Ireland at Dundrum). One of the five royal roads from Tara, seat of the Kings of Ireland, ran due north and ended at Dunseverick Castle. That ancient road was known as Slighe Mhidhluachra or High King's Road and it is said to have passed through Moira.¹⁰ Another source says it crossed the Lagan at a ford near Moira – possibly over the ford where Spencer's Bridge now stands. Congal and his troops marched south. Domhnall advanced from Tara, with an army of Irish chieftains and princes.

The two armies, reportedly comprising fifty thousand men on either side, came together at Moira on 24th June AD 637.¹¹ After six long days of fighting, Congal's army was annihilated; Congal himself was killed as were a number of the Scottish Princes. The battle is described as one of the most bloodthirsty in early Irish History. Sir Samuel Ferguson considered it "the greatest battle, whether we regard the numbers engaged, the duration of

¹⁰ Colm O'Lochlainn quoted by Rev. Patrick J. McKavanagh in Glenavy, the Church of the Dwarf 1868 – 1968 Printed by IRISH NEWS LTD.

¹¹ It has been suggested that The Battle of Moira was not fought at Moira but near Newry. For more information and links see Appendix 1.

the combat or the stake at issue, ever fought within the bounds of Ireland.” He wrote an epic poem in 1872. I quote a verse from *Congal: A Poem in Five Books*:

My sins, said Congal, and my deeds of
strike and bloodshed seem
No longer mine, but as the shapes
and shadows of a dream.
And I myself, as one oppressed
with life’s deceptive shows,
Awaking only now to life
when life is at its close.¹²

The routed armies fled over the Ford Ath-ornagh (Thornford or Thornbrook), up the ascent of Trummery and in the direction of the Killultagh Woods near Ballinderry. This direction of retreat helps the writer to believe that Congal’s army had approached the battlefield from the North rather than from Dundrum in the south as suggested by another.

When the Ulster Railway was being built, great quantities of bones were discovered in the cutting close to the ruins of the old Trummery church and tower. It is quite likely that they were those of men and horses killed in the battle. Rev. Henry W. Lett, writing in 1800s, says:

At Mr Waddell’s lime quarries have been found quantities of the actual bones of the natives long ago. This was their graveyard and the mode of

¹² Congal: a poem in five books by Sir Ferguson, Samuel, 1810-1886
Publ. 1978.

sepulture¹³ was some form of cremation. After the corpse had been burned, the ashes and bones were placed in a small pot or urn made of the plastic clay, so well-known by the excellent bricks and tiles now manufactured with it, and turned mouth downwards on a flat stone in a hole in the ground about half a yard deep. And just below the kilns, exactly where it was possible to ford the Lagan River there stood a mound which a few years ago was discovered to consist almost entirely of human remains, bearing marks of calcination, evidently of those who had been slain in some great battle.¹⁴

One thousand two hundred years after the battle, one old resident of Moira parish said, "In all directions bones are picked up when the ground is ploughed deep."¹⁵

Some of the names of the townlands in the area originate from this battle - particularly Aughnafosker, which means the "field of slaughter" and Carnalbanagh - the "Scotsman's grave." There was once a pillar stone in Carnalbanagh with crude crosses and circles on it, marking the graves of the Scottish Princes. Sir Samuel Ferguson in his poem writes about that pillar-stone.

¹³ An archaic word for burial or interment.

¹⁴ Quoted by Eileen Cousins B.A. in "Like and Evening gone" - a history of Magheralin Church.

¹⁵ Quoted in Antiquarian Jottings by Right Rev. Monsignor James O'Lavery M.R.I.A. Ulster Journal of Archaeology. Volume XI. Publ. 1905.

The hardy Saxon little recks
what bones beneath decay,
But sees the cross-signed pillar-stone,
and turns his plough away.¹⁶

At the end of his book, Sir Samuel added a note concerning this stone.

I learn with deep regret and some shame for my countrymen of the north that this memorial exists no longer. It has been destroyed by the tenant. I saw it and was touched by the common humanity that had respected it through so many ages, when I walked over the battlefield, accompanied by the late John Rogan, the local antiquary of Moira, in 1842.¹⁷

Inside the cover of a copy of *The Battle of Magh Rath*, a book which at a time belonged to one called Edmund Getty, is a note that appears to be by John O'Donovan:

March 27th 1848. This evening I walked with John Rogan of Lady's-bridge over the supposed site of the battle of Moira. He showed me the part of the hill where the pillar-stone once stood, supposed to be erected over the grave of one of the heroes. It commands a splendid view. The Mourne mountains are seen over the hilltops; the Lagan winds in the valley, and on its banks is seen a rath. Another rath is higher up, near a ford ...¹⁸

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

O'Donovan refers to a letter he received from the same John Rogan, in which he was told that the farmer who removed the stone "was named Green. He is not long dead."¹⁹

Another ancient pillar-stone commemorating the battle once stood on the hill near Trummery old church. It was believed to have been erected over the burial place of Congal Cláen. In 1834 Mr Rogan described it as having been encrusted,

with gray moss, and measuring about four feet eight or ten inches in height; on the side facing the north were four crosses neatly executed, three of them being within a circle. On the opposite side a large cross was observable, also encompassed by a circle. With regard to the time, or by whom erected, tradition is quite silent; but, that on some occasions this had been used as a place of interment, there cannot be any doubt, as human bones in a very decomposed state were often turned up. Report says that a former proprietor caused it to be carried away and used in the arch of a limekiln; but a mortality which exhibited itself amongst his farm stock having been attributed to this cause, the stone was restored to its ancient site.

Some years later Rogan adds,

¹⁹ *ibid.*

a few years subsequent to writing the above, this interesting relic was wantonly, perhaps I should say maliciously, broken to fragments, and spread on the entrance into a field.²⁰

For one thousand years after the Battle of Moira, there are few records of life in the area. It is believed that Vikings were nearby for a time. In AD 839 they reached Lough Neagh through the Lower Bann and wintered there. Confusion over the name Linn-Duachail led historians to assert that the Vikings had used the area around Maralin as a base to plunder churches in the north of Ireland - particularly Armagh. John O'Donovan had originally believed this but later corrected his assertion.²¹ Linn-Duachail was in County Louth. However the Vikings were as close as the southern shore of the lough for Oxford Island is said to be a Viking name - Ost-Fjord, East inlet - and Viking treasure was unearthed near Aghalee in 2013.²²

Around the time the Vikings were in Ireland, a King came to Moira as a visitor and not to fight! Murtagh McNeill wrote a poem called "The Circuit of Ireland." He traced

²⁰ The Round Towers of Ulster Source: Ulster Journal of Archaeology, First Series, Vol. 3 (1855), pp. 292-300. Published by: Ulster Archaeological Society Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20608774> Accessed: 29-04-2017 08:50 UTC.

²¹ "Linn Duachail, not Magheralin, County Down as O'Donovan once thought. *Circuit of Ireland note on line 35*. He afterwards corrects the error. *Fragments of Annals P.120 Four M., 1045, p.848.n*" - as quoted in *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*: edited by James Henthorn Todd.

²² www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-25128242

the progress of the King of Aileck through Ulster in the tenth century and listed the places where he stayed the night. The list includes Moira.²³

Moira was never far from bloodshed. Just down the road, near Glenavy, is the scene of further battles between the descendants of those who fought the battle of Moira. The battlefield was at Cráeb Tulcha or Crew Hill where on both occasions, in 1004 and 1099, the native Irish were victorious, even if they still did not gain full control of the East of Ulster for another three hundred years.

The foremost record of life in the area comes from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, was engaged in a campaign against English expansion in Ireland known as the Nine Years War. O'Neill had a Fort at Inisloughlin close to a ford on the Lagan.

Tyrone had met the Earl of Essex on 7th September 1599, for a “parley” on the instructions of Queen Elizabeth I at a ford on the Lagan and met him again in November that year. However the meeting is more likely to have been on another Lagan, which forms the headwater for the River Glyde in Co Louth. A truce was agreed but Elizabeth was displeased with Essex. She believed he had allowed O'Neill excessively favourable conditions and had treated

²³ Ibid. (But see also footnote 8 and Appendix 1, where J W Hanna suggests this also was near Newry).

him as an equal. She said of O'Neill, "To trust this traitor upon oath is to trust a devil upon his religion."²⁴

Over the next couple of years, O'Neill continued pressure on the English and a large reward was offered for his capture, dead or alive. He ostensibly sought pardon while continuing to defend his territory but Crown forces kept up the fight in 1601-1602.

Mountjoy, Lord Deputy of Ireland, reported that,
Chichester is now undertaking a fort in Killultah, held by Brian MacCartar's²⁵ men, being a place ... of great strength but exceeding importance, for it is the only den that is left for the rebels in all those and these parts.²⁶

Fynes Moryson describes how the fort was besieged and captured on 15th or 16th August 1602.

The Fort of Enishlanghen ... was seated in the midst of a great Bogge, and no way accessable, but through thicke Woods, very hardly passable. It had about it two deepe Ditches, both compassed with strong Pallisadoes, a verie high and thicke rampeire of earth, and timber, and well flanked with Bulworkes. For defence of the place fortie

²⁴ *Golden Lads: A Study of Anthony Bacon, Francis and Their Friends* by Daphne Du Maurier.

²⁵ This was Brian MacArt O'Neill, nephew of Hugh O'Neill.

²⁶ *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts* edited by Brewer & Bullen. Publ. 1870.

two Musketeres, and some twentie swordmen were lodged in it. But after that our forces with very good industry had made their approaches to the first ditch, the besieged did yeeld the place to the Queene and themselves absolutely to her mercy. So a ward of English was left in the Castle, after the spoile thereof was taken, wherein were great store of plate and the chiefe goods of the best men in the Countrie.²⁷

O'Neill's power was now greatly weakened. In exchange for help in getting a royal pardon, he granted his land in Killultagh to Sir James Hamilton, who five years later granted the same lands to Sir Fulke Conway.

O'Neill eventually fled Ireland in what was known as the Flight of the Earls and the English settlement in the area began in earnest. James was now on the throne and granted much land in the area to several Irish freeholders, "hoping the same would be better manured and inhabited."²⁸ The territory of Moira was granted to Murtough O'Lavery.²⁹ According to Rev. James O'Lavery, the territory included the townlands of Risk, Carnalbanagh, Drumbane, Gortnamony, Ballycanal,

²⁷ An Itinerary by Fynes Moryson 1908, 199-200. (Spelling as in original quote).

²⁸ The history of Ireland ... to the year 1245 by John D'Alton. Publ. 1845.

²⁹ *ibid.*

Feyney, Leg,³⁰ Taughlumny, Kilminioge, Gortross and Drumnabreeze.³¹

The Plantation of this part of Ulster was underway but the area was still a most challenging place to settle. The Irish woodkerne³² knew their way through the forests and bogs, and were naturally determined to get their own land back. About 1605 it was reported that "Killultagh by reason of strength of bogs and woods was the shelter and lurking place of most of the idle men, thieves, murderers, lawless kerne"³³ In 1610 Killultagh and the nearby district south of Lough Neagh were described as "a strong fortress, a den of rebels, and as thievish a country as any in Ulster."³⁴ Two years later the settlers in County Armagh complained that the kernes of Killultagh were committing robberies daily.

There was another major difficulty to surmount. While the land around us today is open and fertile, it was not always so. We know that Ireland has an abundance of turf-bogs that have passed through the stages of deforestation and moorland to eventually become fertile fields,

³⁰ Perhaps Legmore (Some spellings have changed over the years and some of these townlands are in the Magheralin area).

³¹ An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor, Ancient and Modern by Right Rev. Monsignor James O'Lavery M.R.I.A. Publ. 1895.

³² A robber or outlaw who lived in the woods of Ireland.

³³ Quoted by Rev. W. H. Dundas, B.D. in History of Killultagh. "Lisburn Standard," 28th January 1916.

³⁴ *ibid.*

a remarkable example of which may be seen in the parishes of Blaris, Hillsborough and Moira, which lie towards the banks of the Lagan. The whole district was known as “the Bogs.”³⁵

Sir George Carew describes Killultagh as “a safe boggy and woody country upon Lough Eaugh”³⁶ and Sir Henry Bagenal, marshal of the English army in Ireland, speaks of it in 1586 as “a very fast countrey full of wood and bogg.”³⁷ A note on the corner of an old map of Down from 1590 showing the River Lagan reads: “Alonge this river be ye space of 26 myles groweth much woodes, as well hokes for tymber as hother woode, which may be brought in the bale of Cragfergus with bote or drage.”³⁸

In a poem published in eighteenth century picturing the Lagan in flood, the poet describes Moira and the area:

But soon thy intermitted rage returns,
As Donaghcloney opens to thy view -
Soon Maralin her flooded pastures mourns,
And soon the nymphs of marshy Moira too.
Thy bloated form askance Kilwarlin eyes,
A mass uncouth, misshapen, and impure:

³⁵ Ulster Journal of Archaeology Publ. 1860.

³⁶ Quoted in The Ulster Journal of Archaeology Vol. 6.

³⁷ Quoted in A History of County Down by Alexander Knox Publ. 1875. (Spelling as in original quote).

³⁸ Ulster Journal of Archaeology, Vol. iii. old series. (Spelling as in original quote).

Maze next beholds thy progress with surprise,
And Blaris sitting on her sandy moor. *Hafiz*³⁹

As the years passed, the appearance of the area changed dramatically. Conway's new settlers cleared the natural forest from the valley floor and surrounding hills. It had been so thickly wooded before then that it was said a man might almost make his way from McArt's Fort on the Cave Hill to Lisnagarvagh⁴⁰ on the tops of trees. By 1640 the deforestation must have been considerable for a shortage of fuel was being experienced at local ironworks.

It is only to be expected that the arrival of the new settlers caused great resentment among those already living in Ulster. This eventually boiled over into active rebellion and in 1641 a Rising spread all over the country. Lurgan was burned and Lisnagarvey was besieged. Both sides perpetrated terrible atrocities but soon the tide turned against the rebels. In April 1642 one of those atrocities was close to Moira. Henry Munro leading the Scots and Lord Conway leading the English joined forces to march on Newry. Their first encounter with the rebel forces was at Inisloughlin Fort and in the Kilwarlin woods. It would appear that the Irish had again seized Inisloughlin, as they had seized so many strongholds across Ulster, and hoped to stop the Crown forces from marching south to Newry and Dundalk. But the Irish were shown no mercy and one

³⁹ Hafiz was the pen name of poet Thomas Stott Esq. of Dromore (1755-1829).

⁴⁰ Later called Lisnagarvey, then Lisburn.

hundred and fifty prisoners were summarily executed. Kilwarlin means wood of slaughter.⁴¹

Lisnagarvey and this whole area had suffered badly and much of the country was left devastated by the rebellion. The manager of Conway's estate wrote to him on 6th November 1657 describing conditions;

Some people who had leases are petitioning to give them up, having no money to pay the rent. You cannot think what misery is caused here ... corn and cattle bring in nothing; any trade there is, is in butter.⁴²

The country was also hit by a widespread cattle disease which, given the description, was possibly foot and mouth disease. Restrictions were imposed on the export of Irish cattle into England and losses of cattle in the Lisnagarvey area were said to be considerable.

As the Plantation progressed, much Irish-owned land was confiscated and Ulster was planted with Protestant families from many parts of Scotland and England. The depression continued for some time but at length some improvement was seen. This encouraged the noble Lords such as Conway to devote money to improve their estates. And so the area around Moira slowly began to be a relatively more stable and settled community, with the prospect of better times ahead.

⁴¹ Ulster Journal of Archaeology Vol. 8. 1860.

⁴² *ibid.*