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The Kings of Connacht

NORTH

By David McEllin

by Northwest

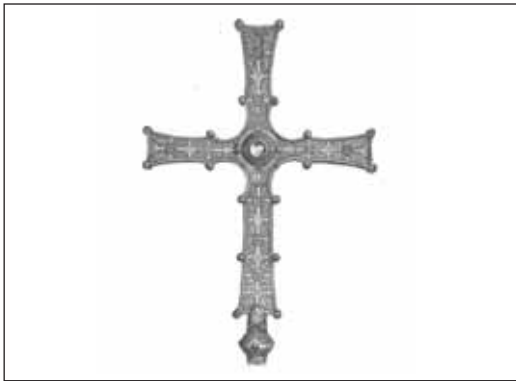


The O'Connor Don is the title of the hereditary heir of the O'Connor Clan, who were Kings of Connacht, and whose ancestry can be traced back to pre-Christian times. The descendants of this illustrious family still reside at Clonalis House, Castlerea, Co Roscommon. Very few European families can claim

such antiquity in their family tree. Feredach the Just, Rex Hiberniae (an O'Connor) reigned in c 75 AD. Niall of the Nine Hostages (whose brother was king) was a seafaring Prince, who plundered the seas and lands circa the early 5th century and took hostages one of whom was Patrick, who was put to work as a slave in Ireland and later converted the Irish to Christianity. Other notable O'Connor kings were Conn of the 100 Battles and Daithi the last Pagan King of Ireland. The O'Connor pedigree provided 11 High Kings of Ireland and 26 Kings of Connacht.

When surnames came into common usage in Ireland in the 11th century the O'Conors derived their surname from the Irish Conchubhair (Conor) which means 'conqueror'. The heartland of the O'Connor kingdom (tuatha) was Co Roscommon but as hereditary kings of Connacht the territory extended into Mayo and Galway to Lough Derg in the south, the river Shannon and Arran Islands. There were five main kingdoms in Ireland namely Connacht, Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Meath. There were 150 petty kingdoms within the territories giving allegiance to the greater king or Royal Bloods as they were known, from which families the High King was chosen. The system was weak basically as the High King's jurisdiction did not go beyond his immediate tuatha where he ruled, and this weakness would later be exploited by Norman invaders. Often authority had to be exerted through alliances with other nobles.

Irish society was ruled by Celtic mores and was based on a 'tribe' or 'clan' system with bloodlines being important in determining legal property rights within the clans. The king presided over courts and



Cross of Cong



Ballintubber Abbey

enforced the Brehon Laws. Ireland was divided socially into groups, the professional, druid, poet, physician, judge and historian, who advised the king on his kingship, and the rest of society which was divided between free people, and serfs (landless people) who were generally captured and defeated people from the disintegration in Europe that followed the fall of the Roman Empire. The military was made up of horsemen, gallowglass and kerne. The Gallowglass' were professional soldiers recruited from Scotland to assist the local Chieftains in defending their realm. Gallowglass soldiers served as bodyguards to the O'Conors and carved images of these soldiers can be seen on the tomb of King Phelim O'Conor in Roscommon Abbey. The inauguration of the kings of Connacht was enacted on the hill of Carnfree (near the pagan site of Cruachain at Tulsk) and the inauguration stone used is now at Clonalis House.

In the 11th Century the O'Conor's took over the High Kingship of Ireland following the demise of the O'Brien dynasty with Brian Boru killed in the defeat of the Danes at the Battle of Clontarf. The O'Conors held the High Kingship over the next two centuries beginning with the elevation of Turlough Mór O'Conor who established the first concept of centralised authority in the country. To reinforce his position he built the first stone bridges over the rivers Shannon and Suck and Castles at many locations including Dunloe, Dunmore, Galway and Collooney. The O'Conors left many heirlooms from this time including such relics as the Cross of Cong, which is on display at the National Museum. Turlough was influential with Rome in establishing a Diocese at Tuam at a time when the Pope was endeavouring to bring about reform in regard to the power of bishops vis-a-vis the abbots in the Church. This was a golden time when Ireland enjoyed a Celtic autonomy and way of life, a unity of land, law, language and culture, which was celebrated in a festival called the Tailteann in 1168 at the behest of then High King, Rory O'Conor.

However the storm clouds were already gathering as Pope Adrian IV had approved the invasion of Ireland by Norman and Welsh Knights ostensibly to bring about Church reform but another facet also prevailed which was an internal dispute with an exiled King of Leinster Dermot McMurrough who had fallen foul of Turlough Mór O'Conor and Tighernan O'Rourke, King of Breffni, following the elopement of O'Rourke's wife, the beautiful Devorgilla, with McMurrough from O'Rourke's castle at Dromahair, Co Leitrim. The invasion began in 1169, a hundred years after the Normans invaded England. The incursion of a small band of warlords into Co Wexford was to have dire consequences for Ireland and the Gaelic lifestyle. Rory O'Conor attempted to defeat the Normans in a siege at Dublin but was taken by surprise when Strongbow and his defenders broke from the city and made their escape inflicting serious losses on the Irish forces. Further reinforcements crossed from England unopposed and O'Conor confined his efforts to the defence and stability of Connacht building castles and abbeys such as Ballintubber and Knockmoy, the Normans doing likewise at Galway, Mayo and Sligo and indeed at Roscommon town, which the Irish found to be practically impregnable.



Church in ruins



Clonais House

One of the last efforts to reverse the trend occurred under Phelim O'Connor in the 14th Century. It coincided with the invasion from Scotland of Edward Bruce (brother of King Robert Bruce) with 6000 Scottish troops, at Larne. A great Irish/Scottish army aligned under O'Connor and Bruce combined to face the Normans on the battlefield at Athenry in 1316. The battle ended in defeat because of superior armour and weaponry of the Normans with 11,000 Irish soldiers killed, including Phelim O'Connor and many other Irish Chieftains. This battle settled the supremacy of the Normans in Ireland. The O'Conors lived in relative harmony for the next 150 years unaffected by Crown forces in their western habitat but sadly the 16th Century brought further turbulence with the Reformation,

which brought about unprecedented wars and turmoil throughout Europe. Ireland was not immune.

The Tudors had taken over the Throne of England and under the personage of Henry VIII and his successor Elizabeth I in 1558 a plan for the anglicization of Ireland was undertaken, which culminated in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, which was fought for the restoration of the Catholic Stuart dynasty. The result was to auger badly for Ireland over the next 300 years. Penal Laws were introduced which denied Catholics political franchise, education and economic privilege and lands were confiscated which reduced many Irish people to a state of impoverishment. At the height of the Penal Times one member of the O'Connor family Denis O'Connor was compelled to live in a bothán (cabin). By the 18th century Catholics held 8% of all land holdings. Some upper class families held on by conforming to the established Church. The O'Conor's stayed loyal to their Gaelic and Catholic traditions and survived albeit in more inauspicious circumstances than they were accustomed to in the area of Clonalis.

Clonalis House in Co Roscommon is open to the public in summer months. It is a treasury of historical documents and artefacts of the Gaelic past. Among the relics of this past is the harp used by the great bard Carolan who was a frequent visitor to their home and enjoyed the patronage of the O'Connor Clan. Also found there is the cross and chalice of Bishop Thaddeus O'Rourke of Killala (an O'Connor relation) who found refuge with the O'Conors during the persecution of the clergy in the Penal Times. The O'Conor's were responsible for the preservation of Irish manuscripts, The Book of the MacGauran (14th Cen) and Book of the O'Connor Don (17th Cen), a large collection known as The Ashburnham, now in the Irish Academy. Many other documents of historical importance can be seen there. The O'Connor motto anglicised is "From God comes every helping hero." The Connacht flag bears an eagle and the arm and sword of the O'Connor Clan.

Ref. The History and heritage
Of the Royal O'Conors and Clonalis
By Pyers O'Connor Nash