

## Donaghmore of Moy Cova

*An ancient Irish parish past and present, being the parish of Donaghmore, county Down*

J. Davison Cowan, LL.D. (T.C.D)

1914

•

The parish of Donaghmore takes its name indirectly from the church, and hence has an ecclesiastical origin. The townland in which the church is situated was originally called Donaghmore, and from thence the name was applied to the parish. When parishes were formed the names given them were generally those of townlands within their respective limits ; but, in almost all cases, the townland in which the church was situated gave its name to the parish.

The Irish language afforded St. Patrick and the other early Christian missionaries few terms which could be used for ecclesiastical purposes. Consequently, they had to borrow from the Latin, and sometimes from Greek through Latin—while the words thus appropriated became ‘ changed in form to suit the Irish laws of pronunciation.’ [1]

One of these words was *Domnach*, which is derived from the Latin, (*Dies*) *Dominica*, and signifies in Irish ‘ Sunday,’ or ‘ the Lord’s Day,’ and also a ‘ church’ ; and, according to the best authorities, all the churches in Ireland which bear the name *Domnach*, or—in its anglicised form—‘ Donagh,’ were so called because their foundations were marked out on Sunday, or the Lord’s Day. *Mor* in Irish means ‘ great’—anglicised, ‘ more’—and hence ‘ Donaghmore’ signifies the ‘ Great Church.’

The spelling of the word varies but little at present. In the older records the Irish is more or less preserved—where we have *Dompnachmore*, *Domnachmore*, *Donnachmore* and *Donachmore*. In modern times it is generally spelled *Donaghmore* or *Donoughmore* ; but the former is undoubtedly the correct orthography and is that adopted on the ordnance map.

*Donaghmore* was anciently termed by way of distinction *Domnach Mor Muighe Cobha*—i.e. *Donaghmore of Magh Cobha*—*Magh Cobha* being the name of the territory in which it was situated. In the early centuries of the Christian era there were no parishes in Ireland, and during this period *Donaghmore* was simply the townland which contained the church—subsequently called *Tullynacross*—and at present the *Glebe* on the ordnance map. It will therefore be necessary to treat of the territory in general, of which the several townlands of the present parish of *Donaghmore* in early times formed a part. Bishop Reeves (‘ Ecclesiastical Antiquities’), in his sketch of *Donaghmore* and its ancient church, refers at length, in the same connection, to *Magh Cobha*, while Dr. John O’Donovan, in his notes on the Four Masters and the ‘ Book of Rights,’ constantly associates this territory with *Donaghmore* and its church.

*Magh Cobha* (pronounced *Moy Cova*) signifies the Plain of *Cobha*, and was doubtless known as such for many centuries before the Christian era.—Bishop Reeves [2] informs us that according to the ‘ *Rennes Dinnsenchus*’ [3] *Magh Cobha* surnamed after *Cobha*, the huntsman of the sons of *Miletius* [4] of Spain. Doubtless, the particular passage referred to in

the ‘ Dinnsenchus ’ by Dr. Reeves is that quoted by Dr. Joyce as follows :—‘ Coba (Cova), the *Cuchaire* or trapper of Heremon (first Milesian King of Ireland) sen of Milesius ; it is he that first prepared a trap (*airrchis*) and a pit-fall (*cuithech*) in Erin ; and he himself put his foot in it to try if it was trim, whereupon his shin-bone and his two forearms were fractured in it ; and his drinking-cup, after being emptied, fell down, so he died thereof (i.e. of the wound and thirst) ; whence is derived Mag Coba, Cova’s plain.’ [5]

In the third century this territory was ruled by Prince Eochaidh [6] Cobha (Eochaidh in Irish denotes eques, horseman), and was known as the plain of Eochaidh Cobha. The tribe name anciently borne by the territory was Uibh Eathach, from which, when anglicised and the silent letters dropped, we derive Evagh, Iveach or Iveagh, the name of the barony.

There seems to have been a conflict of opinion at one time in regard to the location of the territory of Magh Cobha—chiefly owing to an error of the Four Masters in placing it in Tyrone. Dr. John O’Donovan, in the notes to his translation of the Four Masters, thus refers to it :

‘ The Four Masters, and from them Colgan and others, have erred in placing the plain (Magh Cobha) in Tyrone, and Dr. Lanigan has been set astray by them, where he conjectures (‘ Ecclesiastical History of Ireland ’) that Magh Cobha was probably where the village now called Coagh is situated ; but the situation of the plain of Magh Cobha is fixed by the older writers, who place it in Uibh Eathach, now Iveagh, and who placed it in the Church of Domhnach More Muighe Cobha, which is unquestionably the present Donaghmore, in the barony of Upper Iveagh, nearly midway between Newry and Loughbrickland.’ [7]

O’Donovan cites the best authorities for his contention both here and in the ‘ Book of Rights,’ [8] where he affords us some idea as to the extent of the plain—placing it ‘ in the monastery of Druim Mor (Dromore) and the Church of Domhnach Mor Muighe Cobha’ (Donaghmore). ‘ Donaghmore of Magh Cobha’ has been so closely connected with this territory that some have been led to suppose that it was coterminous with the present boundaries of the parish of Donaghmore, but this is a mistake.

The territory was of considerable extent and embraced a large portion of Iveagh—extending from Donaghmore to Dromore. According to Hogan’s ‘ Onomasticon,’ the river Lagan at Dromore was in Magh Ccbha. Some authorities consider that this territory extended from *Newry* to Dromore, [9] but the probability is that it included only the north section of the lordship of Newry.

According to the Four Masters, Magh Cobha was cleared of wood and the forts erected A.M. 3529, during the reign of Irial (known as the Prophet), son of Eremon, King of Ireland. With all due respect, however, to such eminent authorities, it may be safely asserted that there were great forests in Magh Cobha for many centuries after this date, while doubtless only some of the forts were then erected.

The ‘ Annals ’ also record the names of several kings or chiefs of the territory as at the following dates : A.D. 683—Fearghus ; 732—Cuanach ; 734—Fearghus Glut ; 771—Conall Crai ; 796 (*recte* 801) Euchaid ; 851—Cearnach ; 879—Conallan. The Magennises were chiefs of Magh Cobha in the twelfth century, and indeed for a long time afterwards. They superseded another branch of the Magennis family—named O’Haideth—the last of whom

was slain A.D. 1136—while, according to O'Dubhagain's 'Topographical Poem,' the O'Quinns, the O'Garveys and the O'Hanveys were among the petty kings in Iveagh.

It is interesting to know the rights and revenues of these petty Kings of Magh Cobha. This information is afforded us in the 'Book of Rights,' which gives us 'an account of the rights of the Monarchs of all Ireland, and the revenues payable to them by the principal Kings of the several provinces, and of the stipends paid by the Monarchs to the inferior Kings for their services. It also treats of the rights of each of the provincial Kings, and the revenues payable to them from the inferior Kings of the districts or tribes subsidiary to them, and of the stipends paid by the superior to the inferior provincial Kings for their services' (Introduction, 'Book of Rights').

The following is the stipend of the King of Magh Cobha paid by the King of Magh Cobha paid by the King of Uladh : [10]

'The stipend of the King of Cobha of Victory (is)  
Ten drinking-horns, ten wounding swords,  
Ten ships which a host mans,  
Ten cloaks with their borders of gold.'

He had also the following rights :

'Entitled is the King of Magh Cobha  
Of the light and thin-edged weapons  
To eight greyhounds and eight steeds  
And eight mares in fine running order.'

The 'Book of Rights' contains no record of the King's Lee-Metfords, motors, or aeroplanes !

Doubtless, there was a castle, or castles, in Magh Cobha from the earliest times. One of these structures is mentioned by the Four Masters, where we read of 'the foreigners of the castle of Magh Cobha' making an incursion into Tirowen (Tyrone) in 1188. In that year this castle is said to have been a strong one—possessed by the English ('the foreigners'), who doubtless captured it from a native chief or king. This castle is also mentioned in the 'Confirmation' of Innocent III. of John de Courcy's Charter to St. Andrew de Stokes ('Papal Letters,' vol. i. p. 17). According to the 'Annals of Ulster,' it was rebuilt of stone in 1252 by the son of Maurice Fitzgerald, and demolished by Brian O'Neill in the following year—having met the fate of many similar buildings in those troublous times. It was restored 1260. Knox informs us that this castle was in Donaghmore. [11] Probably Knox is indebted for his information to Harris, who states that castles were formerly erected at Tuscan Pass (Jerretspass) and Fenwick's Pass (Poyntzpass). [12]

The 'Annals of the Four Masters' record various exploits in Magh Cobha at the years herein mentioned, and although no particular spot in the territory is specified as a scene of action, yet we may feel certain that no portion of the little kingdom stood aloof and unaffected in the circumstances. Indeed, it is more than probable that some of the principal scenes of action in many of the stirring events and sanguinary conflicts recorded lay within the modern bounds of the parish of Donaghmore, and especially in that portion contiguous to the Passes from Armagh to Down, viz. Jerretspass and Poyntzpass.

A.D. 998, Magh Cobha was plundered by Aedh, son of Domhnall [13] when a ‘ great spoil of cattle’ was carried off—after wards called ‘ the great spoil of Magh Cobha.’

A.D. 1102, an army was led into Magh Cobha by the Cinel Eoghain. [14] The Ulidians [15] entered their camp during the night and slew two distinguished personages.

A.D. 1108, a ‘ great war’ was waged between the Cinel Eoghain and the Ulidians, with its seat principally in Magh Cobha—though the first battle seems to have been fought close to the city of Armagh. Large forces proceeded to Magh Cobha to relieve the Ulidians, viz. ‘ Muir Cheartach Ua Briain (O’Brien), with the men of Munster, Leinster, and Osraige (Ossory), and with the chiefs of Connaught, and the men of Meath with their Kings.’ ‘ Both parties went all into Machaire Arda-Macha [16]—and were for a week laying siege to Ardmach’ (City of Armagh). Muir Cheartach, it seems, when ‘ the men of Munster were wearied,’ entered Armagh by a devious route, ‘ and left 8 oz. of gold upon the altar, and promised 8 score cows,’—after which he returned to Magh Cobha, where a ‘ spirited battle’ was fought on ‘ Tuesday the Nones [17] of August,’ between Domhnall Ua Lochlainn, with the Clanna-Neill of the north, and the men of Munster, Leinster, and Ossory. The latter were defeated with great slaughter by the Clanna-Neill, who ‘ returned to their forts victoriously and triumphantly, with valuable jewels and much wealth, together with the royal tent, the standard, and many other precious jewels.’

A.D. 1103, Maghnus, King of Norway, who had contemplated the invasion of all Ireland, was slain by the Ulidians, and his people slaughtered at MoyCova, while on a predatory excursion in this territory.

The ‘ Annals of Ulster’ also record that the King of Norway was slain in this year (1103) ‘ at Moy Cova in which is situated Donaghmore beyond Newry in Iveagh.’

A.D. 1104, Domhnall, grandson of Lochlain, led an army to Magh Cobha when he obtained ‘ the hostages of the Ulidians.’

In A.D. 1109 another attack is made on the Ulidians who were in Magh Cobha by ‘ the people of the North of Ireland, with the Cinel-Conaill and the Cinel-Eoghain—when the Ulidians gave them the three hostages which they themselves selected.’

A.D. 1113, Magh Cobha is once more the seat of war. Donnchadh [18] is banished from Ulidia, his kingdom divided and given to others. His old allies, the men of Munster, Leinster, and Connaught, proceed to Magh Cobha to his aid. ‘ Another army . . . was marched by Dondmall Ua Lochlainn to relieve the Ulidians : and there was a challenge between them, but the successor of St. Patrick separated them, under the semblance of peace and tranquillity.’

A.D. 1128, the hostages of Ui-Eathach were carried off by a plundering army which entered Magh Cobha.

In A.D. 1188, we are told, the English of Moy Cova Castle and a party from Iveagh set off on a plundering excursion all the way ‘ into Tyrone’—where they seized a number of cows. They were pursued by Donnell O’Loughlin and his retainers, who defeated them with great slaughter. ‘ But Donnell, the son of Hugh O’Loughlin, Lord of Aileach, and heir-presumptive to the throne of Ireland, . . . alone received a thrust from an English spear, and fell in the heat of the conflict.’

It would be deeply interesting to know something in regard to the people who lived here in ancient times—their lineage, social condition, and manners and customs, together with the physical aspect of the place ; but such information is only afforded us from what is known of the Irish people and the country in general at the period. In ancient times the Irish, though a mixed race, were certainly more closely allied in blood than we are to-day ; their social condition, manners and customs were more uniform than at present. Between Ulster and Connaught there was no substantial difference in these respects, while the physical aspect of the country as a whole was much the same—apart from its natural conformation.

In these several respects, therefore, anything that may be said of Ireland and the Irish people in general is largely applicable to Moy Cova and its people in particular. In regard to Pagan times we are lost in the mists of legend and myth, though doubtless these contain kernels of truth ; but we are on surer ground when we come to the earlier centuries of the Christian Era. It is not to be inferred, however, that Christianity changed all ; for, as a matter of fact, much was handed down from Pagan times, and survived for centuries ; and even yet traces may be found of customs—at least—which have been in vogue from time immemorial. It is worthy of note, too, in this connection that ‘ The Institutions, Arts and Customs of Ancient Ireland, with few exceptions, grew up from within, almost wholly unaffected by external influence.’ [19]

Rome, which conquered and influenced most of the ancient world, never subjugated Ireland—whatever she may have done *ecclesiastically* in bygone times.

Much of this preliminary chapter, it is to be feared, may appear a digression from that which the reader had expected, but as our intention is to give a ‘ pen picture’ of things as they were here and elsewhere in past times, and which we understand will be of interest, we crave the pardon of those who are likely to prefer something more modern.

The Moyeovians were doubtless for the most part a portion of the great Celtic family which colonised Ireland at an early date, and largely possessed the characteristics of their race in type and temperament. They were certainly of purer stock than those of a subsequent period, while it is to be feared that at present among the modern inhabitants it would be impossible to find a ‘ pure Celt’ anywhere—though some possess the pardonable pride that they are such.

During the long lapse of centuries the Irish have become a very mixed race—for the most part, ‘ descendants of Firbolgs and other British and Belgic races, Umorians, Formorians, Tuatha Dé Danands, Milesians, Gauls, Norwegians, Anglo-Saxons, Anglo-Normans, and English.’ Sullivan, who, if he could advocate the existence of a ‘ pure Celt,’ would certainly do so, yet, in view of this admixture of race in Ireland, makes the following significant comment : ‘ This (admixture) is a fact which should be remembered by those who theorise over the qualities of pure Celts, whoever these may be.’ [20]

It seems there were two distinct types of people in ancient Ireland, and it is confidently asserted that, notwithstanding the subsequent admixture of race, such can still be traced. Sullivan considers that there are a few broad facts regarding the ethnology of ancient Ireland which may be taken as certainly established. ‘ In the first place, there were two distinct types of people—one a high statured, golden-coloured or red haired, fair-skinned, and blue, or grey-blue eyed race ; the other a dark-haired, dark-eyed, pale-skinned, small or medium statured, little-limbed race. The two types may still be traced in the country, and are curiously contrasted in their blushes : the fair-haired type has a pinkish tinge, the other a full red, with scarcely a trace of pink in their blush.’ [21]

We fail to trace these types in Donaghmore—at least so far as blushes are concerned. The truth is, we are not a blushing people, but should we occasionally ‘colour,’ the hue seems to be a deep crimson !

Dr. Joyce gives us the ‘marks of aristocracy’ among the ancient Irish as ‘an oval face, broad above and narrow below, golden hair, fair skin, white, delicate, and well-formed hands, with slender tapering fingers. [22] We are not aware how far these ‘marks’ are traceable in our modern aristocracy. Certainly, ‘the true Celtic head of Ireland’ is wanting, which O’Curry describes as ‘a face broad above and narrow below.’ [23]

Canon MacCulloch, D.D., in his recent standard work on ‘The Religion (Pagan) of the Ancient Celts,’ after showing in the opening chapter (on ‘The Celtic Family’) that they were a mixed race—having mixed not only with the aborigines of the lands in which they settled, but with other peoples—refers to their types and characteristics. They were, we are told, of differing types ; some short and dark, others tall and fair, and blue-eyed. But among all there is a common Celtic *facies* ; the same old Celtic characteristics are exhibited by all—‘vanity, loquacity, excitability, fickleness, imagination, love of the romantic, fidelity, attachment to family ties, sentimental love of their country, religiosity passing over easily to superstition, and a comparatively high degree of sexual morality.’

The Moycovians lived under the clan system—a grouping of society which was far different from that of to-day. The people were divided into tribes and clans, as were the Scotch and the Anglo-Saxons in remote times. In the expanding series there were : the Family (‘the living parents and all their descendants’), the Sept, the Clan, and the Tribe. These several divisions were supposed to be united by descent from a common ancestor ; but such descent was more or less fictitious, as ‘those whose degree of consanguinity was doubtful or obscure,’ and even strangers, were frequently adopted into all the groups.

Under the tribal system Ireland was blest with a multitude of kings—in regular gradation order. Besides the supreme monarch, there were the Kings of the Five Provinces, [24] and those of the Tuaths, and Mor Tuaths, i.e. a number of Tuaths united. A Tuath, we are informed, contained about 177 English square miles, representing an oblong district sixteen miles by eleven. [25] Moy Cova was a Tuath, and had its own king, as had doubtless most of the other Tuaths—at least those not united into Mor Tuaths. In all Ireland there were 184 Tuaths, and taking into account the Mor Tuaths, it may be safely asserted that the Irish kings in those days numbered at least upwards of 160 !

Under such a regal host, Ireland, in those olden times, should have been well and peacefully governed ; but the truth is it was far otherwise. The tribal system with its gradation of kings provided about the worst government possible, especially for a people of the Celtic temperament. There was no cohesion, and no real central authority—even that of the supreme monarch was only nominal. ‘The chief king had no power over the numerous sub-reguli beyond what he could enforce by arms, and there was no cohesion even amongst clans the most closely related.’ [26] Ireland was only so many petty kingdoms or principalities with no clearly defined rights and obligations that could be legally enforced—while each contained the fiery elements which, on the slightest pretext, so often culminated in bloody strife, and hence the constant wars and tumults of which we read. Tribe fought with tribe and chief with chief, and only the fittest survived.

It cannot be truthfully said that Ireland was ever a nation in the proper acceptation of the term, though we are aware others hold to the contrary. Mrs. Green writes beautifully on ‘ Irish Nationality,’ but it is to be feared she frequently romances, and, instead of stating facts, too often deals in fiction. She admits that (at the time she claims this ‘ Nationality’) there was ‘ no central authority’—only a number of ‘ self-governing communities’—‘each tribe being supreme within its own borders,’ and hence a ‘ divided government.’ True there was a uniform system of law, such as it was ; but there was no Executive to enforce it, except the sword ! With all due respect to Mrs. Green’s opinion in regard to ‘ Irish Nationality’ (if she means ‘ Ireland, a Nation,’ as the term is popularly understood) we make bold to assert that no such idea existed, nor could it in the circumstances. If our authoress means, by ‘ Irish Nationality,’ Irish sentiment and tradition, she is nearer the truth. These did assuredly prevail, and we are among those who think they should still prevail. The Scotch have largely maintained their old national customs and traditions, and to their credit be it told. He is a poor Irishman who will not do likewise. Doubtless the present revival of Irish learning will do much to improve matters in this respect, *if it can be kept out of the domain of politics !* In this connection, we think that anyone who wishes to study Irish archæology should learn the Irish language. For others, the study would be simply a waste of time—the acquirement being perfectly worthless as a qualification for any post of importance either inside or outside of Ireland. The English language holds the field, and bids ‘ fair to become the general language of the human race’ (Avebury).

It is interesting to know the nature of the tenure of lands in Donaghmore in its territorial days, and elsewhere in Ireland, and that of the rents to be paid by the tenants. According to the best authorities, it would seem that in the most ancient times there was no private ownership of land in Ireland—that it was all common property, and every few years there was a fresh distribution, i.e. the tenure was not fixed or permanent. Private ownership was a matter of evolution, and it was only by slow degrees that certain persons began to possess land as their absolute property ; but, even then, such lands comprised a very small portion of the soil of Ireland. The king, his nobles, and a few others who rendered him various kinds of services, held lands in this way, which they let to tenants for a term of seven years, and for which they were paid rent in kind. The mensal lands of the chief could thus be let, but such were not private property, being his only for life or during his chieftainship. Most of the land, however, was either tribe-land or commons-land, and in neither case was private ownership recognised. The tribe-land was common property and belonged to the people in general. It was, however, parcelled out to the several families of the sept, and every few years there was a fresh distribution. The commons-land (not arable land) was fenceless and used in common by all for pasturage and other purposes. Doubtless a large portion of Donaghmore was commons-land— such as Glen, the marshes, the bogs and forests. Those who held tribe-land or used commons-land, although they were not liable for rent in the ordinary acceptation of the term, yet they were obliged to make certain payments or subsidies to the chief. [27] It may be noted that those who occupied tribe or commons-land could not dispose of such by will or otherwise. Their property was purely personal, which passed on the death of the owner to his family. If the owner died in debt to the value of his ‘ estate,’ only a certain portion went to his creditors, the family being entitled to a small part, so as to be saved from destitution. This is what was called ‘ The rights of a corpse’—thus mentioned by Ware : ‘ Every dead body has in its own right a cow and a horse, and a garment, and the furniture of his bed ; nor shall any of these be paid in satisfaction of his debts ; because they are, as it were, the special property of his body.’ [28] It will thus be seen that, under the Brehon Laws, which regulated the land customs in ancient times, the tenant had no right of private ownership, and no fixity of tenure, except for a few years, and that, moreover, he was obliged to pay rent. True, the tribe land

was supposed to be the common property of the people ; but when the individual is denied the right of private ownership and a permanent tenure of his particular holding, the phrase ‘ common property ’ is not so fascinating. Such were the sole rights and obligations of tenants under ‘ Irish law.’ British law seems to have been more generous to the Irish tenant. Under the recent Land Purchase Acts, Irish tenants have been enabled to purchase their holdings, the British exchequer advancing the money, for which a moderate interest is charged for a term of years—when they become absolute owners of their farms, free of rent.

It is worth noting that the first rent-payers in Ireland were the Firbolgs, who were conquered by the Tuatha Dé Danann. ‘ Breas Mac Elathan, one of the Tuatha Dé Danand Kings,

was the first who imposed rents in Ireland, and the rent-payers were chiefly the Firbolgs, and so grievous were the burthens he imposed upon the whole country that he was deposed. The Scoti or Milesians conquered the Tuatha Dé Danand and in turn made *Aithechs* or tenants of them, and so it has continued as in most other countries, each succeeding conquering race obliging their conquered predecessors to pay tributes and rents.’ [29]

We are sure it would be an interesting sight to us moderns if we could behold the old inhabitants of Donaghmore in their native dress—so far Ancient different from our present habiliments. The costume worn by them was that of the ancient Irish, and was indeed a very picturesque one—at least so far as colours were concerned—though we fear the combinations were not quite harmonious ! The upper garments worn by the men were mainly of four classes : a great cloak, without sleeves, commonly covering the whole person from the shoulders ; a jacket, tight-fitting, with sleeves ; a cape for shoulders with head-hood ; a kilt—same as that worn by the Scottish Highlander ; while one of the nether garments was a tight-fitting trousers—called *triubhas*—anglicised *trews*— from which we derive ‘ trousers.’ The large sleeveless cloak was worn by both men and women, and was variously dyed. [30]

The Irish were very fond of colours ; and besides, rank was denoted by the hue of the garment. The ‘ Book of Ballymote ’ has the following stanza on the ‘ sumptuary law ’ of dress :

‘ Mottled to simpletons, blue to women ;  
Crimson to Kings of every host ;  
Green and black to noble laymen ;  
White to clerics of proper devotion.’

It seems the distinction of rank by the wearing of certain colours had a pagan origin, and was introduced, according to our legendary history, by the thirteenth monarch of Ireland—Tigernmas—B.C. 1543. His successor, Eochaidh Edgudach—known as ‘ Eochaidh, the cloth-designer ’—is said to have extended and completely established this sumptuary law. O’Curry refers to a statement by Keating (on the authority of an ancient record now lost) that it was by this Eochaidh ‘ cloth was first coloured crimson, blue and green in Ireland. It was by him that various colours were introduced into the wearing-clothes of Erin—viz. one colour in the clothes of servants ; two colours in the clothes of rent-paying farmers ; three colours in the clothes of officers ; five colours in the clothes of chiefs ; six colours in the clothes of *Ollamhs* (Doctors holding the highest degree in the arts or professions) and poets ; seven colours in the clothes of Kings or Queens. It was from this (says the old book) the custom has grown this day, that all these colours are in the clothes of a Bishop.’ [31]

O'Curry refers to the colours worn by the celebrated Queen of Connaught, Medbh, and her consort, Ailill, in the century immediately preceding the Christian era—recorded in 'The Táin.' These two good people had been boasting and, it would seem, disputing in regard to their respective possessions, when, to end the contest, it was decided to make a complete inspection of their valuables. Among the precious possessions examined was the royal wardrobe—the colours of which are thus specified : 'Crimson, and blue, and black, and green, and yellow, and speckled, and pale, and gray, and blay, and striped' ! [32]

The old Brehon Law (which was much like our Common Law, there being no Parliament in ancient times, and consequently no Statute Law) took cognisance of Irish costume—its material and colours—as denoting position or rank. A sumptuary law in the Senchus Mór lays down the following regulations :—'The sons of kings, when in fosterage, were to have satin mantles, dyed scarlet, purple or blue' ; while 'the sons of chiefs were to be dressed in red, green, and brown clothes, and those of inferior ranks in grey, yellow, black and white.' [33]

The inhabitants of Moy Cova must have been familiar with the picturesque sight of the Ulster clans and their leaders, with their differences of costume and colours—as they marched through the territory, and doubtless fought in their midst. Indeed, the Moycovians themselves were members of an Ulster clan—three of whose chiefs ('the three good chieftains of Moy Cova') have been immortalised in the great poem of 'The Táin' (see *infra*).

A vivid pen-picture of the Ulster clans is afforded us in the tale of the Táin—one of our best pieces of Irish Homeric literature—though of course all due allowance must be made for the poetic license assumed by the author of the poem in his description.

Queen Medbh of Connaught with her army had invaded Ulster—the kingdom of her former husband the renowned Conchobar Mac Nessa. In her retreat with the Connaught forces she was overtaken by Conchobar and the Ulster army at Slane of Meath. She and her consort, Ailill, held a council, when MacRoth, the royal herald, was ordered to go forth and observe the approaching clans of Ulster, and then return with an exact account of their military order, their dress, their weapons, and their numbers.'

The Ulster warriors were fast approaching, and anon the herald heard,

' Floating from far away, a muffled roar,  
A crackling, thunderous murmur, and deep din  
Of many mingled sounds.'

He gazed again,

' And while he gazed, he heard a growing roar  
Of mingled booming, crying, thundering,  
With shrill, sharp snaps and thuds, ringings and cheers,  
All floating towards him on the eastern wind.'

MacRoth had not long to wait, for soon,

' From early morning till the evening fell,  
The Ulster hosts arrived in Slane of Meath.  
So great their numbers that in all the time

The land was ne'er left naked, but was clothed  
By moving throngs. All orderly they came ;  
For every throng surrounded its own King,  
And every band its lord.'

The first warrior described by MacRoth is the great champion—Conchobar MacNessa—King of Ulster, who led the northern hosts—having under his special command ' an ardent, stalwart band of very noble aspect,' esteemed in ' numbers to be thrice three thousand.'

' All,  
Quick flinging off their raiment, dug the earth,  
And lifted sods, and raised a mighty mound  
High on the rounded summit of a hill,  
To be a seat and station for their lord.  
And he, their lord, was tall and thinly built.  
Courteous and proud, of princeliest way and style,  
Accustomed to command and to restrain.  
And awful was his kingly gleaming eye.  
His yellow bush of crispéd drooping hair ;  
His trimly forking beard ; his crimson fooan (mantle)  
Folding five times about him ; the gold pin.  
Above his breast ; the lagna (shirt) next his skin,  
Of purest white, adorned with threads of gold.  
Were all of princely make. He wore, besides,  
A white-bright shield, adorned with monstrous beasts,  
In deep red gold. In the one hand he bore  
A golden-hilted sword, and in the other  
A wide, gray spear.'

We must not fail to mention the ' Three Moy Cova good chieftains of Moy Cova' :

' " There came another band into that hill,"  
MacRoth went on. " Controlling it, I saw  
Three purple-faced and anger-kindled men  
Of honourable rank. Each had thick hair  
Of pale gray-yellow ; and their ample brats (mantles)  
Were all alike, and were secured by pins  
Of brightest gold. Bright gold embroidery  
Adorned their three neat lagnas. Their three shields  
Were all alike. A gold-hilted sword  
Each wore upon his thigh ; in his right hand  
Each grasped a gray, white spear."  
" Who were those, Fergus ?" asked Al-Yill.  
" Three good chieftains of Moy Cova". . . ' [33]

Among the numerous clans described by MacRoth was that under the great chieftain Celtchair Mac Uthair of Dun-da-leth-dass (Downpatrick)—a clan overwhelming in magnitude ; fiery-red in a heat ; a battalion in numbers ; a rock in strength ; a destruction in battle ; as thunder in impetuosity. The chieftain at its head (a great contrast to Conchobar !) was an angry, terrific, hideous man, long-nosed, large-eared, apple-eyed : with coarse, dark-

gray hair. He wore a striped cloak, and, instead of a brooch, he had a stake of iron in that cloak over his breast—which reached from one shoulder to the other. He wore a coarse, streaked shirt next his skin.’ [34]

We cannot forbear to mention the picturesque clan of Ercc—the little son of Capri Nia-Fer, Monarch of Erin, and of Fedilm (ever-blooming) Nucruthach, daughter of Conchobar, King of Ulster. The herald describes this clan and its youthful chieftain thus :

‘ Some of them had red cloaks, some gray cloaks ; others blue cloaks ; and others cloaks of green, blay, white, and yellow ; and these cloaks all floating splendidly and brightly upon them. There is a red speckled little boy, with a crimson cloak, among them in the centre ; he has a brooch of gold in that cloak over his breast ; and a shirt of kingly silk interwoven with red gold next his white skin.’ [35]

Well, ‘ the old order changeth, giving place to the new’—the ‘ Ulster clans’ have gone, never to return, and the Irish dress, so many-coloured and picturesque, has long since disappeared, with the exception, perhaps, of that faint relic, the large hooded cloak which, we are told, the Ancient country-women still wear in many parts of Ireland, though we have not observed it in Donaghmore ; and ‘ more is the pity,’ for it is a very comely attire—especially if, as in ancient times, it is ‘ striped and spotted with divers colours’ ! Probably the claddah cloak, now worn by many women, resembles in some respects that of the olden time, and it is to be hoped won’t be soon proscribed by ‘ Dame Fashion.’

Early attempts were made to anglicise the Irish dress, but failed—particularly during the reign of King John.

The ‘ Head Act,’ as it was called, of Edward IV. rendered it lawful to seize ‘ any native having no faithful men of good name, clad in English apparel, in his company, and to kill him and cut off his head, the cutter-off of each head being entitled to levy off every man in the barony who tilled one plow-land, two pence : and off every cottier, having a house and moat, one penny.’ [36]

A sumptuary law of Henry VIII. enacted that ‘ no person shall wear . . . any manner of clothing, mantle, coat, or hood, after the Irish fashion, but in all things shall conform to the habits and manners of the civil people within the English pale.’ [37] The same monarch proscribed the colour saffron thus : ‘ Ne persone, or persones, the King’s subjects, shall weare any shirte, kercher, bandelle, or markete, coloured or dyed with saffron.’ [38]

We should have thought this proscription quite unnecessary, if the following statement (quoted by Knox) of an Irish tourist be true, who visited the country about the close of the fifteenth century : ‘ The Irish doe weare linen shirtes of great length for wantonnesse and braverye, with white hanging sleeves plaited : thirty yards are little enough for one of them. *They have now left off they’re saffron, and learned to washe their shirtes four or five times in the year !*’ [39]

Notwithstanding, however, the various enactments and proscriptions, including those of James I., against Irish dress, it continued to be worn, and its general disuse in the reigns of James II, William III. and Anne may probably be attributed to the fashion of the times rather than to legal prohibition.

We fail to see any valid reason for the proscription of the Irish dress. The Irish should have been permitted to wear their native costume, if they chose, were it only for the sake of sentiment, which has its uses, and especially in regard to dress, which in this case was considered a distinguishing mark of nationality.

It may be interesting to note that, notwithstanding all their passionate love of colour, yet ‘as a matter of fact the ancient Irish had no national colour’—so we are informed by Dr. Joyce, and there is no higher authority. A large proportion of our countrymen have adopted green as a national colour, but Joyce regards its adoption as a very modern innovation. [40]

Sir Bernard Burke agrees that the ancient Irish had no national colour. He states : ‘The various septs were ranged under the banners of their respective chiefs, and when one of those chiefs was elected King, his colour may be considered for the national ensign :’ but ‘since the introduction of English rule, the national colour, established by and derived from the National Arms, has been invariably, blue.’ [41]

The colours most in vogue at present in Donaghmore Parish are ‘orange and green,’ but these are mere ‘party’ badges. If the Battle of Boyne had any decisive effect as regards the adoption of party colours, they should certainly be ‘green’ and ‘white,’ as we know (Macaulay) the army of King William wore sprigs of green in their cap, while that of King James wore strips of white paper.

The writer finds a popular local impression to the effect that the Moycovians, who lived here and elsewhere in the territory, even in the early Civilisation centuries of the Christian era, were half savages, as were Irishmen generally at the period ; but this is far from the truth, and is indeed little short of a libel. For the age, and as compared with other peoples, the Irish possessed a high degree of civilisation, and were the means of Christianising and civilising others, who now affect to despise them as an inferior race in this as well as in other respects. The Irish Church, in those days of her splendour, was the brightest light in Christendom, and Ireland, under her teaching and influence, was justly called, comparatively speaking, ‘the Island of Saints.’ Of course they fought and were cruel in the ‘bloody strife,’ but they were no worse than other Christian nations in this respect— in an age when even bishops buckled on their armour and led the armed host. Notwithstanding, however, the Irish were, *par excellence*, devoted to their religion, and very punctilious in regard to its observances.

It is to be feared that our modern ‘week-end’ Sabbath- breakers, and others of their ilk, would consider the following rule of St. Conall, in the sixth century, as regards the observance of the Lord’s Day, rather severe : ‘No out or indoor labour, not even sweeping or cleaning up the house ; no combing ; no shaving ; no clipping the hair or beard ; no washing the face or hands ; no cutting ; no sewing ; no churning ; no riding on horseback ; no fishing ; no sailing or rowing ; no journeying of travellers, but wherever a man happened to be on a Saturday night, there was he to remain till Monday morning.’ We would (for modern times) add : ‘No tennis ; no croquet ; no golf ; and no motoring, except to church !’

[1] See Joyce, *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, vol. i, p. 316.

[2] *Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, p. 349.

[3] A tract giving the legendary history and etymology of the names of remarkable places.

[4] The Milesian Colony, of Spanish origin, arrived in Ireland about thirteen hundred years before the birth of Christ.

- [5] *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, vol. ii. p. 469.
- [6] This prince was the great ancestor of the Magennises and other ancient families of the race of Ir-one of the Milesian Kings of Ireland.
- [7] Vol. iii. p. 344. [8] Note. pp. 165-6.
- [9] See Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, p. 117.
- [10] Uladhh was the name applied to the entire province of Ulster up till 332—after which it embraced the counties of Antrim and Down only—known as ‘ Little Ulster.’
- [11] *History of Down*, p. 356. [12] *Down*, p. 85.
- [13] King of Aileach—Elagh—in Inis-Eoghain, Inishowen in County Donegal.
- [14] ‘ The race of Eoghain—the O’Neills, MacLaughlins, and their ‘ correlatives in Tyrone.’
- [15] The people of Uladh—called by O’Flaherty, who wrote ini Latin, *Ulidia*, while he designated the other portion of Ulster *Ultonia*.
- [16] The plain of Armagh—lying round the city.
- [17] In ancient times the month was divided into Kalends, Nones, and Ides. The Nones fell on the 5th of the month, except in May, March, July and October, when they fell on the 7th. The Ides in the latter four months fell on the 15th, but generally on the 13th.
- [18] King of Ulidia.
- [19] Joyce, *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, vol. i. p. 1.
- [20] Introduction—*Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, O’Curry. p. xxiv.
- [21] Introduction—O’Curry, p. Ixxii.
- [22] *Social History*, vol. ii. p. 176.
- [23] *Manners and Customs*, vol. iii. p. 94.
- [24] In the beginning of the second century Ireland was divided into five Provinces, the fifth being Meath. This division continued till long after the Anglo-Norman invasion.
- [25] The term Tuath had both a geographical and genealogical signification, having been ‘ applied to the people occupying a district which had a complete political and legal administration, a Chief or Righ (King), and could bring into the field a battalion of seven hundred men (Introduction,’ O’Curry, p. Ixxix.).
- [26] Introduction, O’Curry, p. xli.
- [27] See Joyce, vol. i. p. 188. [28] *Antiqq.*, 152.
- [29] Introduction (Sullivan), Professor O’Curry. p. xxiii.
- [30] See Joyce, *Social History*, vol. ii. p. 193.
- [31] *Manners and Customs*, vol. iii. p. 89.
- [32] *Ibid.* p. 90.
- [33] Joyce, *Social History*, vol. ii. p. 222.
- [34] From the beautiful poetic translation of *The Táin* by Mrs. Mary A. Hutton of Belfast, book xiv. pp. 384-9 and 404.
- [35] Prose translation of *The Táin*—see ‘ Curry, *Manners and Customs*, vol. iii. p. 95.
- [36] See O’Curry, *Manners and Customs*, vol. iii. p. 96.
- [37] See Knox, *History of Down*, p. 33.
- [38] Note, an English surname must also be taken, the main policy of the Act being to detach the Irish from their sept—whose name they bore.
- [39] *History of Down*, p. 66. [40] *Social History*, vol. ii. p. 192.
- [40] *Vicissitudes of Families*, note, vol. i. p. 120.

An ancient Irish parish past and present, being the parish of Donaghmore, county Down  
(1914)

Author : Cowan, Joseph Davison

Subject : Donaghmore (Northern Ireland) — History ; Down (Northern Ireland) — History

Publisher : London : D. Nutt

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center

Collection : allen\_county ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/ancientirishpari00cowa>

Edited and uploaded to [www.aughty.org](http://www.aughty.org)

October 4 2013