



The Harp and the Hand

Exploring Irish Roots



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List of Characters

FICTITIOUS CHARACTERS	HISTORICAL CHARACTERS
The Celts and the Christians – Tenth Century B.C.	
Nuallán, Celtic poet Ainmire mac Uidhir, chieftain/king Ailidh, first wife of Ainmire Máedóc, son of Ainmire and Ailidh Doireann, second wife of Ainmire Fergus, son of Ainmire and Ailidh	Palladius, first bishop of Ireland St. Patrick, early bishop of Ireland Erc, early bishop of Ireland Lóegaire, high king of Ireland Congalach, king of Northern Brega

Introduction

“There isn’t a soul in Ireland who hasn’t lost loved ones to migration.”

The woman spoke in sadness and resignation. She was a guide at one of the many living history museums that dot the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The Irish were certainly not the only people to seek better lives in distant lands during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Germans, the Italians, the Scots, the English, and the eastern Europeans also left their homelands in great numbers. But what I realized when the Irish guide spoke those words to me in 2011 was that alone among these nations, the Irish continue to bleed their children unto this very day.

There was another difference between the emigration of the Irish and other peoples. Of course, most emigrants leave their homelands with a sense of nostalgia and many experience homesickness. The majority, however, focus primarily on the hope for a better life. In contrast, many Irish emigrants have been scarred by a palpable sense of loss, of dislocation—of exile. This sadness marks songs, poems, and letters home from far away.¹ Here is but one example from the 19th century:

Farewell to thee, Ireland, the land of our birth,
The pride and the glory, the gem of the earth.
We sail with sad hearts to a land far away
In search of that bread that may fail if we stay...
Farewell, oh farewell to thy beautiful shore;
Tis with tears that we bid thee farewell evermore.²

If you are reading these words, you are probably part of the great Irish Diaspora. You likely live in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, even Great Britain or elsewhere in Europe. My own great-great-grandparents sailed from County Antrim in 1857 to the United States.

You have picked up this book because, like me, you are curious about the lives of your Irish ancestors. And it is for you that I have written this book. It has entailed five years of research and two trips each to the Republic of Ireland and to Northern Ireland. Many of the books I’ve read in preparation have been written for the academic audience and were a bit, shall we say... dry. However, I am not writing for an academic audience; I’m writing for my fellow genealogists. I hope you find this book interesting, informative, and enjoyable.

If you also have German ancestors, you may be familiar with a similar book I wrote for that audience in 2010: *Our Daily Bread: German Village Life, 1500-1850*. In that volume, I invented a fictitious village and a fictitious family to illustrate facts and figures.

I have used the same method for *The Harp and the Hand*. But for this book, I have invented two families. One follows the story of a family of the Celtic period in the south of Ireland, through generations of invasion and change, to their exile to the far west of Ireland following an English invasion in the 17th century, and finally the passage of family members to North America.

The other family arrived much later to Ireland, part of the 16th and 17th century “plantation” of land-hungry lowland Scots into Ulster in the north. While Ulster shares its prehistory and medieval history with the rest of Ireland, since the mid-1500s it has gone in quite a different direction. That is why I created a second set of characters.

This volume spans over a thousand years of Irish history. Since the time frame for this book is much longer than for the German book, it is organized differently. The German book was organized by topic, e.g., work life, village life, marriage, et cetera. This book is organized chronologically. Near the beginning of the book, you will find a list of characters to help you keep the fictitious and historical persons straight.

I needed a large cast of characters to explain so many centuries of history and daily life. There is no need for you to keep track of them as individuals over the long haul; they come and go. The individual characters are simply vehicles to illustrate the times in which each of them lived.

While the book’s narrative is built on this fictitious scaffold, the research underlying the family stories is factual. Endnotes for each chapter refer to the scholarly sources used to document the chapter stories. If you want to learn more about a particular topic, the endnotes and the bibliography are there for you to seek out more information.

So how large is this Irish Diaspora? Well, as of 2011, the population of the Republic was about 4.6 million and that of Northern Ireland was 1.8 million, a total island population of 6.4 million. In 1995, Irish President Mary Robinson paid tribute to “the 70 million people worldwide who can claim Irish descent.”³

Various tallies from individual countries suggest that in the United States, Irish immigrants and descendants total more than 36 million, or almost 18 percent of the population; in Canada, 4.5 million or about 14 percent; in Britain, 14 million or about 10 percent; in Australia, 7 million or about 30 percent. (New Zealand does not break out Irish ethnicity from the general European category.)

The Harp and the Hand presents two fundamental themes to Irish genealogists. The second theme, as we have already discussed, is that of exile and emigration, which resonates throughout the second half of the book.

The first theme, dominating all the early chapters, is of invasion. The notion of Ireland as a land of pure Celts is a romantic myth. Ireland's long history is a chronicle of invasion after invasion, beginning with the arrival of the Celts themselves. They were a Germanic tribe from the Alps who spread across Europe and who reached Ireland around 350 B.C., where they absorbed the native population. The modern Irish and their Diaspora kindred have almost as mixed an ethnicity as the typical modern American: from the original Iron Age settlers, to the Celts, the Vikings, the Normans, the Scots, and of course the English.

Finally, I must explain the title of the book. I wanted a phrase that would encompass both strains of Irish life, that in the largely Catholic Republic and that in predominantly Presbyterian Northern Ireland.

Henry VIII of England introduced what was called harp coinage for Ireland in about 1534, and it still appears on the coat of arms of the Irish Republic and the Irish Euro. The earliest references to the harp on the arms of Irish kings date back to medieval times. The Irish have a strong affinity with the wandering bards and poets, who played their harps, spread news from one settlement to another, and enlivened Irish gatherings.

As the harp symbolizes the Republic, the open hand, fingers pointed upwards, symbolizes Northern Ireland. Its origin is unknown, but the Norman Earl of Ulster, Walter de Burgh, had incorporated it into his flag by 1243. So it was associated with an invader, but it was later adopted by the Celtic lords, the Uí Neill dynasty. By the mid-13th century, all the Gaelic kings of Ulster were members of this dynasty. So both the native population and the invaders have claimed the Red Hand as their own. Even now, it is used both by the pro-republic and the loyalist camps in Northern Ireland.

The sectarian troubles between the Republic and Northern Ireland make it easy to focus on the two countries' differences. While this book explains how and why the conflict began, it focuses more on what the two states have in common—after all, they were one state until the 1920s. Until the seventeenth century, they lived through the same history. They celebrate many of the same holidays, and they share many of the same myths and superstitions. They claim common ancestry from Celtic tribes and Vikings. But most of all, they share the same sad history of forced exile from the green and lovely land of their ancestors.

Figure 1. The Harp and the Hand



The Celts and the Christians

The poet, carrying his harp, climbed up to the crest of the Hill of Slane. Below him stretched the wide plain of the River Boyne, the richest and most fertile stretch of land in Ireland. The Boyne swarmed with salmon, trout, and eels. In the river marshes lived thousands of geese, cranes, swans, and quails. Overhead flew eagles and hawks. Across the plain and in the forests, huge herds of wild pigs foraged, hunted only by wolves and men from the few scattered settlements. Early medieval Ireland, particularly its eastern plain, was a miracle of abundance. It was an almost untouched natural Eden.⁴

The sun hung low in the southern sky, but there was enough light for the poet to survey the landscape he knew so well. Although most of it was thickly forested, there were also clearings where the poet could see the scattered ringforts, the homesteads of the Celts. Each ringfort was marked by an enormous bonfire. It was Samhain, one of the four principal festivals of the Celtic year. It marked the end of the harvest period and the beginning of

the dark, damp Irish winter. It was the time of year when spirits walked the earth and the boundary between the physical and spirit worlds was breached.

Figure 2: A Celtic fili



The year was 936, and Ireland had been Christian for 500 years. No longer just a Celtic celebration, Samhain had long since been adopted by the Church as a Christian festival as part of its effort to channel pagan practices and enfold the Celts into Christianity. November 1 became All Saints' Day, when a special mass was said for the souls of the departed. The night before, All Hallows Eve, would come to be known as Hallowe'en..

The poet's name was Nuallán, and he was a *fili*, whose traditions dated back to the pre-Christian era of the druids. For generations, the men in Nuallán's family had been *filid* (the Old Irish plural for *fili*; in Scottish Gaelic, the plural was *filidh*).

But Nuallán would be the last of his line, because he had never married. Instead, he had chosen to concentrate on his profession. In so doing, he had achieved the highest of the seven grades of *filid*, something his father and grandfather had been unable to do. Within Celtic society, he carried the same rank as the kings themselves.⁵

The Celts believed that the stories of their people were too sacred to be consigned to paper; they were passed on orally from one generation to the next for centuries. One historian speculates that because the tribal kingdoms were so small, there was no need to develop written records; a king could administer his lands through face-to-face contacts.⁶

Nuallán was not simply a harpist; he was a poet who set his stories to music. Ordinary harpists were several pegs down in Celtic society. To reach Nuallán's high grade, called the *ollamh*, he had been required to memorize more than 250 long stories and 100 shorter ones; together they related the story of the Celtic people. He also could recite the genealogies of all the chiefs or *rí túaithe* in the Kingdom of Brega. Nuallán was famed for his singing even more than for his storytelling. Accompanying himself on the harp he had inherited from his forefathers, he was said to sound like a god.⁷

That evening, Nuallán was not the only man on the Hill of Slane. Behind him as he stood on the crest of the hill was a Christian monastery with its abbot and monks. As Celtic Ireland became Christianized, many of Nuallán's fellow *filid* associated themselves with the monasteries, either as monks or as still-pagan tutors, working alongside the Christian teachers.⁸ **However**, Nuallán's family line remained aloof from the Church. They taught the sons of the nobles as did the monks, but only in the old way—employing memorization and recitation. Nuallán considered the writing practiced by the monks a lazy form of chronicling that cheapened their sacred texts. He also had a low opinion of Christian dogma, although he kept such views to himself.⁹



It was probably inevitable that all the peoples who lived near the Hill of Slane over the centuries would consider it sacred, since it towered more than 500 feet above the river valley. One legend chanted by

Celtic druids and their successors the *filid* had told of the burial there of the first high king, Sláine mac Dela. He was the mythic king of the Fir Bolg people who inhabited the island before the coming of the Celts.¹⁰

Many millennia later, the Christians made the Hill of Slane their own by creating a legend about Saint Patrick. During Patrick's campaign to convert the Celts to Christianity in the mid-5th century, he was said to have lit a fire on Easter Eve on the Hill of Slane. Christian Easter fell close to the feast of Beltane in the Celtic calendar, and it was celebrated with sacred bonfires. The Celtic High King, Lóegaire, had decreed that no one could light a fire that night before he lit one on the Hill of Tara, which was within sight of Slane less than 10 miles to the south.

Stories differ concerning what happened when Lóegaire and his men arrived in their chariots to challenge Patrick after he set his fire ablaze. According to the legend, a man named Erc was the only member of Lóegaire's retinue who paid homage to Patrick that night. In gratitude, Patrick baptized Erc and later consecrated him as a bishop. Erc went on to found a monastery on the Hill of Slane. After many years of traveling missionary work, Erc returned to Slane, where he died in the year 514 at age 93.¹¹

The actual history of Patrick and his Irish mission is buried inside the many legends and stories that surround his life and his work. What is known is that whatever happened that night on the Hill of Slane, Patrick was allowed to continue his missionary work.

Two short works written by Patrick himself survive, although many of the details believed to be true about the man come from two churchmen who lived 200 years later.

In his *Confessio*, Patrick wrote that he was born into Romano-British nobility, although where on the island of Britain he lived is uncertain. Patrick says he was captured by slavers as a teenager and sold somewhere in northern Ireland. He spent six years as a slave, primarily tending to his master's cattle and sheep up in the hills, as he grew into manhood. Then, encouraged by a dream to escape, he made his way many miles to a coastal harbor where he boarded a ship and returned to Britain and to his family.

Despite the lack of education during his captivity, Patrick followed his father and grandfather into a career in the Church. He is believed to have completed his studies in what is now France. He probably rose to the rank of bishop while there. At some later point, he had a vision in which he was directed to return to Ireland to spread Christianity.

Patrick's two writings contained no dates of his birth, his captivity, or his return to Ireland, but he is popularly believed to have arrived back in Ireland in 432. It is also not known when he died. It may have been as early as 457 or as late as 492.¹²

The earliest documented bishop in Ireland is not Patrick, but Palladius, who is known to have been sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine in 431. What prompted his mission was the need to minister to the scattered groups of Christians who had come to Ireland from Britain, either as settlers or as captured slaves.¹³ The 7th-century biographers of Patrick wrote that Palladius preached briefly in Ireland before returning to northern Britain. They inferred that his early departure was due to his failure to convert the Celtic nobility and his subsequent banishment by the King of Leinster.

Neither Palladius nor Patrick would have had easy missions. At worst, they faced death or imprisonment at the hands of the many Irish chieftains. At best, they faced hostility and disbelief, as inferred by the story of Patrick's encounter with Lóegaire on the Hill of Slane. However, the stories suggest Patrick was more effective in working with at least some of the Celtic chiefs, because some chose to be baptized. They were the men who granted the land where the bishops established their monasteries.

Although it was many centuries before Ireland became solidly Christian, it was the only part of the Old World to be converted without bloodshed and martyrdom.¹⁴



Harp in hand, Nuallán strode eastward down the slope as the sun set behind the Hill of Slane. As a *fili*, he had the right to travel throughout the countryside, whereas most of the Celtic people were tied to their ancestral lands. One historian writes of

a greatly under-populated land, and of the island as a whole consisting of a wilderness of timeless beauty, barricaded by bogs, mountains and vast expanses of mixed forest, mostly of oak, hazel, and ash, but also with woods of rowan, holly and yew. And in the midst of this primeval splendor were great tribal clearings occupied by population-groups who lived in isolation from each other. Only holy men, courageous traders, wandering poet-scholars or marauding armies dared to brave the wilderness beyond.¹⁵

On this night, Nuallán was headed for the fortified homestead or ringfort of a nearby local king, Ainmire, son of Odhar (mac Uidhir).¹⁶ Ainmire's title was *rí túaithe*. *Túath* was the Irish Celtic word for "people"; each tribal band was a separate *túath*, so the "king" of the band was actually more a chieftain than a king.¹⁷

About 150 tribal bands were scattered across Celtic Ireland. Each had about 3,500 people and about 10-15 subordinate nobles. Most of the band members claimed descent from a distant common ancestor. In Ainmire's case, this man was Odhar, who through warfare founded a dynasty, the Uí Uidhir.* Ever since, there had been a son named Odhar in each generation. In Ainmire's family, it had been his elder brother, who had died young in a bloody skirmish against a rival *túath*.¹⁸

Ainmire had been elected three years before, following the death of his uncle, the former king. As king, Ainmire's personal land holdings consisted of about 250 acres of scattered woodland and rich, well-drained grazing lands. All of his noble retainers and some of his non-noble followers held land of their own, the amount varying with rank. The lowest level of free men, the *ócaires* or young lords, had no subordinates below them; they controlled about 35 acres each. As they matured, many of these young lords would receive a larger proportion of the *tuath* lands. In addition to the freemen, there were unfree laborers and slaves, who lived in clusters of huts near to their lords.¹⁹

In all, the *túath* lands covered about seven square miles, or almost 4,500 acres; they stretched some miles east from the foot of the Hill of Slane and south to the banks of the River Boyne. Nuallán passed by several ringforts belonging to Ainmire's retainers on his way to the king's own ringfort. Ainmire's home was in the center of his territory in the most defensible position, on a slight rise of the terrain, so that the chief could command a view in each direction.²⁰

The wealth of the tribal chieftains—indeed, the wealth of the higher kings as well—was based on cattle. Ainmire also owned sheep, pigs, and poultry, but his wealth was calculated in head of cattle. He did grow some field crops such as oats, wheat, and barley as flax for linen—but cattle were the foundation of his status. Payments of all kinds were computed based on the equivalent value of a cow or the value of a female slave (*cumhal*), which was equal to the value of three cows.²¹

As the dwelling of the *rí túaithe*, Ainmire's ringfort or *rath* was the largest in his little kingdom—137 feet (42 meters) in diameter. Inside the ringfort were several buildings, including a storage shed, a barn, a sheep-fold, a pigsty, and a kiln. The largest structure was the circular home of the chief because he was expected to entertain his retainers and guests.

The house walls were constructed of stout posts through which had been woven wicker wattle, sealed with mud mortar. The roof was thatch. The structure was a single room, about 36 feet in diameter (11 meters). Only the family, their foster children, and two slaves slept in the house. Their beds

* *Uí* is the plural form of *Ó* as in O'Rourke; both mean "descendant (or descendants) of."

lined the interior walls in order to leave room both for entertaining and for daily activities, including cooking, bathing, and clothes washing. Cooking was done outside or over an open hearth; there was no chimney, only a soot-blackened opening in the roof for smoke to escape.²²

All ringforts in the *tuath* were circular and surrounded by water-filled ditches. The inner bank of the ditch was protected by a tall earthen embankment. The

embankments of some of his retainers were topped with a wooden fence of post and wattle (woven wicker branches); however,

Ainmire's own bank was crowned with an ancient, impenetrable hedge of blackthorn. The ringforts of Ainmire's retainers had one surrounding ditch and embankment, but Ainmire's had two. Most ringforts had just one gate and an earthen bridge into the interior; they were generally located on the east side of the homestead. The purpose of these defensive constructions was as much to prevent the loss of livestock as to deter attacks from enemies of the *tuath*.²³



Figure 3. Reconstructed ringfort house



The Samhain feast had already begun by the time Nuallán entered the gate of Ainmire's ringfort. The celebrations were to last for three days and include games, contests of skill, singing, drinking, and feasting. Ainmire greeted Nuallán with delight because Nuallán's songs and stories would be an unexpected highlight of the feast. Ainmire's guests were seated in order of rank, with the highest close to their host. He offered Nuallán, who carried the same rank as Ainmire himself, the place of honor.

The two men presented a striking contrast. Ainmire looked just as the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus had described the Celts: handsome, tall, light-skinned, hair of the whitest blond color, and piercing blue eyes. Ainmire was without blemish, a primary requirement to be eligible for kingship. Although at age 38 he was well past the midpoint of a natural lifespan, he remained robust and athletic, still a champion at sports and

warfare. He was a man of action and instinct rather than reflection. He was a loud man, quick to anger but also quick to laugh, and generous to his subjects. No wonder he was elected chief after his uncle's death, rather than one of his uncle's own sons.²⁴

Nuallán was not as striking as Ainmire. His appearance was unassuming—until he began to sing or recite. Then he became the most compelling man in the room. He was of medium height, with brown hair beginning to turn gray. Perhaps his features were a throwback to the people who first settled the island before the coming of the Celts. His hazel eyes were wise and shone with calm intelligence. Unless he was performing, he tended to listen more than he talked. There was very little that he missed.

Both men wore their hair long, but Ainmire pulled his back while Nuallán wore his loose. Ainmire was clean-shaven; Nuallán wore a flowing beard. Both were fastidious about their personal grooming, as were most Celts. They bathed regularly, and even used oils and sweet herbs to scent their bodies after washing.

Both men were dressed in linen tunics, which hung to mid-calf and were dyed yellow with saffron. Around their waists were belts under which they tucked short daggers. Over their tunics, called *léine*, each wore a colorful woolen cloaks or *brat*, held in place on one of their shoulders with an ornate bronze pin. Nuallán wore no other jewelry, but Ainmire had a necklace of twisted, elaborately worked gold called a torque as a symbol of his kingship.

Celtic nobles favored brightly colored clothing; that night, Ainmire's cloak was purple, while Nuallán's was crimson. The colorful cloaks and the mid-calf length of their *léine* were symbols of nobility. Clothing of slaves was

one color and their *léine* short.²⁵



Figure 4. Medieval Celtic shoulder brooch, British Museum (courtesy of John Byrne)

The two men took their places in the most important position in the banqueting circle. They sat on mats of dried grass behind a low wooden table, and they shared a silver cup of wine with nearby nobles. The lower-ranked men, seated near the door, shared wooden containers of wheaten beer.

Wooden platters covered with cuts of beef and pork were already in place on the tables in front of the men, along with small loaves of bread made from wheat that Ainmire's women had ground and prepared. Ainmire offered Nuallán, his honored guest, the best cuts of beef. The men ate by hand, using their short daggers to cut smaller pieces off the haunches of meat.

Such foods were standard fare at Celtic feasts. But now Ainmire's principal wife, Ailidh, approached the guest of honor with a large silver platter bearing something more unusual in honor of the Samhain celebration—fresh grilled trout, flavored with leeks, which had been caught in the nearby River Boyne.

The meal differed in another way from the family's regular meals: much more meat was served. The family's cattle were kept primarily for their milk and cheese; only cows past their productive period, or unwanted bull calves, were slaughtered for meat. The family's usual diet was a porridge made from a variety of grains, mixed with milk or sweetened with honey. Wild seasonal fruits and greens supplemented the milk, cheese, and porridge meals. The only cultivated fruit came from a few apple trees, planted near the ringfort.²⁶

Ailidh was a few years younger than her husband. They had been married for fifteen years. She wore her blonde hair long, reaching to her waist. She was dressed, as were the men, in a linen tunic, but hers touched the floor. It was dyed green, and the neck was embroidered with gold. Her belt was of braided, dark green wool. Her cloak was blue. Besides the pin that held her cloak in place, Ailidh wore several bracelets of finely worked bronze and rings inlaid with jet stones.

Ailidh was not as good looking as her husband was handsome; but she was so thoughtful, kind, and wise that many of their retainers thought her the most beautiful woman they had ever known. She was the favorite daughter of a chief from a nearby *túath*, who so loved her that he gave her a dowry that made her a wealthy woman—not only valuable household items, but as many head of cattle as her husband possessed. This meant that husband and wife carried equal authority within the relationship, and in that way her father had protected her well.²⁷

Ailidh and Ainmire had lost their eldest son during his first year, but they had another son and three daughters who survived the perilous years of infancy. The daughters were all living as foster children in the households of other noble families, in accordance with Celtic custom.

The bonds of fosterage cemented alliances between nobles and was a primary form of education. Foster families agreed to train both girls and boys in the arts and skills they would need as adults. Young girls reached the age of majority at 14, when they returned home to their own families. Boys remained with their foster families until age 17.

Ailidh's eldest daughter was almost old enough to come back to her home, after which she would marry. She would retain a lifelong bond of affection for her foster parents. Given the number of years they spent away from their families, children often remained closer to their foster parents than

to their own. While their children were away, Ailidh and Ainmire had taken on two foster daughters and one foster son to rear in their household.²⁸

Their own surviving son, Máedóc, was ten years old, and a disappointment to his father. While he had dutifully learned all that his father taught him about combat, leadership, and cattle husbandry, it was clear that his heart was not in such tasks. He was as introspective and intuitive as his mother, interested in the life of the mind, not the body. As a very young boy, Máedóc loved sitting at the feet of Nuallán on his visits to the family ringfort, soaking in the music, poems, and stories. In fact, more than a few in the household wondered whether Nuallán might be the boy's real father. They speculated that perhaps the reason Nuallán had never taken a wife was because of his feelings for Ailidh.

Ailidh was aware of the gossip. It was true that she and Nuallán were attracted to one another, and she often caught Nuallán's longing gaze. Ailidh was Christian, as was her husband and all of the *túath*. But although Ailidh was a more faithful worshiper than her husband, she still adhered to many pagan practices and beliefs, and she viewed marriage and infidelity with a casual Celtic eye.²⁹ It was true that Máedóc did not at all resemble Ainmire; he took after his mother in appearance and temperament. But Ailidh had been faithful to her husband, and Máedóc was Ainmire's son.

When it came time for Máedóc at age seven to be given to a foster family, he longed to become the pupil of Nuallán. His father flatly refused. Ainmire admired all the *filid*, but he wanted his son to follow his father's path.

After the boy spent an unhappy year under his father's tutelage, Ailidh proposed a compromise. Máedóc would go to study with the monks in the monastery on the Hill of Slane. Any decision about Máedóc's future would be postponed for a few years.³⁰ Ainmire was not happy with this decision, but his wife had as much authority in the marriage as he did. So he assuaged his ego: He took a second wife, Doireann.

Divorce was a simple process in Celtic society. Ailidh could have chosen to leave her husband, taking with her all the property she had brought to the marriage, plus her share of their increase in wealth during the years they had been together.³¹ But while she did not love her husband in the modern sense of the word, she did respect him. The two, with their different strengths and weaknesses, were a good match, a good partnership. And she understood that Ainmire needed this new marriage to feel, once again, like a man. So she accepted the second wife into their home.

Doireann and Ainmire had married two years ago, shortly after Máedóc had begun his monastery studies. Now Fergus, the son born to them, was a year old. He looked just like his father – same piercing blue eyes, blond hair, and handsome little face. He was noisy, headstrong, physical, into everything. In short, his father was thrilled.



Our family lived in the early medieval period, which dated from the fall of Rome, about the same time that Patrick began his Irish mission, to the tenth century. So what was their world like? Firstly, it was rural. By this time, other emerging European countries had organized themselves around villages, with Christian churches at their center. In these villages, the dwellings were generally clustered together, and the people walked from their homes each day to farm their individual or communal plots of land. Each village had its own complement of craftsmen: carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, innkeeper, miller.

In contrast, early medieval Ireland remained primarily rural. Related clans lived in clusters of individual ringforts, surrounded by their protective earthen walls, living off their own cattle and other livestock. This loose tribal structure of the *túath* gradually transitioned into the townlands under which Ireland is organized to this day. However, the country never developed a nationwide village structure. Irish towns, when they were finally founded, were established by later foreign invaders.

Secondly, Celtic Ireland was fractured. By the early medieval period, some European nations had begun to coalesce under kings. France, which developed from the western third of Charlemagne's empire, began to be ruled by the House of Capet in 987, although it took the French monarchy several centuries to gain control of all the lands that are now part of the nation. By 1072, William the Conqueror had successfully imposed a ruling structure over all of Britain—England, Wales, and Scotland. Even Sweden, which was a Baltic power throughout the medieval and early modern periods, began a process of consolidation as early as the tenth century under Eric the Victorious. The rise of the commercial classes and the development of monetary systems in these countries gave their monarchs sources of power and finance that freed them from dependence on their vassal lords.

But Ireland—with the exception of a few isolated ports founded by invaders—did not develop a merchant class nor a commercial economy. It remained a collection of small tribal territories, its economy agricultural, barter its primary medium of exchange, cattle ownership its predominant source of wealth.

Beginning as early as the second century A.D., one Celtic dynasty or another claimed the high kingship of Tara and overlordship of all lower kings. Small and mid-sized “kingdoms” waxed and waned as the tribes gained or lost power.

After the 12th-century Norman invasion, Ireland's unstable boundaries coalesced into the four provinces that still exist today (see Map of Ireland, p. viii): Ulaid (Ulster) in the north, Mumu (Munster) in the south, Laigin

(Leinster) in the east, and Connachta (Connacht) in the west. When the Christians had begun their written records in the fifth century, there was a fifth province, called Mide (Meath). It was located in the middle of the country, stretching from the Irish Sea on the east to the hills of Connacht in the west, the kingdom of Ulster to the north. Most of what was once Mide is now part of Leinster.

Tribal wars broke up Mide by the end of the 6th century. The eastern half became the Kingdom of Brega, ruled by a dynasty called the *Sil nÁeda Sláine*—which suggests that the family arose on or near the Hill of Slane. By 688, Brega itself had split into two sub-kingdoms—Northern Brega and Southern Brega.

Ainmire's *túath*, with its symbolically important location below the Hill of Slane, was in Northern Brega. About the time that Ainmire took a second wife, Congalach mac Máel Mithig became King of Northern Brega. He was a tenth-generation descendant of the Áeda Sláine dynasty. He was destined to be elected High King of Ireland in 944, and he ruled until his death 12 years later.³²

In general, there were three hierarchical levels of kings in Celtic Ireland. Ainmire was a *rí túaithe*, and he was at the lowest level of kingship, more a tribal chieftain than a true king. At the time of our story, Ainmire's superior was Congalach, King of Northern Brega. Congalach was a king over several bands, called a *ruiri* or *rí buide*. At the top level was a provincial king, a *rí cóicid* or *rí ruirech*. The provincial king over Brega was Donnchad Donn mac Flainn from the southern Uí Neill dynasty, who ruled from 919 to 944 and who also served as high king of Ireland.

The position of high king was more myth than reality. Before the 8th century, the high kings may have been primarily legendary, although some of the surviving Celtic stories name high kings from as early as the 2nd century. Not until the 9th century were some provincial kings able to wield actual political influence over the other provinces as high kings. The Uí Neill dynasty dominated the high kingship longer than any of the other provincial kings, but not even they were able to convert the position into a permanent royal house of Ireland.

The various chieftains and kings at all levels continued to jockey with one another for land and power. Cattle raids remained constant, and boundaries between kingdoms were fluid.³³



How is it that we know so much about Celtic kingdoms and rulers and even Celtic Daily life if their historians, the filid, refused to commit any of it to paper? Thank some Christian monks in later

centuries who were interested enough in the Celtic stories, legends, genealogies, and laws to commit them to writing before they were forgotten.

The most credible type of historical source was the annal, a listing of notes to record battles, marriages, deaths, and other historical events, written as the events occurred. Several annals are noted in this book, either in the narrative or the endnotes. One example was the *Annals of the Four Masters*, recorded by four monks whose names have been lost.

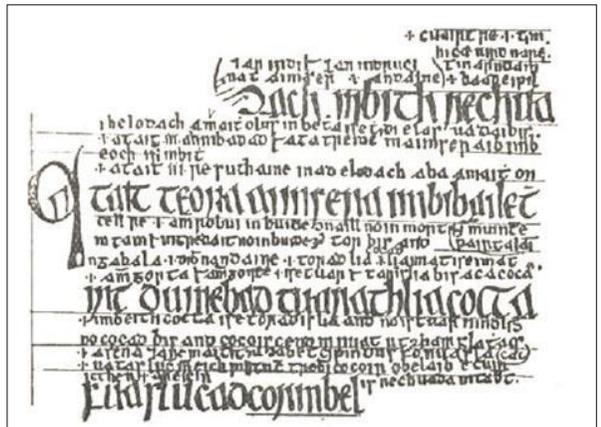
Most of the earliest written records are far less credible than the annuals because they mix myths and legends in with historical events. The capture of Celtic law, legend, and stories by Christian monks is a double-edged sword. It has saved the Celtic legacy, but the surviving documents may omit aspects of Celtic life of which the monks disapproved. How much the manuscripts have distorted the original oral accounts is uncertain.³⁴

One of the two more important volumes of law is called the *Senchus Mór*. According to its preamble, it was created at the instigation of St. Patrick himself. It says he enlisted Celtic judges and Christian monks to write one unified set of laws, incorporating both Celtic tradition and canon law. Modern scholars, however, have concluded that while some aspects of Celtic law may have been written down between the fifth and the seventh

centuries, the *Senchus Mór* itself was not compiled until the eighth century, about three centuries after Patrick's death.³⁵

The *Senchus Mór* is a collection of legal decisions by the Celtic judges, together with detailed commentaries on the individual decisions. Both the Celtic judges and the Celtic poets had their roots in the ancient druid religion before Christianity. The Druids or *druí* were as highly ranked in their time as Nuallán the *fili* was in the 10th century. They performed several functions: They conducted all the sacred religious rites. They were seers, healers, poets, and judges. By the Christian era, however, the various druidic functions had become separate professions.³⁶

Figure 5. Senchus Mór fragment. The primary text is in larger script; the commentary text, in the smaller



The legal functions were performed by the Brehons. Most kings kept their own Brehon, although others traveled the land. Their training was arduous, and could last twenty years. Just as the *filid* memorized their stories, songs, and genealogies, the Brehons memorized hundreds of judicial cases. The cases were written in verse to make them easier to remember. Brehons adjudicated disputes and ruled on appropriate damages. In the era before the Normans, kings decided many cases in their own jurisdictions – but they did so only after a Brehon had recited all the relevant law and precedent.³⁷

The *Senchus Mór* lists the six classes of Celtic society: (1) the kings, (2) the professional classes, such as the *filid* and the Brehons, (3) the *flaiths* or nobles, (4) the freemen who possessed property, (5) the freemen with little or no property, and (6) the slaves. If one's economic prospects improved, it was possible to rise or fall from one class to another. Other than the slaves, all men and women had an "honor price" based on their personal ranks in society. The honor price was the amount that must be paid to them if another person injured or dishonored them.³⁸

In general, both the kings and the *flaiths* were the heads of their extended families. Within a *túath*, the *flaiths* were often related to the king, heading a junior branch of the dynasty. Both the positions of *flaith* and king were elective. Any man who was descended from the great-grandfather of the deceased king or *flaith* could become the next head, either of kingdom or of family; the seventeen men most closely related to that great-grandfather were eligible both to be elected as head and to select their new leader.³⁹

The requirement that kings and heads of noble families must be descended from the last man's great-grandfather is the reason that genealogy was so important to the Celts. With each new leader, familial relationships shifted, and so did the plots of land that the descendants held. A "promotion" would result in a larger piece of land, or a better one, while a "demotion" would result in less.⁴⁰ A land-owning male of any class was considered to own his own land; but he was not free to sell it outside the family or *túath*. Nor did he have exclusive right to use or dispose of his wife's property. The goods and livestock with which she came into the marriage belonged to her family. In case of divorce, all her property remained with her.⁴¹

In most feudal societies, lords gained the allegiance of their supporters by grants of land, which the lord could revoke if the land-holder displeased him. The basis for wealth in Britain and the continent in the early medieval period was land.

Not so in Celtic Ireland, where all but slaves and property-less freedmen held their own land on behalf of their family lines. Instead, wealth was based on the number of cattle a person held. A king or chief tied his men to him with grants of cattle, either in outright grants or in loans. In return, the

retainers paid yearly tributes of the major part of the annual increase in the herd, as well as milk, cheese, butter, meat, and grain that had been grown using the king's oxen. The tribute amount varied, but it could be equivalent to as much as one-third the amount of the original cattle grant.

No wonder men carefully guarded their livestock inside their fortified ringforts—and no wonder cattle raids were so frequent. A successful raid resulted in an immediate increase in a man's wealth, and no tribute was owed on it to his king or overking.⁴²

Brehon law recognized ten categories of marriage, so the Christian concept of a single type of marriage must have seemed incomprehensible to the Celtic mind. Laurence Ginnell, a late 19th-century English barrister who wrote the definitive work on Brehon law, noted, "Apparently the law on marriage and the dissolution of marriage was wholly pagan, and never underwent any modification in Christian times." Since what we know today about Brehon law was recorded by 8th-century monks who censored legal aspects they believed to be contrary to Christian doctrine, it is surprising that this aspect of Celtic law was not erased from the record.⁴³

The ten categories included "marriages" as casual as brief sexual liaisons, or concubinage, or even marriage through abduction. But the law also defined four categories it called the "lawful women".

- In the first two categories, both bride and groom were of equal rank; but in one category, the man brought more property into the marriage, so he enjoyed greater legal rights within the marriage. In the other category, the woman brought more property, so that she enjoyed greater authority and legal rights than her husband. The wives in these cases were *cetmuintir*.⁴⁴
- In the third category, both spouses brought equal property into the marriage; this was true for Ainmire and Ailidh, so that the two shared equal legal status. That is why Ailidh had the power to negotiate a monastery education for their son, even though her husband disagreed. This category of wife was also *cetmuintir*.
- In the fourth category were second wives—but only if they produced a son. This was the case with Ainmire's second wife, Doireann. Second wives who bore sons were classified as *adaltrach*.⁴⁵

Because land and property were considered to belong to the extended family, inheritance was complicated. Sons of legal wives inherited equal shares of their fathers' property; however a portion of the property also went to the other male members of the father's paternal kinship group. Sons inherited two-thirds of their *cetmuintir* mothers' estates, but only one-half if their mothers were *adaltrach*; the remainder was returned to the mother's

family. The rules changed over the centuries, but in general, daughters inherited no property except for heirlooms. If there were no sons, the daughter could inherit, but only for her lifetime; the property then reverted to the family.⁴⁶

Historians differ whether Celtic law gave women equality. Some argue that Christianity increased women's equality, while others argue just the opposite.⁴⁷ However, Brehon inheritance law suggests that women were not equal to men, since they inherited only in the absence of brothers and then only for their lifetimes. Nevertheless, marriage law accorded them considerable legal rights; legal wives could make their own decisions considering the property they brought into the marriage. Even when the husband brought more property into the marriage and therefore had more decision-making authority over the wife's portion, divorce was easily obtained. The fact that a divorcing woman would take her own property with her after the marriage dissolution gave the woman a considerable bargaining chip in the relationship.



Máedóc, son of Ainmire and his first wife Ailidh, reached maturity in the year 942. He had been studying in the Slane monastery for eight years. Having reached the age of 17-year-old man, he should have returned to his father's house to help him in his work. But Máedóc's years in the monastery had only increased his love of learning and his dislike of farming and herding. He decided to remain in the monastery and become a monk.

Ainmire was furious. He had acquiesced in his wife's choice to permit their son to study, but he could not accept Máedóc's career decision. He warned his son that if he chose this path, he would disinherit him. Fergus and his younger brother Odhar, Ainmire's sons by his second wife, would become his sole heirs. Máedóc's mother did her best to stay out of this conflict. Though it would break her heart to lose her son to monastic life, she knew how unhappy he would be if he submitted to his father's will.

Máedóc remained in the monastery, and Ainmire swore that his eldest son was no longer welcome in the family's ringfort. Ainmire and Máedóc never spoke or even saw one another again. Twice a year, however, his mother would visit her son at the monastery, and they spent a precious few moments together, particularly each September on the feast day of the Nativity of Mary.⁴⁸

Ainmire began to lavish even more love and attention on Fergus, his handsome, rough-and-tumble son by his second wife. Fergus was eight years old, and he should have moved to the household of a foster parent the previous year—but his father had not wanted to part with him. Finally, he

chose one of his distant cousins, a nobleman from his own *túath*, to foster and train Fergus. Ainmire could have chosen a king from a nearby *túath* as Fergus' foster father, thereby cementing relationships between the two small kingdoms. But it was not unusual to select a foster family from among a man's subordinates; and the arrangement kept his son closer to home.⁴⁹

Fergus barely knew his elder brother, who gone to the monastery when he was only a year old. He and Máedóc were different in almost every way: appearance, physicality, skills, interests.

However, each in his own way had a common passion – Nuallám, the *fili*. Máedóc was moved by the poetry in Nuallán's songs and stories. In contrast, Fergus loved the songs and stories for their adventure and heroism. He was enthralled by the warfare.

Fergus begged his indulgent father for his own harp. Ainmire was not worried this son would reject his father's lifestyle, so he was happy to oblige. For his part, Nuallán was fond of the boy. He had no children of his own, and it was a sweet pleasure to see the hero worship in his eyes whenever Fergus sat at his feet.



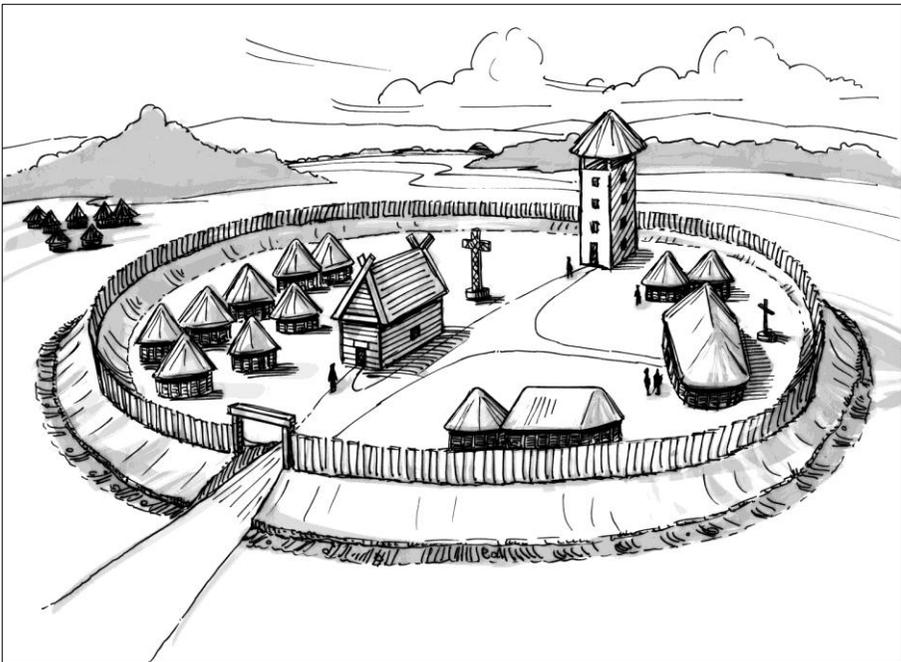
Maédóc's days in the monastery of Slane were long and hard, but he was happy. Because he was already accustomed to monastery life, his probationary period as a novitiate lasted only a few months before the abbot permitted him to take his vows. Although some of his fellow monks were married, Máedóc remained true to his vow of chastity.

Máedóc's life was ordered around the seven canonical hours, the periods of prayer that punctuated the days and nights of the monks' lives. They began their day with the celebration of Lauds at daybreak, when the monks chanted psalms and listened to spiritual lessons. In the winter, daybreak came around 8 a.m., but in the summer, as early as 4 a.m.; so summer days were much longer for the monks. The other six services were Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline, and Vigils or Nocturns. So depending on the length of day, the monks assembled for prayer in their church about every three hours, day and night. The only breaks in this schedule were on Sundays, saints days, and the major Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas; on these special days, the monks celebrated Holy Eucharist as well as their daily prayers, and they enjoyed days of rest.⁵⁰

All the monks were assigned tasks necessary to the daily life of the monastery: tending the herds and flocks; plowing, planting, weeding, and harvesting the crops; preparing meals; and doing laundry. Maédcóc did his part of the manual labor, but the majority of his working hours were spent in the scriptorium. There he copied books, either second copies of the monastery's own volumes or books borrowed from other monasteries or brought back from Europe by wandering missionaries. Technically, the books were called codexes, bound volumes with cut pages, to distinguish them from the continuous pages of scrolls. Maédcóc lacked the artistic talent for the intricate, colored pages and illustrations for which the early Irish Christian scribes were known; his own special skill was his clear, even script.

From the early medieval period, Irish monks did not live communally as their peers did on the Continent. The Celtic-era monasteries resembled ringforts much more than they did the European institutions. They were

Figure 6. Plan of an early Irish Christian monastery



circular wooden stockades, often surrounded by ditches. Each monk lived in his own small thatched, wooden hut. The largest structure in the stockade was the church, which in the 10th century was constructed of wood; only the altar was stone. Other buildings in the monastery enclosure included a workshop, the smithy, and the refectory and adjoining kitchen, where the monks ate. There was also the scriptorium, a tall wooden tower where

Maéidóc and the other scribes worked. The actual scriptorium was on the ground level. The library was on the three stories above the scriptorium. The top floor of the tower held the bell that called the monks to prayer. Outside the monastery walls were the farm buildings, a mill, and a limekiln.⁵¹

Except for the 50-day period between Easter and Pentecost, the monks fasted all or part of each day. During the short days of winter, they ate only once a day. They had a second, lighter meal in the early summer evenings because their work day was longer. Most of the year, they waited to eat until late afternoon; but during Lent, they did not eat at all until evening.

Their regular diet was a cooked dish made of grain or vegetables, perhaps enriched with egg or cheese. The only seasonings were salt and herbs from the monastery garden. They drank milk or ale. Their bread was coarse. On Christian feast days, they ate fish caught in the River Boyne. They ate in silence, using sign language only when necessary, for example to ask for bread to be passed to them. As they ate, one of the monks read to them from the scriptures or other holy books.⁵²

Their clothing was simple: the standard tunic worn by most Celts, over which they wore a cape and hood of rough wool. This wardrobe served both for working and sleeping. Unlike their European brothers, who shaved only the crowns of their heads, Irish monks shaved all the hair from the front of their heads and from ear to ear, leaving the hair in back to grow long.⁵³



As the number of Christian believers swelled during the early centuries of the Christian church, some kind of organization became necessary if the Church was truly to be “universal,” not just a collection of separate congregations. By the end of the first century, bishops were governing groups of churches. In general, bishops were ordained priests, so they could trace their ordinations back, in an unbroken line, to the apostles of Christ. The bishops reported to a provincial bishop or an archbishop, who in return reported to the Pope. The bishops’ headquarters were almost always located in the most important cities in their jurisdictions.

However, Palladius and Patrick, the first Christian bishops to visit Ireland, faced a problem. There were no cities in Ireland. So Patrick decided he had to use the *túath* as the basic organization of the Irish church. When he was successful in converting a local king, he often established a bishop’s seat in that area. He started with these small areas, assuming that over time, each bishopric would grow.⁵⁴

However, the Celts, steeped in druidic mysticism, took a different path. Many of the new converts chose to demonstrate their devotion through

Green Martyrdom. Red martyrs are those who choose to die for their faith. Green martyrs demonstrate their devotion through fasting, abnegation, and retreat from the world. They were heavily influenced by what Patrick had taught them concerning the Mideast hermits who withdrew to the desert for solitary lives of prayer. The Irish monks emulated these hermits, but they also chose to come together in spiritual communities—abbeys and monasteries—to labor and pray for Christ. They believed that by living in community, they could support one another through their austere daily lives.⁵⁵

Patrick accepted the Irish structure, and he celebrated the countless men and women who embraced the monastic life. The monks did not take holy orders; few of them were ever ordained as priests. Instead, they took vows to follow the rules of their own orders, including those of poverty, chastity and obedience.⁵⁶

Maédóc's monastery on the Hill of Slane was believed to have been founded in the 5th century during Patrick's lifetime. By the end of the 6th century, most of the most important Irish monasteries had already been founded. By the 7th century, monasteries and abbeys overshadowed the bishoprics as the most important institutions in the Irish church.

In some monasteries, including Slane, one man served as both bishop and abbot.⁵⁷ This was not always the case. Bishops were ordained priests; abbots swore obedience to their monastic rules, but many were not ordained. And many abbots, with their casual Celtic attitude toward matters of sin and sex, were married. Indeed, the leadership of numerous monasteries passed from father to son.⁵⁸

In the early medieval period, called the Dark Ages in western Europe, scholarship and literacy were a low point. The classical writings of Greek and Roman scholars were mostly forgotten. The Pope and the Roman Church were mired in one dogmatic debate after another as the Church progressed from a collection of disparate, scattered communities into one unified organization. So it is not surprising that the Irish Christian Church, situated on an island at the far reaches of the continent, would be able to "go native," with a unique personality.

Irish Christianity was monastic more than it was episcopate. It ignored or downplayed Roman Catholic practices of marriage and clerical celibacy. It accepted women in monastic leadership positions, even sometimes over men. It was the first to implement private confession instead of the humiliating public confessions still used on the continent. And it honored Celtic songs, stories, and scholarship.⁵⁹

Cahill notes, "While Rome and its ancient empire faded from memory and a new, illiterate Europe rose on its ruins, a vibrant, literary culture was

blooming in secret along its Celtic fringe... Ireland, at peace and furiously copying, thus stood in the position of becoming Europe's publisher."⁶⁰

As the Roman Church cracked down on schisms and punished churchmen who diverged from official doctrine, dozens of scholars headed for Ireland and its more relaxed approach to Christianity. And the books they brought further enriched the Irish monasteries' libraries. Some came to stay, but many more came to study. On their return home, the students helped to spread Irish scholarship. Meanwhile, Irish monks traveled to the Continent to found new monasteries. The most famous monk, Columbanus, established between 60 and 100 monasteries in France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy in just 25 years.⁶¹

With the patronage of the kings and chieftains, monasteries became wealthy. The monks took individual vows of poverty, but this did not prevent the institutions of the monasteries from becoming major landowners and wealthy farming communities. Many of the monasteries were founded by noble Celtic families, who passed down the leadership of their monasteries from one family member to another.⁶²

The monastery abbots used their wealth to adorn their churches. They commissioned reliquaries, jeweled silver and gold chalices and altar vessels, altar cloths embroidered with gold thread, tomb covers with hammered bronze panels, and manuscripts illustrated with glorious artwork in rich colors. Classic and distinctive Celtic patterns and designs were re-imagined to enrich Christian craftwork.

Attracted by the monasteries' wealth, craftsmen flocked to the monasteries. So did traders, bringing wine, fine fabrics, spices, and exotic foods from the continent. Small settlements sprung up near the most important monasteries, which were often constructed near major crossroads across the still sparsely settled countryside. Monastery schools expanded to accommodate the sons and daughters of the well-to-do. In sum, the monasteries gave Ireland something that Celtic culture had heretofore lacked: urban centers.⁶³



Time passed. Maédóc had been a monk for six years, and he had found his life's work: to transcribe and codify the Brehon laws. One of the oldest monks at Slane had once been a *fili*. He had lost most of his sight, but his memory was intact. He agreed with Maédóc that this body of law should be documented before it was forgotten. Although many scriptorium monks altered Celtic content to make it more acceptable to the Church, Maédóc wanted to create a book that was as accurate to the original content as he and the old monk could make it. First they conferred

for months as they decided how best to organize the work. Brehon judges kept all the decisions in their heads and simply recited the relevant cases as necessary, so that no one had ever come up with a system to organize the entire body of work.

By 948, the two monks had been working on their project for five years. The old man would slowly recite each case while Maédóc hastily transcribed each passage. Then he laboriously created the final copy in his neat, even script. One volume had already been completed. He called the book the *Leabhar Buidhe Slaine*, or the Yellow Book of Slane.

But the elderly monk was tiring more quickly, and Maédóc worried that he would die before the two finished their work. So now he focused exclusively transcriptions. Creation of the finished work would have to wait.

Then, one crisp autumn day, just a week before All Hallows' Eve, the monks working in the scriptorium heard shouting. When they looked out, they saw a horrible scene of destruction. A band of marauding Vikings was

plundering the monastery church and setting fire to the buildings. Monks were dashing to the last intact substantial building in the monastery, the scriptorium. The monks barred the door and prayed for deliverance.

There was no escape. For one last time, the monks and prayed together. With his precious Yellow Book of Slane in his arms, Maédóc died. The book's content was lost forever that day.⁶⁴

The abbot, who survived, immediately set out to reconstruct Slane abbey. This time, the basic construction material was stone, not wood. The new stone tower to replace the scriptorium and bell tower was round, 16 feet in diameter and 100 feet tall.⁶⁵

Over the centuries, the abbey would be attacked several more times. In 1172, it was plundered by the King of Leinster. In 1175, it was destroyed totally by the Normans. More than 300 years later, in 1512, the Baron Slane, an Anglo-Norman knight named Christopher Fleming, constructed the last monastery. The ruins of that monastery sit today atop the Hill of Slane.⁶⁶

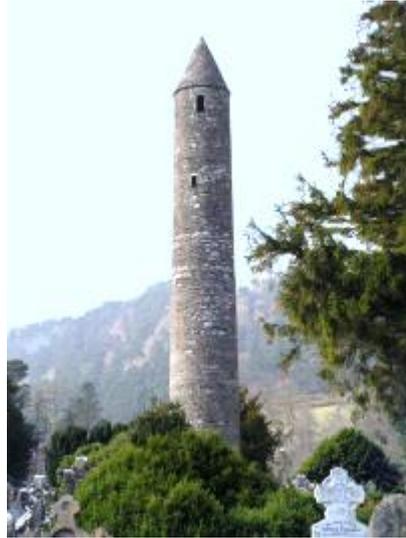


Figure 7. Round Tower at Glendalough Abbey



Many years later, when Fergus mac Ainmire was a married father with a ringfort of his own and also cousin to the new *rí túaithe*, Nuallán the *fili* died far away, on the other side of the Kingdom of Brega. He was an old man who no longer could travel, so it had been many years since he had visited the Uí Uidhir. But he had not forgotten the eager boy with bright blue eyes who sat at his feet and begged for story after story. So before he died, he sent his last pupil to find Fergus. Since Nuallán had never married or had children, and he wanted to bequeath his most prized possession to Fergus, who he knew would treasure it. And so he did. Until the day Fergus died, the harp of Nuallán hung in the place of honor in Fergus' ringfort. The harp would be passed down from father to son for generations, long after they had forgotten about the man who had sounded like a god when he played it.

Figure 8. St. Patrick's statue on Slane Hill overlooks the Boyne River Valley. Photo courtesy of Shane Larkin.



Notes

Introduction

¹ Scholar Robert James Scally wrote, “Historians often claim that the Irish in North America saw themselves as unhappy exiles... Initially I was skeptical. However, after exploring the metaphor’s sources in the Irish background and its personal expression in over 5,000 emigrants’ letters and memoirs—in addition to poems, songs, and folklore—I conclude that it is of great importance...” *The End of Hidden Ireland*, 4.

² “The Immigrant’s Farewell,” published in 1885, was adapted from a song first published in *The Collected Songs of Charles Mackay* (London and New York, G. Routledge & Co., 1859).

³ The 2011 Irish population statistics are from the Central Statistics Office in Dublin, Republic of Ireland, and the Census in Northern Ireland, March 2011. The 2 February 1995 speech by Mary Robinson was accessed on-line on 8 January 2015, and can be found at <http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/addresses/2Feb1995.htm>.

Chapter 1

⁴ Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 36-38.

⁵ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 130: “A chief poet had a social rank equal to a petty king.”

⁶ Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 32-33. Hughes, “The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland,” 76-77. Connolly, *Contested Island*, 15-16.

⁷ According to State, *A Brief History of Ireland*, 16, the *fili* could recite more than 300 stories. According to Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, p. 54, the term *ollamh* also referred to the highest level of the Brehon judges. See also Simms, “Literacy and the Irish Bards,” 238-252.

⁸ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 114: “The arrival of Christianity in Ireland created havoc with the already muddled status of the *aes dana* [i.e., the professional class]. Many professionals, including Druids, became Christian clerics, while others did not. Thus, the *aes dana* quickly polarized into competing Christian and pagan camps.” See also Hughes, “The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland,” 76-77.

⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 190-191: “There are enough references to druids in seventh and eighth-century Irish sources to make it plain that they were considered to have formed a powerful group in Irish society, but to have lost that position as a result of conversion. This sense of the *druí* as the principal opposition to Christianity appears to have been carried by Irish missionaries to England in the seventh century... [L]ater evidence within Ireland and England and also from earlier evidence for the continental Celts suggests that druids were the professional order most likely to have caused difficulties to Christian missionaries.”

¹⁰ For a comprehensive narrative on the Hill of Slane, its ruins, and its history, see Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath*, 58-64.

¹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 17-20 and 254-255. Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath*, 59-61. See also the website for the Parish of Slane and Monknewtown, http://slaneparish.com/history_parish.html, accessed 30 January 2015.

¹² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 183-184 and 219.

¹³ Ryan, *The Illustrated Archaeology of Ireland*, 119. Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church*, 29.

¹⁴ Ryan, *The Illustrated Archaeology of Ireland*, 125, wrote, "The introduction of Christianity began a process of accelerated change in Ireland. But progress was slow at first and we have no reason to believe that the Irish were converted overnight. There is some evidence of tension between Christians and non-Christians well into the sixth century, but the process of change is largely unknown to us." See also Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 151.

¹⁵ Quotation from Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 26. In *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 101, Thompson writes, "Most members of Celtic tribes were restricted geographically by their legal obligations to kin and by the presence of hostile neighboring tribes... Individuals usually did not live or travel far from their parents' home. In sharp contrast, members of the *aes dana* [i.e., the professional class, which included the *filid*] were allowed to pass freely between tribal territories." See also Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 21-22.

¹⁶ Ainmire is fictitious. The mac Uidhir family, which transitioned to mac Guire and finally to Maguire and McGuire, is generally associated with County Fermanagh, although the origins of the sept are not known. I have taken artistic license and placed one branch of them in the Boyne River Valley because it becomes necessary to my fictitious narrative later in the story.

¹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 12-14 and 97-99.

¹⁸ Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 45-46. macMahon, *The Celtic Way of Life*, 34. In *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, p. 101, Cahill writes, "Ri, the Irish word for king, is cognate with the Latin *rex*, but—to our eyes, at least—these kings would appear to be petty chieftains, local strongmen ruling over a few dozen extended families of cattle ranches. 'Rustlers' might be more accurate, for here was little right except might." On p. 61 of *The Brehon Laws*, Ginnel states that all the members of the *túath* claimed descent from a distant common ancestor. In *Celtic Leinster*, pp. 13-18, there is an excellent explanation of the relationship between Celtic tribes. Another good source on the dynamic waxing and waning of tribes and their land holdings is Smyth's *Celtic Leinster*.

¹⁹ Simms, "Continuity and Change: Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland," 45-46. Stout, *The Irish Ringfort*, 111.

²⁰ **Raths or ringforts** are generally more likely to be found in areas with good soils, which suggests that the Boyne River valley would have had one of the highest concentrations. However, the expected density has not been found there; Ó Cróinín speculates that the intensive settlement in this area with its concurrent, heavy agricultural usage, has destroyed many of the ringfort remnants. One estimate is that in populated areas, there may have been one ringfort for each 2 square kilometers. See *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, 239. Keenan, *The True Origins of Irish Society*, 212, estimated the total territory of a typical *túath* at six or seven square miles. Stout, *The Irish Ringfort*, 111, lists the a king's holdings as about 98 hectares, or 242 acres. Whenever possible, the chiefs sited their

ringforts on hills for defensive purposes. Stout diagrams the relationship between the principal ringfort and those of the retainers on p. 124. See also Keenan, *The True Origins of Irish Society*, 212.

²¹ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 70-71. Concerning the crops, see Proudfoot, "The Economy of the Irish Rath," 108.

²² Stout, *The Irish Ringfort*, 118-119. Lynn, "Early Medieval Houses," 126-129.

²³ Byrne, "Early Irish Society," 46. Stout, *The Irish Ringfort*, 113-117.

²⁴ In *Celtic Leinster*, p. 5, Smyth notes, "[B]earing in mind that... the Irish had a warrior society where warfare was endemic, then we must consider the possibility that ... few adults survived beyond forty. The three per cent or so who survived beyond fifty would have consisted largely of matrons and clerics who had been sheltered from the horrors of Dark Age warfare." See also MacMahon, *The Celtic Way of Life*, 8-11.

²⁵ Concerning clothing, see McClintock, *Old Irish & Highland Dress*, 11-18. MacMahon, *The Celtic Way of Life*, 11-12 and 57-58. Bryant, *Liberty, Order & Law Under Native Irish Rule*, 38. Concerning hair, see Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 115.

²⁶ MacMahon, *The Celtic Way of Life*, 54-60.

²⁷ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 124-125.

²⁸ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 127-128. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 115-117. Markale, *Women of the Celts*, 251. Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 295.

²⁹ Ginnell notes on p. 125, "Apparently the law on marriage and the dissolution of marriage was wholly pagan, and never underwent any modification in Christian times." In *Celtic Leinster*, p. 78, Smyth notes that "polygamy, or at least a discreet form of it, continued to be practised by the Celtic aristocracy long after the introduction of Christianity."

³⁰ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 296: "During the pagan era, children of the *aes dana* and some gifted noble children were sent to boarding schools for six months of every year for periods of six to twenty year [to study with the druids]... During the early medieval era, Irish monasteries and nunneries operated schools for noble-class children of both sexes."

³¹ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 122-126. In *Women of the Celts*, Markdale writes on p. 36, "The wife could refuse the presence of any concubine in the family home. If the husband overruled this, she could always divorce him."

³² Eogan, "Early Christian Knowth and the Kingdom of Brega," 18. Congalach mac Máel Mithig is a historical figure. His dates of high kingship as well as his ancestry are listed in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, a historical chronicle compiled in the seventeenth century from several earlier chronicles. Although his selection as high king is documented, the date of his actual assumption of the throne of North Brega is not.

³³ State, *A Brief History of Ireland*, 16. Keenan, *The True Origins of Irish Society*, 212. See also Ginnell's *The Brehon Laws*, 39-42; Ginnell's names for the various levels of king are slightly different than those used in this text, but he presents a good explanation of the relationship between the kings as well as the kingly election process.

³⁴ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 17-23. Richter, *Medieval Ireland*, 16.

³⁵ There are various spellings for the title *Senchus Mór*. This variant is from Ginnell's *The Brehon Laws*. Concerning the role of monks in recording and amending Brehon law, see pp. 3-15 of Thompson's *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*.

³⁶ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 43-53. Also, in *The Illustrated Archaeology of Ireland*, p. 126, Ryan writes, "An academic class inherited some of the mystique of the pagan druids, but their role seems to have been that of the poet, genealogist, and preserver of historical lore of all kinds." See also Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 88-89.

³⁷ Ginnell, p. 54, states that every king or chief who could afford to do so would maintain a Brehon as part of his household. Some sources, however, suggest that the Brehons remained unattached. Probably both were true; in whichever case, however, the Brehons would have been free to come and go should they wish.

³⁸ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 110-116. Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 140.

³⁹ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 62-64. The rules of election and the eligibility to be an elector are complicated. For more information, see this reference.

⁴⁰ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 76: "...on the holder's death not only the particular land which had been thus held by him, but all the land of the same class belonging to his [extended family]... was divided anew among its male members."

⁴¹ Markale, *Women of the Celts*, 34.

⁴² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 71-80. Markale, *Women of the Celts*, 31-32.

⁴³ Ginnell, *The Brehon Laws*, 125. See also Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 116.

⁴⁴ In *Women of the Celts*, p. 37, Markale notes, "When the wife... had a fortune equal to her husband's and was of the same birth, she was on a completely equal footing. She could settle all contracts deemed advantageous on her own authority. The husband's consent was necessary only when a contract was deemed unfavorable. Equally, the wife had the right to demand the cancellation of all disadvantageous contracts made by her husband relating to his own fortune. When the wife was inferior in rank, and especially when her fortune was less than her husband's, these rights were severely reduced... On the other hand, when the woman had a greater fortune than her husband, she was the unchallenged head of the family. The husband's authority was almost nil." See also Bryant, *Liberty, Order & Law Under Native Irish Rule*, 78-82.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 133-139.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 144-146. For a detailed, headache-inducing explanation of inheritance law nuances, see Bryant, *Liberty, Order & Law Under Native Irish Rule*, 146-152.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 120.

⁴⁸ Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*, 66-67.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 294.

⁵⁰ Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church*, 91. Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*, 28-42.

⁵¹ Ryan, *Illustrated Archaeology of Ireland*, 136. Ó Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity," 68-69. Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 184. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints*, 145-157.

⁵² Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*, 20-22 and 46

⁵³ Ó Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity," 70.

⁵⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 241-249.

⁵⁵ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 150-153. Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*, xiii and 3.

⁵⁶ Ó Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity," 64-65.

⁵⁷ Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath*, 61, states that the abbots of Slane were generally also bishops.

⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 250-251 and 271-275.

⁵⁹ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 182-183 and 201-204. Hughes, "The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland," 78-80. However, it is important to note that not all scholars agree that there was a "Celtic Church," distinct from that of Rome; see also Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church*, 4, and Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church*. Concerning the role of women in the Celtic Church, see Thompson, *Women in Celtic Law and Culture*, 211-214. Thompson also notes on p. 216, "...the Celtic Churches stubbornly clung to their native traditions and only very gradually yielded to Papal authority."

⁶⁰ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 183.

⁶¹ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 192. Ó Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity," 74-75. Hughes, "The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland," 83-86. De Paor, "The Age of the Viking Wars," 102.

⁶² Ó Fiaich, "The Beginnings of Christianity," 68. Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*, 11.

⁶³ Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints*, 156-157. Hughes, "The Golden Age of Early Christian Ireland," 86-87. Butlin, "Urban and Proto-Urban Settlements in Pre-Norman Ireland," 22-25.

⁶⁴ The Yellow Book of Slane existed, but its contents are not known. Vikings did plunder the monastery about 948, burning down its wooden belfry. See the website for Slane Parish, <http://www.slane-parish.com/history-parish.html>, accessed 22 February 2015. See also O'Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, 20.

⁶⁵ According to Eogan, "Early Christian Knowth and the Kingdom of Brega," p. 17, the first of the many round towers that are now found all over Ireland was constructed at Slane.

⁶⁶ There is a question concerning the date of this event; various Irish sources date the event from 945 to 950. *The Annals of the Four Masters* lists the date as 948, noting that "The belfry of Slane was burned by the Danes, with its full [sic] of relics and distinguished persons, together with [the] Lector of Slane, and the crozier of the patron saint, and a bell (which was the best of bells)." In *The Antiquities and History of Ireland*, p. 62, Ware writes, "In 950, the Danes of Dublin plunder'd and burnt Slane in Meath, in which fire Ginaus, a learned Man and chief Reader of the place, with many others, assembled in the church, they say were lost."