

CAHERDOONFERGUS.

BY THOS. J. WESTROPP, M.A., M.R.I.A., F.R.S.A.I.

The North-western angle of Burren Barony, in County Clare, is formed by a great rounded mass of limestone, ending in the headland of Black Head—"the great waste rock of Kanborny," as the Cromwellian Survey notices it. This spot figures in the Dindsenchas as "Rind Boirne"—the point of Burren—at which Irgus, one of the sons of Huamore, established himself when that Firbolgic tribe migrated from the rich pastures of Meath to the wild Western hills over the Atlantic.* However we regard the truth of this ancient legend, and how far, even if approximately true, it bears on any of the thousands of Cahers of Ireland, we leave it to others to enquire. In face of the complete resemblance in plan, and even details, between our Irish forts and those scattered across all Northern Europe, the enquiry can only be approached on a wide basis, and not, as our predecessors did, on the narrow ground covered by the legend and the study of a few exceptional forts in Ireland, and in Ireland alone.†

On the shoulder of the Head, commanding a most noble view across Galway Bay, and out to the great peaks of Connemara, the Aran Isles, and the open sea, stands a dry stone fort called on the map "Caherdoonfergus." This name, however, is pronounced among the older peasantry of the district "Doonirias," and "Caher doon Eerish," and very probably preserves the name "Irghuis," attributed to the pre-historic warrior in the legend of the Sons of Huamore.

The ascent is very steep and painful, if undertaken by the shortest climb from the old upper road, but we are well rewarded when we reach the breezy plateau, about 650 feet above the sea, walled in to the east by higher crags, rising to the bluff hill crowned by the cairn of Doughbranneen, 1,040 feet above the sea.

* Dindsenchas of Carn-chonail.—"Revue Celtique," 1894, p. 478.

† The question is treated at some length in the Journal, R.S.A.I., 1896, pp. 142-151.

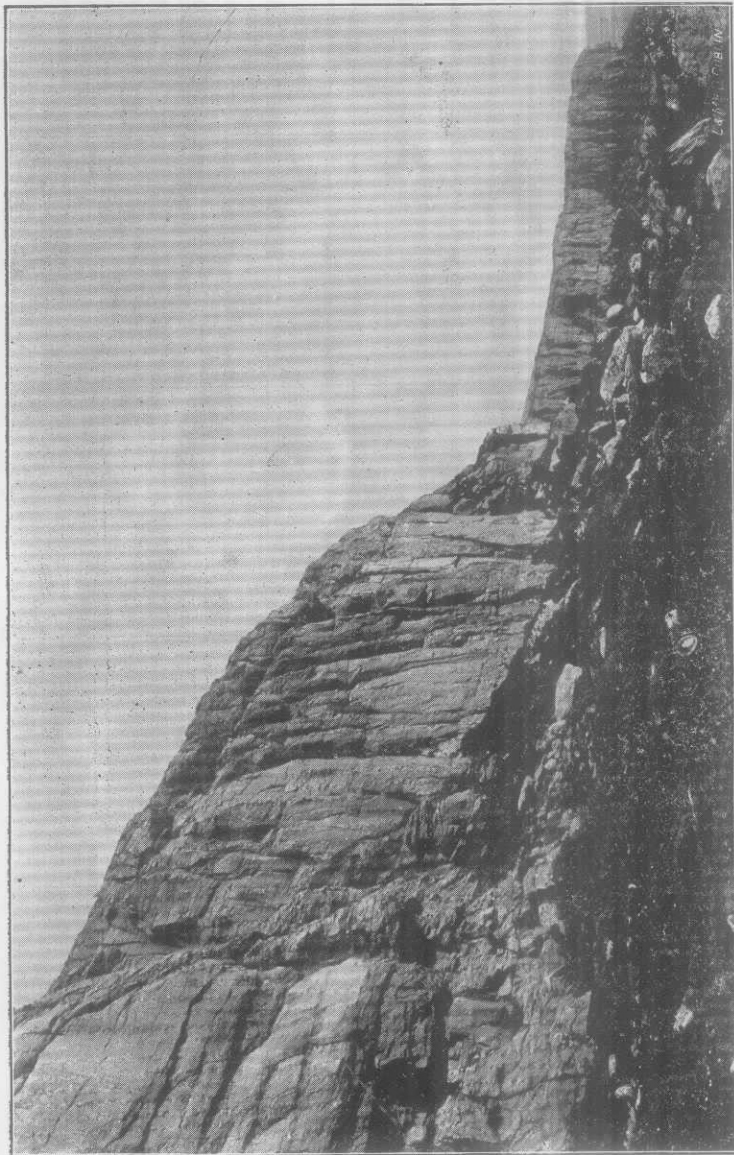


Photo by

INLAND CLIFFS, BLACK HEAD.

[G. Fogarty.]

On the rocky terrace we find the Caher, an irregular enclosure, almost D-shaped in plan, with a somewhat abrupt bend or "angle" to the south-west, while the south side is nearly straight. The wall is in parts over 10 feet high, and, at the most, 13 feet thick. It is roughly built of limestone blocks, laid as headers, as is nearly always the case in our dry stone forts. It is rather more massive towards the east, where a defaced opening represents the ancient gateway, and several of its blocks are over six feet in length. This is not unusual in our forts, and is very noticeable in Caherballiny, at no great distance to the south. The inner garth measures about 65 feet east and west, and a few feet more from north to south. Thus it will be seen the fort is one of the smaller cahers of the district, of which the vast majority range from 100 to 130 feet in external diameter, their walls being usually from 10 to 12 feet thick. There is some trace of a terrace 4 feet high, and of steps made of rough blocks and 2 feet 6 inches long. The rampart, though more or less defaced by time and weather, does not seem to have any constructed batter; in this again following the rule apparent in most of the lesser forts of the district.

The "Ordnance Survey Letters,"† say that tradition in 1839 alleged that the ruin was enchanted, *i.e.*, haunted, by Fergus, son of Roigh, and his companions. I do not doubt it was reputed to be haunted like many another fort of earth and stone in wide Erin; but we cannot but suspect that O'Curry, like many another incautious questioner, put the name of Fergus into the mouth of his informant by injudicious leading questions. The present inhabitants say "it cannot be the name of Fergus that appears in the Doon Eerish," and are borne out by some of the better read Irish speakers of Clare. Enough caution can scarcely be used in getting information, and we have demonstrated to a triumphant "folk-lorist" that one could with equal ease extract a Greek legend from a native, as get the piece of information he had received, and which was cleverly founded on his own questions. So we can scarcely pride ourselves, like Murgan in the poem of "the Tain Quest," ‡ to have found the spot connected with the lover of Maeve; or repeat with the Ogam, "Fergus, son of Roi, is here!"

† Mss. Royal Irish Academy, 14-B-23.

‡ "Lays of the Western Gael."