The Mount Callan Ogham Stone and Its Context

SIOBHÁN de hÓIR

The Mount Callan ogham stone is considered to be modern, carved some time around 1780 or a little before in order to provide evidence of an Irish origin to Macpherson’s Ossian. It influenced not only the literary controversy but also stimulated antiquarian fieldwork and provided inspiration for the study of ogham.

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The Mount Callan, Co. Clare,¹ ogham stone is now a mere curiosity, largely forgotten, but in its time it was perhaps the most influential, and certainly the most controversial, of all field-monuments in Ireland. Now, two hundred years further on (it was first noticed in print in 1780), seems a good time to review its history. The flat slab lies on a slope north of Lough Boolynagreana and measures approximately 287 cm. by 87 cm. It bears an ogham inscription supposedly marking the grave of Conán, one of Fionn Mac Cumhaill’s warriors who was thought to have died in the third century A.D. One line of scholastic ogham, with long marks for vowels, cut on a stem-line, runs down the middle of the stone, and the whole inscription is enclosed in a cartouche, though the stem-line runs through the border at one end; see figs. 1 to 4.

The Mount Callan stone was the first ogham stone to be transcribed, translated and published.² Until this time, antiquarians had read descriptions of ogham stones in literature, but no example had been recognised. The controversy concerning its genuineness prompted further research and caused scholars to go out into the countryside in search of further examples.

Research on oghams has by now progressed to the point when it can be said that there is no question but that the Mount Callan stone is a late, scholastic ogham and has no connection with the three hundred or so genuine, classic oghams in Ireland. These genuine classic oghams are usually fairly well-shaped pillar stones, about 90-180 cm. in height, with an inscription running up the edge of the stone, using the edge of the stone as a stem-line, with vowel marks as notches on the edge. The language of the inscriptions is the earliest form of the written Irish language in Ireland. The floruit of the ogham stones would seem to be from the fourth or fifth centuries A.D. to the middle of the seventh. The inscriptions themselves are quite short, consisting of names in the genitive case, often with some qualification of kinship. A word such as ‘stone’ or ‘memorial’ is understood, then “of X”, or “of X son of Y”, or in more elaborate cases “of X son of Y of the tribe of Z”.³ On the other hand, the Mount Callan stone belongs to a class known as scholastic oghams which are later, dating anywhere from the late eighth to the middle of the nineteenth century. These scholastic oghams are most frequently found in manuscripts, though they are occasionally found inscribed on stone, bone or metal. They do not seem to have had the

¹Mount Callan, more properly Sliabh Challáin, is situated in Knockalassa townland, barony of Inchiquin. The stone lies north of the road from Ennis to Miltown Malbay. It is marked ‘ogham stone’ on O.S. 6-inch scale sheet 31 for Co. Clare.

²The Tarbeg, or Emalagh East, Co. Kerry, ogham stone was the first ogham stone to be drawn in 1707 by Edward Lhuyd or one of his draughtsmen; but it remained in manuscript and no attempt was made at interpretation.

³The standard work on Irish oghams is R. A. S. Macalister, Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum, vol. I, Dublin 1945, now sadly out of date.

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Fig. 1. Vallancey, *Archaeologia* VII, 1785.

Fig. 2. O'Flanagan, *TRIA I*, 1787.

Fig. 3. Ledwich, *Antiquities of Ireland*, 1790.

Fig. 4. Vallancey, *Collectanea*, 1786.
serious purpose of classic oghams, but appear as mere displays of learning. As would be expected considering their connection with a manuscript tradition, the inscriptions generally run horizontally. Long marks run perpendicularly through the drawn stem-line to mark the vowels. As shall be shown, the language on the Mount Callan stone is modern Irish; the inscription is on the face of the stone, not along the edge; the shape of the Mount Callan stone differs from the genuine ogham stones in being a flat slab rather than a pillar stone; the vowels are marked as long cuts running perpendicularly through the drawn stem-line, and it also has another characteristic of some scholastic oghams in having dots divide the words.

The Mount Callan stone was first mentioned in print by Sean Lloyd, who in a small and now very rare guide to Clare published in 1780 refers to the mountain and the stone: "...this Stone hath an Irish, Celtic Inscription on it, which implied in English under this Stone lies the furious and long-legg'd Conanus..." Curiously, Lloyd does not even mention the word ogham in his description.

Charles Vallancey published the first real report on this stone with reading and illustration (read in June 1784 and published in 1785) (fig. 1). He himself takes credit for discovering a poem which led him to the site of the grave: "In an ancient Irish MS I found mention of an inscription in Ogham on the tomb of a great Chieftain named Conan Colgac, said to be slain A.D. 295... At length, I was so lucky as to find an ancient Epic poem, describing the circumstances of the Hero's death, and the local situation of his monument; the verse in Irish runs,

Ni raib an laec fraocca Conán; an Gabhra san trean dail, 
Am Bealtine an blian roimhe; aig coine adharta na Greine. 
Ro torcar an cura nar tim; abfiangail re Fianaib Finn, 
Fa he do Clanab Moirn amhain; do tarla aca san teangbail. 
Do clóid afeart thiar bo tuaig; a cluice caointe bo diol truaig, 
'Sta ainm Oghaim air lic blaihi; i slib comh dúb Callán.'

Vallancey provides a translation of the poem:

"The fierce champion Conán was not present at the bloody battle of Gabra, for on the Beltine (1st day of May) of the preceding year, the dauntless hero was murdered by the Fiana Finn, at an assembly met to worship the sun, being the only man of the Clan Moirne (tribe of Moirne) who happened to be at that solemnity. His lamentation was grief-exciting, his grave was dug on the north west side of the black mountain of Callán, and his name is inscribed in Ogham on a hewn stone."

Vallancy states that at his request Theophilus O'Flanagan sought and found the ogham stone and supplied the following reading: FAN LICS T1 CONAN-COLGAC COS-FADA, which he translated: "Beneath lies Conan Colgac the long footed." The reading does not agree with the accompanying engraving (fig. 1) in all respects, particularly in the second half, but this could perhaps be the fault of the engraver, working with very unfamiliar material.

O'Flanagan himself wrote his own version of the discovery of the inscription in an account read to the Royal Irish Academy on 19 December 1785 and published in 1787. It was,
incidentally, the first article on antiquities to be published by the Academy. He states he had gone with Edward William Burton, of Clifton, Co. Clare, in order to show him the stone which he says he discovered five or six years previously. O’Flanagan also suggests that it was he himself who had discovered the verse on Conan’s death: “I took great pleasure in reading many of the legends, written on the exploits of the Irish Feni in prose, as well as those in verse ascribed to Ossin. In one of the latter I met the following passage…” He then quotes the verse, which differs in detail but is essentially the same as that quoted in Vallancey’s article, and he identifies the passage as coming from Cath Gabhra (the Battle of Gabhra). Scholars do not believe that the lines quoted belong to the original poem as older copies of the poem do not include these lines and when they do occur in later manuscripts, it is thought they are interpolations. O’Flanagan also published a drawing of the stone (fig. 2) and gives his reasons for writing about the monument. “…I had the honour to present a memorial to Colonel Vallancey in the year 1784; but as indeed I had not then a sufficient knowledge of the Ogam character to enable me to give a critical interpretation of the inscription, I beg leave now to offer to the Royal Academy the results of an attentive examination of it since that time.” The “attentive examination” resulted in O’Flanagan changing his reading from FAN LICSI TA CONAN COLGAC COS-FADA which he translates as “Beneath this stone is Conan the fierce the long-legged” to FAN LI DA FICA CONAN COLGAC COS-OBMDA which he translates as “Beneath this stone is laid Conan the fierce the nimble-footed.” While the first transcription can be accepted as based on modern Irish, awkward though it might be, the second includes the meaningless words fica and obmda. However surprised one might be at this change, it gave O’Flanagan a chance to produce five different readings from the one inscription: “The first and second readings are found by twice deciphering the Ogam line in the inscription, from the broad to the narrow end of the stone (and here the process is from left to right) commutating the letters F and N, whenever they occur, as the sense shall direct” (italics mine). O’Flanagan finds his third and fourth readings by reading the inscription backwards, and the fifth is inverted. The readings are given on the chart below. O’Flanagan’s translations are as follows: no. 2: “Observe not the remains of Conan the fierce, the nimble-footed.” no. 3: “Long let him lie at ease on the brink of this lake, beneath this hieroglyphic, darling of the Sacred.” no. 4: “Long let him lie at ease on the brink of this lake, who never saw his faithful clan depressed.” no. 5: “Hail, with reverential sorrow, the drooping heath around his lamentable tomb.”

O’Flanagan mentions Lloyd as having published an account of Conan’s monument but claims that as that interpretation was exactly the same as O’Flanagan’s own account, Lloyd must have heard about it from O’Flanagan’s talk about it. At the same time, O’Flanagan does not claim to be the first person to discover the monument; he says that his companion on the trip, Mr. Burton, told him that a Mr. Barclay, who lived in the district, had seen it after reading about it in the papers of Michael Comyn.

Vallancey again published a reading of the stone in 1804, and this account is interesting as he himself takes no credit for the discovery of the stone: “Notwithstanding frequent mention is made, in Irish MSS., of the use of the Ogham character, and of certain monuments in certain places, the incredulity of our modern antiquaries was so great, as to deny its existence; until a person was paid, by the late Mr Coningham, to search, on a mountain in the county of Clare, for one of those monuments, mentioned in an ancient

8C. Vallancey, Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis, 6(1804), 171.
9William Burton Conyngham.
poem. The monument and inscription were at length discovered and published in the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy."

The interest in the inscription was intense. Almost every guide book and directory of the period, such as Wilson’s Post-Chase Companion, Gough’s Camden’s Britannia, Lewis’ Topographical Dictionary, Dutton’s Statistical Survey of Co. Clare, etc., mention the stone and its inscription. Every learned and unlearned antiquarian and every cosmopolitan traveller to Co. Clare seems to have written about this ogham. Some must have even visited the site.

Opinion was sharply divided as to whether the carving was genuine or not. Writers such as Edward Ledwich (fig. 3), who could not believe that anything good could come out of Ireland, dismissed the idea that ogham stones could survive for so many centuries. The view of Charles O’Conor of Belanagare was perhaps the sanest of any of the contemporaries, as one might expect from that exceptional man; if the inscription was authentic, he argued, it would increase the knowledge of former times, and he advocated further, critical inspection of the inscription. Charles Vallancey and William Burton Conyngham of course believed that the carving was genuine and hailed it as proving all their theories about an ancient, glorious Celtic civilization.

The next generation was equally divided in their opinions about the stone. John O’Donovan, Eugene O’Curry and George Petrie believed that the Mount Callan stone was

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Ledwich, Antiquities of Ireland, Dublin 1790, p. 103.

a forgery, and both O'Curry and O'Donovan denounced Lloyd and O'Flanagan in their writings. This belief that the stone was a forgery coloured their whole attitude about ogham stones in general. O'Curry ignored the topic of ogham as far as was practicable in his works. O'Donovan was very reluctant to believe in the authenticity of any ogham stones, but when faced with the ogham stones within the 'Cave of Dunloe' or Coolmagort, Co. Kerry, he had to admit the existence of stone which had genuine inscriptions carved upon them.

John Windele, Fr. Matthew Horgan and Abraham Abell, all leading lights of the so-called Munster School of Archaeology, believed that the Mount Callan stone was genuine. Like Vallancey, they believed in a grand ancient Irish civilization which had pre-Christian round towers and writing. Many of their theories were wide of the mark, but it is to their credit that they did extensive fieldwork, discovered many other genuine ogham stones (and a few more forgeries especially as they let it be known they would pay for examples of ogham stones). John Windele was especially active in his researches into ogham, and he collected ogham stones as other men might collect books, referring to this collection as his "megatholithic library." His large collection of manuscripts is in the Royal Irish Academy, both manuscripts in the Irish language which he collected, and 'notebooks' which he wrote or had written for him, and these latter reflect his interest in antiquities in general and ogham in particular. Much material has been copied into these notebooks about the Mount Callan stone, and some of the later history of the stone can be reconstructed from them. Several letters, or copies of letters report trips made by various people to the site. In an extract from a Journal of a journey made by Abraham Abell in August 1834, the interesting suggestion is made that the stone should be moved from Clare, and plans drawn up as to how it could be moved from the bog onto the road, and along the road to Limerick and then onto Cork. Nothing came of the idea. There is also a copy of a letter from Edward Clibborn, clerk of the Royal Irish Academy to John Abell of Limerick dated 30 April, 1836. Clibborn suggests digging up the grave which would "surely repay the person who raids him," and "if you do not others will, so let no time be lost. The Irish Academy and Dublin Society will purchase whatever valuables are found, and ask no questions."

Windele was not a very methodical worker; material was copied into several notebooks at different times and additional material inserted without any indication of date. One doesn't know what Windele's final judgement was concerning the Mount Callan stone, but it might be that even he doubted its authenticity in the end, because in one of the notebooks the following is written: "But after all it is a forgery."

Probably the last scholar of repute who believed in the authenticity of the stone was Samuel Ferguson. In his early discussions of it, he assigned it to the middle ages, as he saw the connection between it and other examples of scholastic oghams, such as those in Scotland. He was instrumental in getting the Irish scholar, Brian O'Looney, who was from Clare, to write an account of Mount Callan in which he, O'Looney, recalled his youthful

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13 In Windle mss RIA 12 C 12, p. 265, and RIA 12 K 29, pp. 568-569.
14 RIA 12 C 12, p. 259. For biographical information on Edward Clibborn, see RIA A/4/50(ii) in a letter by John O'Donovan.
15 RIA 12 K 29, p. 328.
trip to the mountain which still, in those days around 1844, was a place of assembly connected with the festival of Lughnasa. 17 Brian O’Looney also visited the site in 1859 and found that the stone had been moved by a family who dreamed of treasure under it. O’Looney got twenty-one young men to help him move the stone back into what he considered its original position. This may account for the discrepancy in the first and second editions of the Ordnance Survey maps which locate the position somewhat differently, if the difference does not simply reflect a mapping error. Years later, in his book on oghams, Sir Samuel Ferguson saw no reason to consider the stone was otherwise than authentic. Again, he realised it differed from all other oghams, and its date could not be the same as the other oghams, but he still believed that it was “... of whatever age, a genuine piece of work.” 18

The bibliography concerning Sliabh Challáin is voluminous, but only two other published accounts need be noted here; Westropp included it among descriptions of Co. Clare antiquities and M. MacNeill brought together accounts of it in her book on Lughnasa. 19

The inscriptions also attracted the attention of writers of Irish manuscripts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and at least ten Irish-language manuscripts contain an account of the stone. 20 It appears that in most cases the writers were indeed scribes, copying down their information from a written source, and there is not much evidence of a personal knowledge of the stone. RIA 23 C 21, written by Eoghan Caomhánach, quotes from Wilson’s Post-Chase Companion. The Boston Athenaeum MS S 22 cites Vallancey’s Vindication of Irish History, as does Cork Tóirna ms xxix. In a few cases, the material is used imaginatively, as in RIA 23 0 51 where the unidentified scribe gives an eight-line feart laoi or epitaph on Conán in ogham, or NLI G-36 where a full page of ogham on page sixteen gives the five different readings which O’Flanagan said he got from the stone, but here, O’Flanagan’s English has been translated into Irish and the Irish transcribed into ogham. “Beneath this Sepulchral Monument is laid Conán the fierce, the nimble footed” becomes Faoi Seachdomhartha Adnacalach si ata na laoiadhne Conan an Fhidhain an Luthmar chosach and the ogham uses the forfedha (or extra symbol) as often as not for vowels. Antiquarian manuscripts also included accounts of the stone and inscription, such as Michael Hanrahan, who wrote about it in NLI MS 4726 in 1871, and Thomas Cooke who collected several drawings of the Mount Callan stone in 1842-43. 21

As well as the original forged verse, Sliabh Challáin inspired at least two other poems. Séamas Mac Cruitín wrote a little poem in 1836 beginning, “Is baoth an turas do thugais go Callan chordhubh” satirizing Uilliam Ó Gráda who had said he could read the inscription, 22 and Brian O’Looney made a special visit to the site and wrote in verse about it, 23 in response to a request by William Smith O’Brien in 1859.

The inscription may have had another influence. There is a series of modern tombstones which include a line or even more of ogham carved on them. One of the earliest is that

18 Sir Samuel Ferguson, Ogham Inscriptions in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, Edinburgh 1887, p. 53.
20 RIA 24 B 28; 23 0 51; 12 0 51; 23 C 21; 24 C 13, and 24 C 25; NLI G-36; Maynooth B 11; Cork Tóirna xxix, and Boston Athenaeum MS S 22.
21 I am indebted to Mr. N. Crowley, Clare County Librarian, who brought these drawings to my attention.
at Ahenny, Co. Tipperary, where, in 1802 the following was carved in ogham: FA AN LIG SO NA LUA ATA MARI NI DHIMSUA O MFAILLE NA GCRANIBH (Under this stone lies Mary Dempsey from Ballycranna). It can be strongly suggested that the carver of the Ahenny stone meant to echo the Mount Callan stone.

The earliest investigators all read the name Conán on the stone, because they had set out looking for the tomb of Conán. Later interpreters read the name as Conaf, Cosaf, Cosas and Collas. This illustrates how notoriously difficult ogham inscriptions are to read properly. If even one stroke is added, subtracted or misinterpreted in a letter, that letter does not become unreadable but becomes an entirely different letter. Four strokes to the right on the stem-line equates with S, but it can also be read as two sets of two strokes, that is, LL, which explains why Ferguson could waver between Cosas and Collas. The chart (p. 47) gives various readings of the inscription. Even more examples could be given, but enough are included to make the point that interpretation can be difficult, especially if a stone has undergone weathering.

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There is no reason for thinking that the Mount Callan stone was carved much before its first mention in print in 1780. In fact, of all the people suspected of being responsible for carving the stone, only one name belongs to a period earlier than the eighteenth century. It has been suggested that one of the bardic family of Mac Bruaideadh (MacBrodie/MacBrodin) who lived in the neighbourhood might have been responsible. Which member, when and why it was forged by a MacBrodin is not mentioned, only that the family lived in that area for many generations and would have been aware of local legends connecting Sliabh Challáin with Conán, and as a bardic family they would have known ogham and, proud of their knowledge of this obscure manner of writing, might have done it as a scholastic exercise rather than as a forgery. All this is much too nebulous and the Mount Callan ogham fits in much better into the specific context of the Macpherson controversy.

The eighteenth century saw the flowering of the Romantic Movement which so affected archaeology as well as literature and music, when there was, as Piggott has shown, a "turning away from the clear calm daylight of the classical ideal to a vague exciting barbarian gloom for inspiration." Then, in 1760, there began one of the most exciting literary debates of any age and in following this controversy one can see how and why the Mount Callan stone came into being.

In 1760 James Macpherson, a Scottish school-teacher and tutor, published anonymously two poems in the Gentleman's Magazine for June, and then a book entitled Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language, again published anonymously in Edinburgh. He followed this with two more works published in London under his own name: Fingal, an Ancient Epic poem in

25See, for instance, T. J. Westropp, "Notes on Certain Primitive Remains (Forts and Dolmens) in Inagh and Killeemer, Co. Clare", J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland, 46(1916), 104-107, where he also mentions that Dr. G. U. Macnamara suggested this.
26Ibid., p. 104.
1762 and Temora an Ancient epic poem in 1763. These works introduced Ossian and other Celtic heroes such as Fingal to the world. The effect was immediate and electrifying: "Macpherson provided a convenient hero to suit the mood of his time, a noble savage from the mysterious Celtic past who wandered lonely in the misty hills, enjoying his sweet melancholy as he played his harp and sang of epic battles against insuperable odds, of the ghosts of the dead heroes that hovered in the magic of Celtic moonshine, finding his only comfort in the sorrows of defeat and the mysteries of nature." These works "inspired a cult of worship and imitation that spread the fame of Ossian round the world, and was well over a century in running its emotional course."

Macpherson's poems were translated into many languages—French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Danish and Swedish, Hungarian, Russian, Polish. The poems were even translated into Latin and Scottish Gaelic. Ossianic literature went on to inspire artists, Music and even politics. Napoleon, among others, commissioned paintings of Ossian, and he tried to elevate Ossian into the same position that Homer held in the Greek world, or Virgil in the Roman.

From the beginning a great controversy surrounded Macpherson's work. Many critics could not bring themselves to believe that such a thing as Celtic literature could exist at all, or that literature from such an early period could survive in what they, as classic-orientated scholars, would have regarded as an illiterate, uneducated peasant society. The cry of forgery and fraud was raised when Macpherson failed to produce any ancient manuscripts to back his claims. His critics seemed to demand nothing less than a complete well-rounded epic from a well-preserved manuscript. They argued that the compositions must be modern. Macpherson had undoubted ballad sources for his inspiration, but it was he himself who composed new material and passed it off as ancient, producing an eighteenth-century epic for an eighteenth century audience.

On the whole, Macpherson's poems did not engender the same fiery and acrimonious controversy on the continent as they did in Great Britain and Ireland. In Europe, there was debate about their authenticity but, on the whole, Ossian and Fingal were viewed as heroes who, it was hoped, were authentic and had lived in former times.

In these islands, however, the question was much more complicated and vexatious. The question of Ossian's authenticity was emotive, involving the individual's sense of nationality, his politics and, even more, his prejudices. Passions were further heightened in Ireland as men argued that the original sources were not Scottish as Macpherson had published them, but Irish, and that the true original heroes were Oisín and Fionn MacCumhaill. Much of this defence was wrong-headed, and Vallancey, who argued that Ossian was Irish, would argue that those early warrior-bands were of Chaldaic or Phoenician origin. One of the sanest contemporary views was expressed again by Charles O'Conor. In a letter to Chevalier Thomas O'Gorman, dated 4 July 1781, he writes: "On the whole, the works fathered upon Ossian are undoubtedly grounded on fables still recited among the common people in Ireland & Scotland: they refer chiefly to the exploits of Fin macCumhal and the heroes

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28 For a list of various titles and editions, see Rudolf Tombo, Ossian in Germany, New York 1901, pp. 3-4.
30 Itam, p. 8.
32 Tombo, op. cit., pp. 63-64.
33 Derick Thompson, Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian, Aberdeen 1951.
35 C. C. and R. E. Ward, op. cit., p. 167 (1772-1790), from BL Add Ms. 21, 121.
who acted under him in the third century. Some of those tales Mr Macpherson has set
off with his own embellishments and, having succeeded to his wish, it may for the future
pass for what it really is, an ingenious forgery, which as it proved entertaining to many,
can be injurious to none, except to those who believe it useful in their researches concerning
British antiquities."

The title of Vallancey’s first Mount Callan article shows how closely he connected the
ogham stone with Macpherson’s Ossian: “Observations on the Alphabet of the Pagan Irish
and of the Age in which Finn and Osin lived.” And O’Flanagan in his article, as
previously quoted, states he had been led to the passage about Conan through his interest
in Ossianic literature. Obviously, the tremendous interest in the Mount Callan stone came
about precisely because it was part of the great Ossian controversy, and it can be seen
how closely the history of the Mount Callan stone parallels it. While Macpherson’s works
provided the inspiration for works of art and music, the ogham stone provided one of
the more important inspirations for archaology, at least in Ireland.

One might ask why Conán and Sliabh Challáin were chosen by the forger. It certainly
would have been hard to find any other site which reflected better the Celtic gloom than
the hill which a local poet called “Callan ciordhubh.” In recent years its aspect has been
somewhat changed by afforestation and turf-digging, but it is still a very isolated spot.
Two hundred years ago it must have been even more so, and gloomy enough to gladden
the heart of any Romantic who wished to be depressed. So much has been written about
the site and the stone that it is hard to separate genuine folk tradition from preconceived
ideas or misunderstood information, but there do seem to have been local legends connecting
Conán with Sliabh Challáin. In 1785 E. W. Burton made an effort to locate the stone,
unsuccessfully. He wrote: “The common people of the mountain are well acquainted with
the name of Conane, the hero supposed to be buried under the Ogham monument; they
cannot be convinced that the search was made after an inscription, but after an enchanted
key that lies with the interred hero, which, when found, will restore an enchanted city,
sunken on the neighbourhood shore of the Atlantic sea, to its former splendour, and convert
the hideous moory heights of Callan mountain into rich fruitful plains. Their imaginations
are heated in this gloomy awful wild, expecting also great riches whenever this city is
discovered.” We will discuss later how three of the men suspected of forging the stone
were from Clare and would have known local legends.

Conán at first sight seems a very unlikely hero to pick. He has been generally identified
as Conán Mac Morna, known as Conán Maol na mallacht (Conán the Bald of the curses),
“fear millie agus mor-bhuadhartha na Feine” (the wrecker and great disturber of the Fian).
He plays minor roles in the earlier tales, and first comes to prominence in An Bhroidhean
Chaorthuinn where, in a magic hostel he and other warriors are stuck to the floor and
Conán loses the skin of his buttocks when he is pulled away from the floor. A character
change can be noted between the earlier and later stories. From being an epic hero, albeit
a malicious one, he becomes a comic character without dignity. Almost all the humour
elements are present in the late tale, Eachtra Lonnochdián an tSléibhe Riffe: how Conán
was a glutton and ate huge meals when he should have been on guard or fighting, how
hags fell in love with him and he must flee their advances, how he mistakes a pillar-stone

36 Archaeologia, 7(1785), 276-285.
37 Printed in Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis, 4(1786), 528.
for a hag and runs away frightened, and this story also gives another version as to how Conán lost his skin, this time the skin of his head (after the death of Lomnachtaí, his wife attacks Conán and tears all his skin from his head with her nails; Diarmaid kills a ewe and affixes the skin to Conán’s head). In the printed version of the tale, Conán quarrels with his companions, goes to a beautiful fort seven miles from Limerick, where he kills the owner of the fort, Aonghus na Cairrge, marries his widow and lives in the fort there until he dies and is buried “ar an bhfaithche atá ar an dtaobh thiar de’n diún…” (on the green which is behind the fort), called Rath Conán after him. One of the townlands in the parish of Dromin Athlacca, some 12 or 15 miles south of Limerick City, is called Rathcannon, and local tradition says that Conán Maol lived there, but to complicate matters, Eachtra Lomnnochtaí earlier describes Conán’s parting from his companions: “agus do ghluais chum siubhail ó’n bhFéinn, go nár ghabh leó ó’n lásain go lá a bháis ar Shliabh Challainne…” (and he went from the Fianna and he did not meet with them from that day until the day of his death on Sliabh Callan). However, since the rest of the tale is about his adventures in Co. Limerick, the mention of Sliabh Challáin might be an interpolation.

But perhaps it is not Conán Maol who is associated in legend with Sliabh Challáin; an entirely different Conán, known as Conán Cinn tSléibhe might have been the original hero meant here and later writers mis-identified him as Cónan Maol. Conán of Ceann Sliabhbe, also known as Conán of Ceann Súmaire, is the chief character in the tale Feis Tighe Chonán, which is a frame-work tale for the re-telling of many of Fionn mac Cumhaill’s adventures. O’Kearney, who first edited Feis Tighe Chonán, identifies Kintle, a range of hills near Loch Inse Ui Chinn or Inchiquin Lake, north west of Corofin, Co. Clare, as the Ceann Sliabhbe in question. He was followed in this identification by Macnamara and Westropp. Kintle is the form of the name found in the Ordnance Survey Revision Name-Books, but the form Kintle was supplied by men who were under the influence of the legend of Conán Chinn tSliabhbe, and thus the argument is rather circular. Slea Head in the extreme west of Kerry has also been suggested as the Ceann Sliabhbe in question, but no local legend seems to connect it with any Conán.

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Much as one would like to be able to settle fully the question as to who forged the stone, no incontrovertible evidence can be produced concerning the carver. Reading that W. B. Conyngham defrayed the expenses of the search for the ogham stone, one might be inclined to suspect him, especially as he is connected with another obvious forgery, the “Conyngham patera.” This genuine Bronze Age fibula found in Co. Mayo bears five ogham letters, each separate, each on its own stem, spelling UOSER engraved on one cup-shaped terminal. The other terminal also has symbols, and Vallancey who published the fibula in 1796 interpreted the symbols as Phoenician or Estrangelo, translating them into the same English

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39Eoin MacNeill, Eachtra Lomnochtáin, Baile Átha Cliath no date (but 1945), pp. 86-89.
41It has not yet been possible to identify the manuscript from which the printed version was taken. None of the manuscripts so far examined have any mention of Sliabh Callán.
45Information from Breandán Ó Ciabháin.
word “sun” into which he had translated the ogham.\textsuperscript{46} The Rev. Charles Graves in 1847 examined the fibula and came to the conclusion that the inscription was a forgery.\textsuperscript{47} He was able to see faint tracings of all the characters scratched on the surface and remarked that the characters had a sharpness not seen in ancient work. It should also be noted that the ogham is not the usual type on a continuous stem-line, but is based on the first example given in the Book of Ogham in the Book of BallyMOTE, which was in the hands of the Vallancey circle in Dublin at this time.

William Burton had, with his brother, inherited the fortune of their uncle, Henry Conyngham, Baron and Earl Conyngham of Mount Charles, as a condition of which they assumed the surname Conyngham.\textsuperscript{48} It is much more likely that W. B. Conyngham was an innocent, liberal, uncritical patron who did not know the native sources but was enamoured of the idea of a great Celtic civilization, rather than a forger. It is most likely that he was interested in the Mount Callan stone for the same reason he acquired the fibula: both seemed to be exciting evidence of that civilization. General Charles Vallancey should, I think, be regarded in the same light. As a military engineer, he was responsible for some of the eighteenth century fortifications in Ireland, but he is primarily remembered for his enthusiasm for, rather than his knowledge of, ancient Irish antiquities and language.\textsuperscript{49} He was willing to accept as genuine anything brought to his notice as antique and could put his own interpretation on the evidence. For instance, the markings on the orthostat now as C4 in Newgrange were ogham as far as Vallancey was concerned, and he even read it as ANGUS.\textsuperscript{50}

Neither Conyngham nor Vallancey had enough Irish to compose the poem about Conan and neither had enough knowledge to know what ogham really was, whereas whoever carved the stone had to be close enough to the Irish tradition to know ogham from manuscripts and enough Irish to compose the verse.

Michael Comyn, a Protestant gentleman very interested in the Irish language and legends, and who wrote prose and verse in Irish, has also been accused of forging the stone. O’Flanagan says that a Mr. Barclay had been led to the stone after reading about it in the papers of Comyn. There are several problems here. While Comyn’s Fenian verse tale, Laoi Oisín ar Thír na n-Óg and his prose tales, Eachtra Thoirdealbaigh Mhic Stairn and Eachtraibh a Thriuir Mhaic are found in many manuscripts, and indeed the three were published, Comyn’s own papers were all destroyed before his death in 1760. One version says they were burnt by his son, ashamed of his father’s interest in the Irish language, however, a local legend says they were burnt by Comyn’s second wife who blamed the son in order to get the son disinherited.\textsuperscript{51} Whatever the reason, it must be assumed that the papers were, in fact, destroyed, as no collection can now be traced, so O’Flanagan’s statement can be neither proved nor disproved. As for O’Curry’s assertion\textsuperscript{52} that the verse

\textsuperscript{46}Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis, 5(1796), 171.
\textsuperscript{47}Proc. Roy. Irish Acad., 3(1847), 460-464.
\textsuperscript{49}More information about Conyngham and Vallancey may be had in Walter D. Love, “The Hibernian Antiquarian Society”, Studies, Autumn 1962, pp. 419-431.
\textsuperscript{50}Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis, 4(1786), 212; Claire O’Kelly, Illustrated Guide to Newgrange and the Other Boyne Monuments, (3rd edition), Cork 1978, p. 33.
about Conan was an extract founded on Comyn’s “Adventure of Tairbh MacStern and his sons”, there is no mention of the ogham stone or Conan’s grave in the story. What is mentioned is the “Altair na Gréinne” or the Altar of the Sun, which was probably a genuine wedge-tomb, but in Comyn’s tale, as in many other Irish tales, a megalith has been converted into a druid’s altar, and there is no mention of any ogham. Perhaps Barclay also confused Comyn’s ‘Druid’s Altar’ with Conán’s Grave. In any case, the idea of Michael Comyn forging the stone is completely out of character. He used local topography as a base for his stories, but he had no need to forge anything to prove a point. He seems to have been held in high regard by both his co-religionists and by his Catholic neighbours in Killarney, Co. Clare. He was the man who acted as translator in the famous case in which Seon Ó hUaithnín, although he was being tried for treason for a Jacobite song, had written, called out: “A MHzichil, dá gcochtaítríde mé ná mill an t-amhrán” (O Michael, though I were hanged for it, do not spoil the song).53 He seems to have been a high-spirited gentleman, and perhaps could have carved the stone as an innocent prank, but there is absolutely no evidence to connect him with the Mount Callan stone.

The two most probable suspects are Sean Lloyd and Tadhg O’Flanagan. There is no firm evidence to support this suspicion, but it would not have been out of character for either man. O’Donovan54 records the story related to him by Michael Casey (one of the last of the old herb doctors in Dublin who originally came from Cnoc Firinne in Limerick) that Sean Lloyd did it and that the fact was known to local people. If this is true, Lloyd certainly did not make much capital out of it, mentioning it only once, in his book as previously recorded. Lloyd was a poor school teacher and had a drink problem, and might have been attracted by the money offered by Conyngham. Dwyer describes his end: “Poor Lloyd’s weakness lay in potations. He was found dead on the road.”55

It has been suggested that O’Flanagan composed the verses and made the stone. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the stone was carved by Lloyd, that O’Flanagan knew it was a forgery, but nevertheless, wrote about it as if it were genuine and used it to further his own career. Certainly, O’Flanagan seemed to profit from the stone more than anyone else. He was born in Co. Clare, near Tulla,56 and entered Trinity College in 1784. From being an obscure student in 1784, he became a very important person when his article was published by the Academy. De Lacy writing to O’Gorman in October, 1785,57 says, “Our worthy and mutual friend O’Flanagan sets off tomorrow in the Limerick stage.... He dines this day with O’Halloran. I scarcely can get one moment of his company, he is in such demand.” When Edward Lloyd’s manuscripts reached Trinity College in 1786, it was O’Flanagan who listed them. He became first secretary to the Gaelic Society and edited and contributed to the first (and only) volume of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society published in 1808. In the History of the City of Dublin58 one gets a picture of his later life: “...he was recommended to the notice of Lord Charlemont, and all the members of the Royal Irish Academy, by whom his abilities were much respected and highly spoken of. But an unfortunate propensity for impenitence and irregular habits, revolted those friends his talents had acquired, and having lost their patronage, he was

compelled to withdraw from Dublin. Through the friendship of Sir L. Parsons he established an academy at Birr, and finally obtained a place in the post office; but inveterate habits still involved him in difficulties, and he was compelled to take refuge from his creditors in Kerry, where he superintended a Roman Catholic seminary; from hence he removed to Limerick in 1812, and was placed at the head of an Irish Institute established there by subscription. Here he continued to deliver weekly lectures till his death, which happened on the 4th of January, 1814, in the 53d year of his age.” One gets a picture of a young man, exploding into prominence and slowly decaying.

There is an autographed fragment of a manuscript of O’Flanagan’s in the Royal Irish Academy, 1207, in which he gives a translation in rhyme of the verse about Conan’s death:

“When dreadful havock and contention rag’d
On Gabhra’s plain where Irish Chief’s engag’d
The brave Conan a Champion much renown’d
Whose fierce and furious courage know no bound.”

He also gives an account in blank verse beginning:

“Conan with whom dread march’d along
A champion much for courage fierce renown’d.”

This and other pieces in the manuscript suggest that O’Flanagan was planning a more ambitious production, perhaps on the lines of Macpherson.

In the Windele manuscript RIA 12 K 29 there is a tale about O’Flanagan. Being third-hand, it must be regarded with caution. On p. 325 Windele tells about a man O’Flaherty who was writing a history of Kerry. O’Flaherty had met Peter O’Connell, the Irish scholar from Clare and author of the dictionary of Irish now in the British Library. O’Connell lived in Limerick in the house of Dr. Simon Riorian for a number of years. He told O’Flaherty “that he had obtained from O’Flanagan an admission that he had employed a stone mason who on a certain moonlit night ascended Callan Mountain and cut on the stone there with a chisel and hammer the inscription as it now stands for which service O’Flanagan paid the man 2 Guineas.” O’Flaherty also knew O’Flanagan in Limerick and one evening taxed him with the tale. O’Flanagan grew indignant and “....got into a violent passion and left.” It is not indicated if the indignation was due to innocence or guilt.

That O’Flanagan did take liberties with the inscription is suggested in Whitelaw and Walsh’s History of the City of Dublin where it is related: “…the engraver [of the TRIA drawing] told Mr. Whitelaw that O’Flanagan had altered and transposed lines, made them totally different from the original drawing. Mr. Whitelaw communicated to Dr. Ledwich and it induced them to doubt the existence of the Ogham altogether.”

It must be readily admitted that no incontrovertible evidence has been produced to prove that Tadhg O’Flanagan caused the stone to be carved, or that it was done a little before 1780, but this hypothesis fits into the setting better than any other which can be suggested. It was a time when James Macpherson was composing his poems and passing them off as genuine early lyrics; it was also a time when Iolo Morganwg, that brilliant but wayward

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59 Most probably John T. O’Flaherty, who according to Windele, edited the short-lived The Cork Magazine, c. 1814 or 1818, and wrote the pamphlet, “A Glance at Ancient Ireland”, Cork 1842.
60 p. 932.
Welsh eccentric was providing his countrymen with newly-composed verses of his own invention which he said he found in very old manuscripts. Here in Ireland, the stone would seem to have been carved to provide concrete evidence, so to speak, for Ireland’s ancient civilization. And while it was probably envisaged as a literary response to a literary controversy, it might be said that the foundation of archaeological fieldwork lay on this pseudo ogham stone—forged stone or innocent scholastic prank though it may be.

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